

Chapter II

Some Theoretical Considerations

- I. Emergence of Modern American Short story
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I. Emergence of Modern American Short story

A short story or story telling is an oldest form of artistic expression. It passed from one generation to another through oral tradition, long before the art of perpetuating literary works through writing was invented. It is a brief and concentrated art form, comparatively less complex than a novel. It aims at producing a unique effect. It takes its readers into the world of excitement, wonder and delight. Its records were abundantly found in caves and other such primitive dwellings in the form of inscriptions, sketches, pictures and signs.

Earlier stories existed in a variety of literary forms: religious parables, fables, folktales, myths, allegories and so on. *Aesop's fables*, *Panchatantra*, *Arabian nights*, *the Decameron*, *the Buddhist Jatakas*, were the few notable instances. Egyptian *Tales of the Magicians* are the oldest known stories which date back around 4000-3000 B.C. The Latin stories *Gesta Romanorum* - the stories about the adventures of the Romans proved valuable material for writers like Chaucer and Shakespeare. *Aesop's fables* such as "The Cock and the Pearl.", "The Dog and the Shadow" "The Wolf and the Lamb," "The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse" and scores of others are still universally popular among children as well as adult readers because of their meticulous craft, spontaneity and moral lessons.

In America short story originated as a minor art form catering the needs of the masses, years before the popular means of entertainment like radio or television are to be invented. A large number of people obviously turned toward the "magazine story" with all its stereotypical machinery of stock characters, suspense and happy endings. Short story soon became a popular art form with the rise of literary magazines and periodicals during the nineteenth century.

The magazine editors often controlled the length of these stories approximately between 2000 to 10,000 words but not less than 500 words. They published stories of immense variety: science fiction, fantasies gothic tales and mysteries. Speaking about its varieties Cleanth Brooks and Warren comment: "There are "sport" stories, "young love" stories, "marriage problem" stories, "moral" stories, "child" stories, "sea" stories, "wild west" stories, "farm" stories, "business" stories "crime" stories and the like."¹

Early American writers faced a number of problems because of lack of adequate literary past. As Sydney Smith wrote in *Edinburgh Review* of December 1818: "Literature the Americans have none – no native literature, we mean. It is all imported." Jay Hubbel concludes:

Another difficulty was that while the new land supplied the writer with rich and untouched materials, it gave him no technique for handling them. Of necessity the author had to learn from European writers how to treat these materials and he was thus bound to seem unoriginal.²

However, American writers have shown tremendous progress in spite of these difficulties. That is why Frank O'Connor in his *Lonely Voice* speaks of it as: "The Americans have handled the short story so wonderfully that one can say that it is a national art form." In his analysis of the Nationalism in the American short story, Joseph Urgo expresses similar views. He asserts:

As early as 1830, American short stories were reprinted in England to help explain the new nationality called "American"; throughout the nineteenth century, Eastern magazines paid premium prices for tales of the South, the Southwest, the Pacific coast, and any other backwoods or bordered region claiming a distinction between insiders and outsiders. In the twentieth century the short story in the United States continues to serve the insatiable appetite of the American reader for tales of the marginalized, as the genre works to define the range of human phenomena included within the national borders.³

Joyce Oates frequently appreciated American writers for their significant contribution to the short story. In the preface to the *Oxford Book of American Short Stories* (1992) she writes: “We the Americans are justly proud of our literature, and a great deal of that pride stems from our awareness of the crucial role of the short story— as a form ideally suited to the expression of imagination.”

Short story in America has a unique pattern of development. It originated chiefly in tales and .. sketches published in Washington. Irving’s *The Sketch Book*. He is recognized as the ‘father of American short fiction’ most probably because of his two memorable stories: “Rip Van Winkle” (1819) and “The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow” (1820). These stories are widely anthologized and included in almost every anthology aiming to give a comprehensive picture of the development of American short story. Like for instance: *The Best American Short Stories*, *Norton Book of American Short Stories*, *Oxford Book of American Short Stories* and such others.

American writers have shown enormous variety in the region of short story. The writers like Hawthorne and Melville produced moral and allegorical tales of lasting significance. Poe wrote horror stories during the ‘Romantic period in America’. He was one of the first writers to expound a scientific framework for the analysis and interpretation of the short story. The rise of annuals during the twenties contributed significantly to the development of short story. With Mark Twain, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, regional story or a ‘local-color’ story became widely popular. Joseph Uργο calls it another form of representing the American nationalism.

Short story flourished chiefly during the nineteenth century. Precisely the period between the Civil war in America (1861-1865) and the beginning of World War I in 1914 is usually termed as an ‘era of the short story’. It is still a highly influential literary form even in an era of great developments and popularity of other media of entertainment. One of the reasons why short story

became highly popular in United States and is preferred extensively to the novel is the lack of time. Bryllion Fagin aptly remarks:

We have been a busy people, busy principally in evolving a production system supremely efficient. Railroads and factories have blossomed almost overnight; mines and oil fields have been discovered and exploited; mechanical inventions have been made and perfected by the thousand. Speed has been an essential element in our endeavors, and it has affected our lives, our very natures. Leisurely reading has been, for most Americans, impossible.⁴

A short story is a unique creation, an *organic whole* like the sonnet or lyric. The distinction between a short story and novel is not that of magnitude or length alone. A novel is complex and elaborate work of art embodying several themes, well-developed characters and different eras. A short story, on the other hand, concentrates upon a single and unique idea or theme, very few characters and moves within a limited space and time.

To the short story writers today it is not the length or magnitude that matters, what is more significant is the vision of life that he or she presents in the story with utmost seriousness and complexity. Joyce Carol Oates defines the short story as: “My personal definition of the form is that it represents a concentration of imagination and not an expansion, it is no more than 10,000 words; and no matter its mysteries or experimental properties, it achieves closure – meaning that when it ends, the attentive reader understands why.”⁵

Oates’s comments deserve close attention because she concentrates on the creative impulse or vision, instead of the external factors such as precise length or magnitude. Revealing the growth and development of modernist fiction, she further writes:

Since artistic impulse leaps from the unconscious mind, the form it takes in the real, shared, civilized world is really a matter of the artist’s skill, his taste, his patience with his own material and his good luck. The difference between any novel of Beckett

and any work of Chekhov's is not emotional or psychological. (Since their personalities are obviously similar) But a matter of the degree of formalization or externalization of an interior *vision*.⁶

Modern short story a peculiar product of the spirit of the age becomes more realistic and complex. The factors responsible for the rise of the modern short story are the social and cultural circumstances: especially the two world wars, economic depression, insecurity, racial and ethnic riots and class struggle, murders, sexual assaults and racial riots were quite usual in America especially during 1960's.

It depicts the inner reality as perceived by human psyche through myriad perceptions, sensations, emotions and impressions. The conflict tends to become internal. Modern short story writers like Henry James, William Faulkner, Shirley Jackson and Flannery O'Connor presented these darker aspects of the modern society frequently in their stories. They projected their vision of reality in, what is known as the "slice of the life" story.

The contemporary writers went a step further. Under the influence of the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and William James; they attempted to explore the darker recesses of human psyche. This has given rise to the techniques like psychological realism, stream-of-consciousness technique, interior monologue and epiphany. Henry James invented "psychological realism" in his later short stories such as "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903).

Short story writers like Earnest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson, Edith Wharton, Eudora Wetly, Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, Flannery O'Connor, Shirley Jackson, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes contributed enormously to evolve this form. Among the contemporary writers, Joyce Carol Oates, a multi-faceted genius emerged as a most powerful short story writer.

The primary characteristics of a short story are brevity, economy and unity. It has multiple opportunities for experimentations, and it is a significant medium for presenting complexities of modern life with all its subtle details. However, because of its relatively limited scope, writers might have felt the need of an extended form like novel.

No doubt, many short story writers later turned to become powerful novelists. The writers like Earnest Hemingway, James Joyce, Joseph Conrad popular as novelists, were short story writers of unequal merit. Short story remained Oates's favorite art form:

Most obviously, the short story is short run – a single idea and mood, usually more than two or three characters, an abbreviated space of time. The short story lends itself most gracefully to experimentation, too. If you think about it, the story can't be defined, and hence is open, still in the making. Radical experimentation, which might be ill advised in the novel, is well suited for the short story. I like the freedom and promise of the form.⁷

II. Definitions and Scope

A short story is usually defined as 'a brief fictional narrative.' Edger Allan Poe was the first to invent the definition of the short story and to distinguish it as a literary form. He exemplified his views about the *effect* more elaborately in his influential essay "The Philosophy of Composition":

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view — for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest— I say to myself, in the first place, "Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, which one shall I, on the present occasion, select?"⁸

instances of short stories made out of subjects that could have been expanded into a novel and that are yet typical short stories and not more stunted novels, will occur to everyone. General rules in art are useful chiefly as a lamp in a mine or a handrail down a black stairway, they are necessary for the sake of the guidance they give, but it is a mistake once they are formulated to be too much in awe of them.¹¹

Moreover, it is difficult for the readers to concentrate if the story is too long, as for instance, the story “The Death of Ivan Ilych” fails to make *unified effect*, because of its length and many digressions. Nayantara Sahgal, a distinguished critic, narrates a similar experience about the lack of essence or uniformity in the longer narratives because of the complexities and magnitude:

I feel dreadfully out of step with the times when I come across thousand-page novels or somebody’s life in six volumes. I don’t buy them because I can’t stagger home with them, or relax in bed with them, but also because floods of words, like affluence beyond a point or speed beyond a point, leave me stunned and stupid.¹²

III. Element and Parameters of the Short story

The short story has five core elements: plot, setting, character, point of view and theme. The style of the writer makes a significant impact on the short story. In any fictional narrative, theme plays a vital role in evoking the desired “totality of impression”. To some extent, ‘plotless’ story, abrupt endings and surprising twists and turns will be accepted. But a short story would be a failure without a theme. The contemporary short stories tend to become highly complex and require vigorous explorations to reach the theme. However, it is not plausible to study each element separately because it may destroy the essence of the story. Care should be taken, to study each element in relation to the other.

The short story projects the vision of the author. It is his experience of life. It is not always easy to perceive the theme of the story. Only attentive reader can easily decipher from his previous experience what would be the theme. As Ann Charters reveals:

What makes the statement of a theme so difficult is that the theme must be true to any and all of the specific details in the narrative. This is the test to apply to a theme, once it has been stated. Finding a summary of the plot or a statement of the theme does not mean that you understand a story and so can skip reading it, however. The theme of any good story is inseparable from the language of the complete narrative.¹³

A theme is an indispensable part of the short story. It is the central idea on which the whole narrative framework depends for its success or is responsible even for its failure. It should not be mistaken to the progression of events leading to moral judgment on particular incident.

In analyzing the various aspects of the theme, Cleanth Brooks and Warren further suggest:

It is . . . what we are to make of the human experience rendered in the story. And what we are to make of such human experience involves, directly or indirectly, some comment on values in human nature and human conduct, on good and bad, on the true and the false, some conception of what the human place is in the world.¹⁴

The short story writers of our time attempt to explore modern mind with all its sensations, frustrations and a sense of disillusionment. The power relations and its impact on individual's struggle for identity, the exploitation, and racial, cultural, physical as well as emotional violence were some of the most frequent themes. The apparently senseless and disintegrated stories often divided into multiple and uneven sections suggest symbolically the loss of the social and ethical order and its impact on the human relationships. It implies an individual's fight against the constantly deluding picture of reality.

Since short story is a brief prose narrative, plot plays an important role in the success of the short story. It can be loosely defined as the logical arrangement of events. The short story has to its centre a conflict. It is developed broadly through the three usual stages, *beginning, middle and end*.

Plot is an equally significant element of the short story. It evolved with Aristotelian concept of tragedy. Edgar Allan Poe's views about plot are similar to Aristotle. He conceives a unified action in the story. Aristotle's *Poetics* has somewhat strangely a direct bearing on contemporary writings. It becomes clear from Elizabeth Dipple's analysis of Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* in relation to realism:

The word *mimesis* applies to realism, because such writers as Balzac, Zola, and Drieser have imitated life, perhaps more strenuously and, as they certainly hoped, more honestly than before. The real difference lies in the formal limitation of action: Aristotle allows the fiction at its best only one action and stresses its unified presentation...Realism insists that life is multiform and must be rendered not singly but in its puzzling multiplicity.¹⁵

Plot is a relevant sequence of significant events. To some extent, Gustav Freytag's analysis of dramatic structure is applicable to short story. He conceived it in the form of pyramid. It has to its centre the dramatic twist which takes the conflict to the highest point known as climax. The climax serves the middle point between "Rising Action" and "Falling Action."

A short story with linear plot structure is what we are accustomed with for years. Events or twists in the action follow a plausible sequence, often a chronological order. Gustav Freytag's famous concept of "dramatic structure" consists of five stages: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement or catastrophe. However, the modernist stories concentrate more on the visionary experiences and lyrical insight. Often there is no formal exposition, no introduction of any sort to major characters, the setting, the subject matter or events.

It is based on some kind of conflict, which develops gradually with a series of complex and gripping happenings and moves up to the climax. After climax it works towards resolving the conflict, leading finally to bring the whole story together as an endeavor of making it “an organized whole”. There are however, many controversies in traditional linear plot structure. Such structures impose form over the content. It is the misrepresentation of the chaotic reality. Richard Kostelanetz, a historian of the American short story, focuses some important features of modernist short story structure:

The short stories in the Twenties exhibit greater emotional complexity and ambiguity, as well as a more discriminating sense of emphasis and an increased brevity of representation (in short, a modified, more selective, realism). . . . Instead of concentrating on plot development, the authors resort to rhetorical strategies and parallelism and repetition; the narrator often speaks in the first person and may be a major participant in the action rather than just an observer of it; and the story's end comes as an anticlimax after the earlier epiphany.¹⁶

Another aspect of the modernist short story according to Irving Howe is that it concentrates “less on dramatic action than on climactic lyrical insight.”¹⁷ To a large extent, emergence of plotless story is the result of the postmodernist theories like post-structuralism, which excludes the concept of structure. Stream of consciousness technique denies the plot and concentrates more on the character’s consciousness. Obviously there are digressions, perhaps for the purpose of presenting the visionary subject matter. Similar instance is found in Clare Hanson and Andrew Garr’s analysis of the short stories of Katherine Mansfield: They defined “plotless story” as:

The plotless story seems to arise naturally from the intellectual climate of its time. In a world where as the German Philosopher Nietzsche declared, God was dead and evolutionary theory had produced a sharp sense of man’s insignificance in a changing universe, the only alternative seemed to the retreat within, to the compensating powers of the imagination. With such a retreat came the stress on the significant moment, which would be called ‘vision’ or epiphany by later writers such as James Joyce – the moment of

insight which is outside space and time, vouchsafed only fleetingly to the imagination, but redeeming man's existence time.¹⁸

The plotless story thus conceives of a manifestation of the sudden vision of the writer. James Joyce terms it as "the epiphany." Nadine Gordimer called it "the light of the flash" or "the moment."¹⁹ According to James Joyce, It is "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or in a memorable phase of the mind itself."²⁰

Character is an important aspect of any fictional work of art. Usually a short story has one or two major characters. The action in the short story depends to a large extent upon the characterization. The concept 'character' denotes individual or type. In the moral and allegorical stories of the past characters stand for the human qualities like "Good", "Evil", "Jealousy", "Faith" and "Love." In earlier stories the characters represented certain virtues and named accordingly such as: the "Good" or the "Evil." Such characters are known "types" They tend to become "flat" because of their lack of individuality. In short stories, there is little space for the writers numerous complex characters because of its limited magnitude.

Modern short stories represent the individuals with all their oddities, virtues and flaws. In the short story however there is little opportunity to represent so many complex characters. They usually appear in novels. Instead the story concentrates on very few characters preferably one or two. With some swift and definite strokes, short story writers create memorable characters. As Ann Charters for instance reveals: "Hawthorne told us little about the physical appearance of Goodman Brown except that he is young and newly married."²¹ Yet his character sketch became illustrious because of its complex representation.

An influential English novelist E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) analyzed the concept of 'Characterization'. Distinguishing the types of characters, he remarks:

We may divide characters into flat and round. Flat characters were called “humorous” in the seventeenth century and are sometimes called types, sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality: when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round. The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as “I never will desert Mr. Micawber.”²²

Flat characters according to Forster are the types representing a single trait or virtue. The characters which serve this purpose are numerous. They even come without proper names. All the minor characters such as ‘bus-driver’, ‘maid servant’, ‘house keeper’, are flat. E. M. Forster further explains round characters as: “The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round. It has the inculcability of life about it – life within the pages of a book.”²³

Another important aspect of short story is setting. The action of the story is impossible without any preconception of the setting the term “setting” denotes the time and space of the story. It indicates the social, historical, cultural and psychological conditions of the time.

The setting helps to represent the conflict. It facilitates the writer to render the visualization of his imagination. Sometimes it becomes highly important because of the realistic nature of the story. It often decides whether the story is a fantasy, a science fiction or a realistic conflict between human beings. It influences the characters and gives a peculiar tone to the story. Because of this, the author tends to devote first few paragraphs to describe the setting. Joyce Carol Oates represents the “Erie Country” of her childhood as a fictitious Eden Country in her stories and novels.

Narrator is a crucial part of the story, without him the story is virtually impossible. The “point of view” or narrative perspective determines the tone and atmosphere of the story. It influences the course of the events by attributing

it a meaning. On the basis of the possessive pronouns, the narration would be classified as first person, second person and third person. Since second person point of view is difficult to execute, it is seldom used except in the postmodernist works of fiction aiming a parody of the situation.

First person and the third person are most frequently used perspectives in the short stories. Critics like Wayne Booth and Ansgar Nunning differentiate between reliable and unreliable narrators. Ansgar Nunning analyses this narrative perspective on the basis of ethical convictions. In his opinion: "Unreliable narratives are those whose perspective is in contradiction with the value and norm system of the whole text or to that of the reader."²⁴ There are several possibilities of analyzing the narrative perspective. The narrative mode covers two major areas of concern: the narrative point of view and the narrative voice.

The narrative perspective or viewpoint varies according to the need of the situation the author wishes to proceed with. It is the narrator who facilitates the progression of events. Critics like Northrop Frye, Sheridan Baker point out three possibilities of narrative perspective in fiction the narrator as participant, the narrator as observer and the omniscient narrator.²⁵

"The narrator as participant" most frequently serves as the main character or protagonist. He narrates the story from his personal experience. He is often the protagonist or an important major character. Furthermore they are classified on the assumption of reliability as well: "The reliable narrator reports inaccurately or interprets incorrectly. The other kind of teller, one who reports accurately and interprets correctly, is reliable narrator."²⁶ Such narration always appears in first person.

"Narrator as observer" records events as he or she observes to someone else. He describes the events from a distance, not actively participating in the

events. This kind of narration helps to introduce dramatic irony and makes the story more effective than the narration as participant.

“The Omniscient narrator” is most frequently used in short stories. The narration is known as “all knowing” It uses third person to reveal or to conceal the significant details of the short story. It is also called as “third person omniscient perspective.” Sheridan Baker and Northrop Frye furthermore discuss two possibilities in the “Omniscient narration.”

As we follow the ways of this kind of teller, we perceive that the concept to narrative perspective becomes important: from what stand point is the narrative presented? An external narrative perspective witnesses events from outside. With the narrator standing apart, invisible and telling us what is seen and heard from within a character. Sharing, perhaps some to that characters personality.²⁷

Sometimes the writers limit the narration to the actions or implied thoughts of one character only. It concentrates on the internal and external aspects of that character avoiding other characters. Such narration tends to become limited. It is called as “Limited omniscient” or “Limited third-person” narration. There are several other possibilities other than the above, such as interior monologue” or “dramatic method” of narration.

The short story is a complex art form. It needs great precision and meticulous use of words to create a desired impression. Words and expressions must be used in such a way that they create a pictorial effect or visualize the individuals and incidents in the story. In a review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-told Tales* published in *Graham’s Magazine* (1842), Edgar Allan Poe exemplified this view: “In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect is not to the one pre-established design.”

Every writer develops his own peculiar style of writing. The essential aspects of the style are the use of symbolism, imagery and the use of poetic or

rhetorical devices and metaphorical expressions. The study of these elements of style gives an insight into the world and vision of the writer.

Oates employs irony in order to attack the hypocrisy and absurdity found in modern life. She is the painstaking artist. She takes great efforts to evoke the unique effect through the use of imagery. A significant aspect of her style is the lyrical quality of prose. Richard Gilman summarized the aspects of her style as:

Her virtues aren't difficult to sum up: a native gift for "story-telling"; a more or less clean narrative line, taking her from recognizable starting points to conclusions very solidly on the same track, a passion for, amounting to an obsession with, what we like to call inner life, a good almost photographic eye and year for the minutiae of ordinary existence; a concern with some central human issues and conditions; the myths of love, the nature of female morale, the oppressions of family life, the aridity of urban and suburban existence; the quest for communion; the struggle against "others"²⁸

She writes on almost all aspects of life. She projects her vision on the social evils such as racism and violence in her stories. Critics often fervently deal with the violence in her works. Oates defends the accusations with her usual ironic tone:

In 1995, she observed: "How ironic, as a writer I've been constantly queried why do you write about violent acts? What do you know of violence? and my replies are polite, thoughtful, abstract and even idealistic. I might say that my entire life, indeed the lives of both my parents, have been shaped by 'violent acts.'²⁹

Postmodernism, an alternative and illusory term for anti- modernism or at best pseudo-modernism has made significant impact on the themes of contemporary short stories. The years after Second World War marked the beginning of uneasiness, restlessness among the people. Modern narratives influenced by these drastic changes in the overall attitude.

This study explores the thematic patterns in the stories of Joyce Carol Oates collected in her representative collections specifically *By the North Gate* (1963), *Wheel of Love and Other Stories* (1970), and *Goddess and Other Women* (1974). Each of her stories confirms her continuous engagement with reality. Her protagonists chiefly suffer from a sense of disillusionment, frustration, outright humiliation and deception. These aspects of contemporary reality put a stronghold on the readers' minds.

In brief, this chapter therefore provides the theoretical framework to explore thematic and narrative patterns in the stories of Joyce Carol Oates. It covers the fundamental aspects of the narratives of our time. The above elements play a vital role in the construction and effect as well as tone of the short story. The understanding of these aspects of narration will necessarily facilitate the study of modern American short stories as well.

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