

THE LITERARY ANATOMY

Teaching the Very Short Story

Minimalism's Grace

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"I suspect," says critic Charles Baxter, "that [very short stories] appeal to readers so much now because they are on so many thresholds. They are between poetry and fiction, the short story and the sketch, prophecy and reminiscence, the personal and the crowd.... We find in them a depth of intensity and penetration into human life that is a luminous difference in kind from the novel or the larger story." This depth and penetration occurs as a result of dramatic compression and attention to detail. The genre's best practitioners—among them, Yasunari Kawabata, Anton Chekhov, Amy Hempel, and H. H. Munro (Saki)—use certain tools of fiction to maximize intellectual and visceral power while minimizing other elements, namely length, character development, and the importance of plot. The accent is on economy and accuracy, on giving shape and clarity to the chaos of life. By choosing and polishing only the most important events and details, very short stories are different in kind from the novel or longer story. "Less," as architect Mies van der Rohe once noted, becomes "more."

But what exactly defines a very short story? Very short stories are brief fictional prose narratives between one paragraph and approximately six printed pages. They can feature various styles of fiction styles—e.g., magical realism, naturalism, or dramatic monologue. Unlike the vignette or sketch (see, for example, Lydia Davis's "Boring Friends"), very short stories have little in common with the essay, and do not generally rely on description as a primary device. Very short stories are similar to prose poems (poetry without line breaks, in the form of prose) in that both forms use certain elements of fiction, but with prose poems the accent is far more on musicality, metaphor, rhythm, and other poetical devices. The popularity of both the prose poem and the very short story since the 1980s may be due in part to our fast-paced culture, in which everything happens quickly and the rapid comprehension of the narrative "essence" is paramount to the mobile masses.

Central to the very short story form are three tools of fiction: 1) voice (not only the narrator's syntax, diction, and tone, but the mood created by all three); 2) point of view (the perspective is characterized by a lack of comprehensive knowledge of the first person, or the objectivity and omniscience of the third person); and 3) setting (time period and locale are even more crucial than in a standard short story). Whether on a battlefield in Ernest Hemingway's Spain or at a cocktail party in Dorothy Parker's Manhattan, the setting is used to summon in the reader's mind specific emotions and ideas that quickly paint the character's overall situation. Ancillary tools may include other tools of fiction: conflict, symbolism, imagery, dialogue, and suspense—all of which can enhance depth and meaning. Significantly, however, unlike in the traditional short story, character development is not vital, and plot is of even less importance. Like Mies's signature buildings, fine miniaturist stories are ostensibly simple in appearance, yet complex and precise in detail. Each aspect works in concert with the whole, to realize what Edgar Allan Poe called "the single unifying effect," a cohesiveness between surface (the story) and foundation (the tools used to build it).

When Hemingway penned his minimalist tales of war and remembrance, the very short story was already centuries old. The brief story has its roots in the oral tradition, particularly anecdotes about mythic events and fascinating beginnings (e.g., Genesis and the episodes of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*). In 1st-century A.D. Rome, we find authors such as Petronius writing the first very short stories (e.g., "The Widow of Ephesus"). In the Middle Ages, Chaucer's "The Physician's Tale" (in *The Canterbury Tales*) dramatized an evocative tale of lust. Boccaccio's *Decameron* also contained a miniature: "The Pot of Basil" is a story of love found and fatally lost. With these latter two authors, the form, while still heavily weighted toward the parable with its implicit goal of moral instruction, began to take on more artistic qualities. Words, like colors, began to more fully illuminate the dark and grotesque landscape that the human condition can sometimes be.

In the 18th century, Voltaire and others were able to shed the influence of the parable and to advance the form. Voltaire's short short story "Plato's Dream" exemplifies a tectonic shift toward more philosophical ideas, secular theories, and experimental goals. A century or so later, Edgar Allan Poe ("The Tell-Tale Heart") and Nathaniel Hawthorne ("The Hollow of the Three Hills") employed psychology, fantasy, and horror to engage readers. Finally, 19th-century masters such as Anton Chekhov ("The Huntsman," "Gooseberries") and Guy de Maupassant ("A Piece of String") added realism, with everyday settings, characters, and voice.

Chekhov's and de Maupassant's direct and penetrating exploration of human existence helped to engender great—and more experimental—exemplars of the form in the 20th century, among them, Isaac Babel's "My First Goose," Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill," and Ernest Hemingway's "A Very Short Story." When Jorge Luis Borges's *Fictions* appears in 1944, we witness yet another major development: a strong focus on setting and situation, as well as a wealth of inventiveness, including the mining of metaphysical ideas. Borges's very short stories (e.g., "Book of Sand") are mysterious, magical, and elusive; with each reading the reality seems to change, much like looking out onto the Sahara's shifting horizon.

The “openendedness” that we see in Borges’s work is an important aspect of the evolution of all forms of short fiction in the 20th century. James Joyce’s “Araby,” for instance, culminates not in a dramatic climax of action but in a revelatory moment of illumination and transcendence, what Joyce called an “epiphany.” The shift away from plot and tidy closure—together with the changing expectations of readers—has helped to pave the way for postmodernist writers such as Alice Walker and Grace Paley, who use shifting points of view and subtle effects to convey meaning. These developments—together with the international popularity of the prose poem—have led to something of a global renaissance in short fiction. The very short story form has blossomed in the hands of Japan’s Kawabata (“The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket”), Pakistan’s great Manto (“The Return”), and Colombia’s Gabriel García Márquez (“A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”), among many others.

TEACHING EXERCISES

The very short story has also become popular with high school and college teachers as a way to pique students’ interest in writing fiction and in analyzing complex longer stories and novels. One of the many virtues of the form is that there is an avenue of access for everyone. Students writing their own very short stories learn to dispense with impedimenta and to craft lean, subtle prose, achieving efficiency and grace with the barest of essentials.

I use five basic exercises to teach the very short story. First, I assign students the task of studying three significantly different voices, e.g., Hemingway’s “A Very Short Story,” Jayne Anne Phillips’s “Sweethearts,” and Vladimir Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols.” I then ask them to recast one of the stories by changing its voice to that of a second story, i.e., substituting Nabokov’s long, complex sentences for Hemingway’s short, staccato ones. This helps students to understand the power of voice in fiction: how it, among other things, creates mood. As a follow-up, I ask students to do the same exercise with three more stories, this time focusing on point of view. For this exercise, students read Chekhov’s “The Huntsman,” Ann Beattie’s “Janus,” Alice Walker’s “Roselily,” and Joyce Carol Oates’s “Politics.” Later, students do the same with the setting and situation of a story. Sherwood Anderson’s “Hands,” Cheever’s “The Worm in the Apple” and Tobias Wolff’s “Powder” are all good models.

After students finish these three exercises, they investigate how the *same* author takes a different tack with voice, point of view, and setting in his/her longer and shorter stories, e.g., compare Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Pet Dog” and “The Huntsman,” or Joyce’s “The Dead” and “Araby.” Students write essays analyzing the writer’s creative choices.

As a final project, the class splits up into teams of three, four, or five. Using everything they’ve learned, each team of students must whittle “The Lady with the Pet Dog” (18 pages) down to no more than 2,000 words. They then workshop their streamlined (and reimagined) Chekhov stories as they would their own.