

What is a short story?

What, dear students, is a short story? David Rothwell in his A to Z of English Literature under the entry assigned to the term 'short story' says it is indefinable, for if we say it is a piece of prose fiction shorter than a novel, when does a long short story become a novel and when does a short novel become a short story? So, the criterion of length alone cannot be the whole answer. Edgar Alan Poe made one of the earliest attempts to define it. According to Poe, a short story is 'a short prose narrative'. But what is a short prose narrative? His answer: a prose narrative which takes one from half-an-hour to about two hours to read in a single sitting. He further says that the narrative must strive towards 'a single effect' by telling only those incidents which are absolutely necessary to the intended effect. Other people who have tried to define the essence of a short story say that it must concentrate on a single event, emotion or character in order to create that single effect. Digressions and unnecessary realistic details must be avoided. In my opinion, between the length criterion and the criterion of telling only the absolutely necessary incidents (let's call it 'the narrative economy'), the second criterion is what we should stick with, because it also limits the length of a short story. So the 'short' part in the term 'short story', refers to the criterion of telling what is absolutely essential to the overall intended effect of a short story (the narrative economy).

Let us try to illustrate the above two criteria with the help of a short story included in your text book: The New Constitution.

As far as the criterion of length is concerned, the story under consideration satisfies it amply. It took me about 35 minutes to read the English translation of the story by Khalid Hassan the first time (mainly because I had come back to it after around a year and a half). The second reading took me around 25 minutes and the third, hardly eighteen. The book from which I read the story (I did not read it from your text, because the font in your text book is closely set and hard on the eyes, especially for someone of my age) had it spread on around nine pages. So it satisfies the criterion of length to perfection.

How about the second criterion: that of narrative economy? Well, to answer this question, we need to answer the following question: Does the story strive towards a single effect or impression on the reader by concentrating on a single event, character or emotion and by relating only the absolutely necessary incidents that relate to that single event, character or emotion? The answer to both the questions is in the affirmative: It does achieve that narrative economy and it does succeed in creating that single effect.

Let me tell you how. Although the story is titled The New Constitution, it is all about a single character, Mangu the tongawala. He represents all those who ply their trades day in and day out on the streets and come into contact with as much of the world as their localized trades allow them to. For them, the so called political upheavals and changes are just something they hear on the news and which most often do not translate into any observable changes in their day to day lives. Only those incidents and details are provided in the story which help us in understanding the tragic unraveling or falling apart of this character at the end.

We are told about how all his fellow tongawalas considered him a worldly wise person and the go-to-guy if they needed their curiosity satisfied about anything. He had achieved this reputation (despite

never having attended a school) by always being alert to the conversations of his passengers and sometimes even engaging in an exchange of ideas with them. This is exemplified by how he 'predicted' the breaking out of war in Spain by picking up a rumour from one of his passengers. So he could rarely if ever be wrong about anything, or so he and his friends had come to believe.

He hated the British from the core of his heart, primarily because all his life he had been treated worse than an animal by the English soldiers of the cantonment located in his city. He would get into arguments with drunken English soldiers who were often his fares. He would curse them to his heart's content when he returned to the adda. He was immensely frustrated at having to bear humiliation on a daily basis at the hands of the British and desperately wanted a new law to get rid of them.

He was temperamentally very impatient. This is corroborated by the narrator by telling the reader of how when his wife was pregnant with his first child, he wanted to take a look at his child months before it was due to be born. He pressed his wife's belly and put his ear to it in order to find out something about his baby. He even shouted at her in exasperation for lying around all day.

We get a glimpse into the mind of Ustad Mangu when the narrator tells us of the associations his mind establishes, based not on logic and comprehension of the political situation in the country, but on what he thought should have changed in the limited circle he moved in. Basically, he wanted/wished desperately that everything that went on in the country and even abroad (in Russia, mainly) had been somehow contributing to the changes he so desperately wanted to happen (being rid of the British, for example). That is why he was convinced that the introduction of the new constitution was a result of the King of Russia's influence (though on the surface it was simply because he liked both the new constitution and the new socialist system being introduced in Russia); that is why he related the Red Shirt movement to the King of Russia and the new constitution; that is why he established a connection between all the arrests and trials going on in the country and the introduction of the new constitution. We get a glimpse into his mind and what do we see there? He is desperate for change, and his intense desperation for change and improvement in his immediate surroundings has taken over his mind.

We are told that he had a penchant for the dramatic and loved fanfare. A leader was great only if they wore a lot of garlands and led huge processions where, preferably, people would get into a couple of brawls. Something happened only if it had effects which were loud and obvious.

Because he was desperate for change and wanted a new law to get rid of the abominable goras, he latched onto the idea when a couple of his fares mentioned that a new constitution, which would set the people of India free, was going to be functional from the first of April. Over the course of the month of March he heard his fares talking both against and in favour of the new constitution. But because his mind was already predisposed to the idea of a new law and the changes it was going to bring about such as getting rid of goras and the freedom of India, he dismissed everything he heard against it as rubbish (and those who expressed such ideas as 'toady wretches'). These conversations and their subsequent effects are related to us in some detail because they show how the idea of a new constitution that was going to change everything for the better gradually took over Mangu's mind to the point that he was

convinced that something dramatic and obvious was going to happen as soon as the first of April dawned.

All the above details are essential in understanding why Ustad Mangu explodes in the final incident of the story. He wanted to see the result of the application of the new constitution in a dramatic and obvious way; he wanted to see eye-catching changes in his surroundings; but nothing had changed; everything—shops, people's behaviour, roads, lampposts—was the same. His image of himself as someone knowledgeable about the world, his hate of the British, his frustration and anger at having always been maltreated every day of his life, his desperation, his impatient temperament, and the idea that everything must change on the first of April which had taken over his mind contributed to his final outburst of violence at the mere touch of a swagger stick.

So, the story satisfies the criterion of narrative economy very well: only those incidents and details are mentioned which help us in understanding Ustad Mangu's final insane moment.

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