

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE POETICS OF THE SHORT STORY

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Abstract: *This article explores the poetics of the short story through various theoretical lenses, including formalism, structuralism, narratology, reader-response theory, and cultural criticism. It examines how the short story's brevity, suggestiveness, and narrative economy shape its artistic form. The study argues that the short story is not a miniature novel, but a distinct literary genre with its own internal principles. Special attention is given to the role of silence, reader interpretation, and genre flexibility, as well as to the short story's cultural and political significance. The article concludes that the poetics of the short story lie in its ability to produce rich, complex meaning within strict spatial limits.*

Keywords: *Short story, poetics, narratology, modernism, reader-response theory, literary minimalism, genre theory, structuralism, cultural criticism.*

The short story stands as one of the most concise yet powerful forms of literary expression. Its poetics – that is, the principles and techniques through which it achieves artistic impact – have long been the subject of critical and theoretical study. Unlike the novel, which has the freedom to unfold gradually, the short story demands narrative economy, thematic precision, and stylistic focus. Its effectiveness often depends on its ability to suggest complex emotions and ideas within a highly limited space, making every word and structure functionally significant.

Among the earliest theoretical reflections on the genre, Edgar Allan Poe emphasized the importance of unity of effect, arguing that a short story should aim to produce a singular emotional impression. According to Poe, all narrative elements from plot to setting to tone should serve that central effect, allowing for intensity and coherence. This view laid the groundwork for formalist and structuralist theories that followed, which regard the short story as an autonomous aesthetic object governed by internal logic.

In the twentieth century, structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov began analyzing the short story as a system of signs and codes. They focused on how binary oppositions, narrative structures, and conventional storytelling patterns function even in very short texts. This approach treats the story as a closed, symbolic structure, where plot disruptions, turning points, and

resolution operate within a universal model of narrative logic. For instance, the tension between presence and absence, or life and death, often serves as the underlying structural principle in short fiction, lending the genre its characteristic intensity.³

Russian formalists, notably Viktor Shklovsky, introduced the concept of defamiliarization, suggesting that the purpose of literature and especially the short story is to renew the reader's perception of ordinary things. In this light, short stories become linguistic and cognitive experiments that present familiar experiences in strange or unexpected ways. This aesthetic strategy invites readers to pause, reflect, and reconstruct meaning through the act of interpretation. Because of their brevity, short stories often rely on indirectness, ambiguity, and implication rather than direct narration, which enhances the interpretive role of the reader.

Contemporary narratology, particularly the work of Gérard Genette, has contributed significantly to the analysis of how time, voice, and perspective function within the short story. The ability of a short story to manipulate temporal sequence through flashback, foreshadowing, or ellipsis is central to its poetic structure. Time may be compressed, fragmented, or suspended entirely to draw focus to a single decisive moment. Similarly, the choice of narrator and the point of view profoundly influence the story's meaning. A first-person narrator may invite intimacy and unreliability, while a third-person limited narrator might create distance and restraint. In either case, perspective is carefully controlled to shape reader perception and emotional response.

Another critical aspect of the poetics of the short story is its frequent reliance on silence and absence. What is omitted often carries as much weight as what is revealed. The genre's minimalism makes it particularly suited to suggest rather than explain, to imply rather than describe. This subtlety allows for rich thematic layering, where social critique, existential tension, or psychological insight are embedded within the compressed narrative frame. In many cases, the climax of a short story is not an external event but an internal realization or epiphany—a moment of awareness that changes the character's perception, and by extension, the reader's understanding.

The theoretical study of the short story's poetics reveals that its power lies not in what it tells, but in how it tells it. Its aesthetic principles are defined by control, precision, and resonance—qualities that make it one of the most intellectually and emotionally engaging genres in literature. As such, the short story

³ Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press, 1980.

continues to attract the attention of critics, scholars, and writers who seek to understand the mechanics of its enduring impact.⁴

Another vital aspect of the short story's poetics lies in the role it assigns to the reader as an active participant in meaning-making. Because of its brevity and often ambiguous conclusions, the short story invites and sometimes demands that the reader fill in gaps, infer motives, or reconstruct timelines. Unlike the novel, which often guides the reader through character development and extended exposition, the short story offers only fragments glimpses into a situation, moment, or emotion. This fragmented nature challenges the reader to engage more deeply with the text, interpreting silences and absences as deliberately crafted elements of meaning.⁵

This interpretive openness has been discussed in reader-response theory, where scholars such as Wolfgang Iser have argued that literary meaning arises in the interaction between text and reader. The short story, perhaps more than any other genre, thrives on this interaction. The interpretive work performed by the reader is not supplementary but essential; it is often only through reflection and re-reading that the true weight of a story becomes clear. This makes the short story an ideal genre for exploring subjective experience, ambiguity, and the instability of truth, especially in the context of modern and postmodern literature.

The poetics of the short story are also distinguished by genre flexibility. Unlike the novel, which is often bound by certain narrative expectations and structural conventions, the short story can shift between realism, symbolism, impressionism, modernism, postmodernism, and even poetic prose without losing coherence. Its form is fluid, capable of blending modes and experimenting with language. A single short story may oscillate between internal monologue and objective narration, collapse chronological order, or combine allegory with literal description. This genre-bending quality makes the short story an excellent medium for formal experimentation and stylistic innovation.

This flexibility is not only aesthetic but also cultural. Throughout literary history, the short story has adapted itself to different social and historical contexts serving as a tool of critique, resistance, and identity formation. In postcolonial literature, for example, the short story has been used to challenge dominant narratives and explore marginalized voices. Its compactness makes it a suitable

⁴ Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press, 1980.

⁵ Hunter, Adrian. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

vehicle for capturing localized experiences, oral traditions, and hybrid identities, especially in regions undergoing social or political upheaval.

Moreover, in many literary traditions, the short story has served as a bridge between oral storytelling and written literature, preserving folk motifs, communal memory, and cultural symbolism within a modern literary form. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Jorge Luis Borges, Rabindranath Tagore, and Alice Munro have all used the short story not only as a literary exercise but as a cultural artifact one that preserves, reflects, and reimagines the values and conflicts of their societies.

Thus, the poetics of the short story cannot be reduced to a single definition or technique. It is a highly dynamic and adaptive genre one that balances artistic economy with emotional intensity, minimalism with depth, suggestion with precision. Its theoretical richness lies in its ability to evoke complex human experiences through modest means, making it a subject of endless study for scholars, critics, and readers alike.⁶

The short story's brevity, once considered a limitation, is now widely recognized as its greatest strength. In a world shaped by fast-paced information exchange and fragmented attention, the short story's form aligns naturally with modern modes of reading and reflection. Yet, its depth resists superficial consumption. It may be read quickly, but its meanings often linger provoking thought, interpretation, and emotional resonance long after the final line. This paradox of shortness and depth, of simplicity and complexity lies at the heart of its poetics.⁷

Contemporary approaches also examine the short story through intersectional lenses, incorporating feminist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and ecocritical readings. Feminist theorists, for instance, analyze how the form's compressed structure can mirror the constrained social spaces historically available to women allowing writers to subvert dominant discourses through small, contained acts of narrative resistance. Postcolonial theorists consider how the short story disrupts hegemonic narratives and offers space for indigenous voices and fragmented identities. Psychoanalytic readings explore the genre's interest in repressed emotions, unconscious conflict, and sudden revelations all of which fit naturally within the short story's affinity for epiphany and silence.

Ultimately, the short story is not merely a "shorter" version of the novel. It is a genre with its own internal logic, aesthetic principles, and literary functions. Its

⁶ Hunter, Adrian. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

⁷ Achebe, Chinua. *Girls at War and Other Stories*. Heinemann, 1972.

poetics are defined by intensity, economy, ambiguity, and resonance — qualities that have allowed it to persist across languages, cultures, and historical periods. Whether used to illuminate the inner workings of a single mind or to reflect sweeping cultural changes, the short story remains one of the most agile and expressive forms in world literature.

The global evolution of the short story demonstrates its remarkable adaptability across cultures, making it not only a genre of literary innovation but also a carrier of diverse worldviews. Unlike the novel, which often requires a more developed publishing infrastructure and sustained readership, the short story has flourished even in societies with oral traditions, colonial histories, or political constraints. In such contexts, the short story becomes a flexible vessel for cultural expression, easily circulating in journals, anthologies, newspapers, or through oral recitation. This portability contributes to its power as a tool for both resistance and preservation — articulating suppressed voices, minority languages, and endangered worldviews in compact, symbolic forms.⁸

Writers from various global traditions — from Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina to Rabindranath Tagore in India, from Chinua Achebe in Nigeria to Alice Munro in Canada — have used the short story to reimagine national identities, memory, and myth. Each of them applies distinct stylistic choices while still working within the tight formal constraints of the genre. Borges, for example, constructs philosophical labyrinths using metafictional twists and intertextual illusions, turning the short story into a meditation on time, authorship, and infinity. Tagore combines lyrical prose with moral and emotional nuance, often rooted in Bengali social life. Achebe embeds colonial and postcolonial tensions within realist narratives that also preserve the rhythm of Igbo oral storytelling. These variations prove that the short story is not a fixed European or Western form, but rather a malleable and hybrid genre that adapts itself to specific historical, linguistic, and ideological environments.⁹

One of the key aspects of the short story's poetics in these intercultural contexts is the authorial voice, which must often establish a distinct mood, moral position, or stylistic identity in the span of just a few pages. Because the form is so brief, the author must carefully decide which details to include, how characters speak, how space and time are framed, and what emotional register is sustained. There is little room for digression or elaborate exposition. Thus, every element in

⁸ Hunter, Adrian. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

⁹ Achebe, Chinua. *Girls at War and Other Stories*. Heinemann, 1972.

the short story must be both aesthetic and functional a symbol, a tone, or a narrative movement that serves multiple purposes at once.

The voice may be ironic, lyrical, detached, intimate, or even fragmented depending on the worldview the author wishes to project. This aligns with the poststructuralist notion that voice in literature is not a transparent window into the author's mind but a constructed and strategic effect shaped by social and ideological forces. In short fiction, this constructedness becomes even more apparent due to the genre's compression. Whether the voice speaks in the first person, through an unreliable narrator, or via an omniscient observer, it is carefully calibrated to provoke specific reactions in the reader empathy, suspicion, unease, laughter, or reflection.¹⁰

In addition to voice, another central poetic feature of the short story is its treatment of time. Time in the short story is rarely linear or expansive. Rather, it is often condensed, suspended, or fractured. A single moment a look, a memory, a decision may carry the weight of years. Some stories unfold entirely in retrospect, shaped by memory or regret; others exist in the immediacy of a single scene. This manipulation of narrative time contributes to what some scholars call the "verticality" of the short story: instead of progressing horizontally (through a sequence of events), the story moves vertically plunging deep into a single emotional or psychological truth.

The poetic force of the short story also lies in its strategic use of closure or the lack thereof. Many modern and postmodern short stories resist tidy conclusions. Instead of resolving conflict, they reveal complexity; instead of providing catharsis, they leave questions open. This resistance to closure can be traced to broader cultural and philosophical trends, particularly in societies grappling with uncertainty, fragmentation, or transition. In such settings, the short story reflects life not as a neatly packaged moral lesson but as a series of ambiguities, tensions, and partial meanings.

Altogether, these formal and philosophical qualities voice, time, openness, compression, cultural rootedness give the short story a distinctive poetics that invites endless experimentation and adaptation. Its artistry lies not in what is elaborated but in what is concentrated. In that sense, it is akin to poetry: dense, layered, symbolic, and profoundly expressive within minimal space.¹¹

¹⁰ Hunter, Adrian. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

¹¹ Achebe, Chinua. *Girls at War and Other Stories*. Heinemann, 1972.

A crucial poetic device that amplifies the depth of the short story is symbolism. Due to the genre's limited length, authors often rely on symbolic imagery, objects, or gestures to communicate broader meanings without needing extensive explanation. A lamp in a room, a train leaving a station, a scar, or even a moment of silence can carry metaphorical weight, standing in for psychological states, emotional transitions, or historical contexts. The symbolic element in a short story often works on multiple levels simultaneously: literal, emotional, and thematic, creating density and richness. Because the form does not allow for prolonged development, such symbols become narrative shortcuts that deepen the story without expanding its volume.¹²

This reliance on compact symbolism contributes to the genre's intertextuality as well. Short stories often refer directly or indirectly to literary, historical, mythological, or religious texts, drawing on the reader's prior knowledge to enrich meaning. In this way, the short story functions within a wider web of cultural texts and ideas. An allusion to a biblical parable, a Shakespearean echo, or a local folktale may transform a seemingly simple narrative into a multi-layered reflection on identity, morality, or memory. For example, Jorge Luis Borges's stories are heavily intertextual, blurring the boundary between fiction and philosophy by embedding references to imagined books, historical figures, and metaphysical paradoxes. His poetics are built on the assumption that stories do not exist in isolation but are in dialogue with other texts and traditions.

Moreover, one of the most distinctive features of the short story's poetics is its capacity for emotional intensity. Unlike the novel, which may develop emotion slowly across chapters and scenes, the short story often hinges on a single emotional shift—a realization, confrontation, or loss—that arrives suddenly and powerfully. This emotional economy requires precise language and a heightened awareness of rhythm, tone, and atmosphere. Whether subtle or dramatic, the story's emotional arc is usually brief but profound, often leaving the reader with a sense of haunting, resonance, or catharsis. Anton Chekhov, for instance, was a master of emotional understatement: his characters' desires and disappointments are never overstated, but the silences and pauses in his dialogues speak volumes about human vulnerability and loneliness.¹³

This capacity for emotional condensation aligns the short story with poetry and music, both of which also rely on precision, tone, and rhythm to communicate

¹² Hunter, Adrian. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

¹³ Achebe, Chinua. *Girls at War and Other Stories*. Heinemann, 1972.

emotional states. The language of short fiction is often lyrical or figurative, particularly in modernist and postmodernist traditions, where language itself becomes a subject of artistic exploration. Writers like Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, or Julio Cortázar frequently blur the line between poetic prose and narrative form, using sound, repetition, and metaphor to craft emotionally immersive experiences within brief textual space.

Additionally, the short story's poetics thrive on ambiguity, a deliberate lack of fixed meaning that invites interpretation. In many modern and contemporary stories, the ambiguity is not a flaw but a feature a space in which the reader must participate. This narrative openness aligns with broader existential and postmodern themes: the instability of truth, the multiplicity of perspectives, and the impossibility of fully grasping another person's inner world. The story becomes a mirror in which different readers may see different things. This effect gives the short story a timeless quality its meaning shifts depending on who reads it, when, and in what context.¹⁴

Ultimately, the short story is a genre that finds strength in constraint. Its poetics are based on minimalism, suggestion, and depth rather than expansiveness or resolution. It demands from the writer a high level of craftsmanship and from the reader a high level of attention. Despite or perhaps because of its limitations, the short story has become one of the most vibrant and enduring forms of literary expression.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical approaches to the poetics of the short story reveal a genre that is rich, complex, and endlessly adaptable. From Poe's unity of effect to modern narratology and cultural theory, scholars have shown that the short story is more than a condensed narrative; it is a literary form uniquely capable of distilling powerful human experiences into compact, resonant forms. Its formal precision, narrative openness, and cultural versatility make it both a technical challenge and an artistic opportunity for writers, while offering readers an immersive and thought-provoking literary experience. The short story, with its blend of suggestion and structure, remains a genre of both subtlety and strength one that continues to evolve in response to the literary and social currents of its time.

¹⁴ Achebe, Chinua. *Girls at War and Other Stories*. Heinemann, 1972.

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