

Essay on the Short Story (approximately 800 words [typed])

Over the past few weeks, we have read and discussed many stories. We have looked at what the authors had to say, how they said it and, in some cases, talked about the authors, themselves. You looked at two theories of short fiction: Hawthorne's need to express a moral or theme and his reliance on exposition versus Poe's purpose being to create a single or central effect relying on plot to do so. Some critics have said that a short story is a vehicle, perhaps through its brevity, perhaps through the intimate nature of one person's writing for one other person who will read the work in one sitting, which drives readers to read things into the story, things from their own lives, that may not have been in the story or at least not intentionally put in the story. Another critic said a story's impact is like that of a "high velocity bullet as compared with birdshot." Hemingway said all stories end in death (sounds like his quote from A Farewell To Arms). What does he mean by that? Is he actually talking about each short story or perhaps about what the story is really a part of: LIFE. If so, then that part presented better be done pretty well if it's to be taken seriously or have any meaning for its readers. As critic Wallace Stegner said, "At its very best...the light it casts on one man or woman in one brief fragment of experience can seem to illuminate the world."

I'm not sure that it's vitally important that we come up with a definition of the short story that we could all agree upon, but I'd like each of you to try to construct one for yourself and start your essay with it. Then, I'd like you to decide which aspects of a story (i.e. plot, setting, characterization, theme, conflict, climax, etc.) are the most important to be done right in order for you to like and believe (get something out of?) a story. Pick three or four of those aspects as categories you can use for analyzing the stories you've read. Your introductory paragraph, then, should contain your definition of what a short story is, what the most important aspects of a story are, and a thesis that will say that you are going to analyze the stories you've read (as many of them as possible) and classify the various elements into those three or four groups, determining how effective the authors were in their use of them and what impact their effectiveness had on whether you felt the stories were good or not. You don't have to (shouldn't) pick a best story though there will be some you liked more than others. Just base this judgment on an analysis of the stories against the elements you decided on in the introduction. I would imagine that you'd have at least 3 body paragraphs though it could be more. Take a point by point approach rather than a story by story approach. Your conclusion should reaffirm your belief that properly employing the above techniques (give some examples) can make a story more effective.

Make heavy use of the stories, referring back to them often for specific examples. Everytime you do, put the page where you got the information from in parentheses at the end of that sentence, for example, (58). That will help in my reading. I don't think you need to consult any other sources for this paper. Your own reading ability and good judgment will be enough. You're essentially dividing and classifying your stories and making value judgments on the use of the divisions (techniques) in the stories. Once you've decided on the techniques, and maybe even before you've written your definition of a short story (don't forget that) write an outline for the paper. As you read, you'll be adding to and revising the outline. Take notes as you go back over the stories looking for examples of what techniques you're using. From then on, you should be ready to write the paper.

The Process of Writing Your Essay

Brainstorming

The first step I would take is to think about all of the techniques a writer might use to write a short story. Here are some examples:

- Characterization
- Setting
- Plot
- Climax
- Denouement
- Conflict
- Symbolism
- Point of View
- Irony
- Allegory
- Theme

There are many others, but these are some of the ones I think about when I read and analyze a story.

Narrowing Your Topics

At this point, I am ready to narrow my topics. I look over the previous list and decide on three techniques that I believe are the most important to me when I read a story. You should do the same thing. If you're not sure about this, think about the stories you've liked the most. What is it you liked about the stories? If you liked the way Poe got you through his story, so efficiently, without a lot of discussion or unnecessary detail, maybe Plot is something that's important to you. If you liked the character of Dave in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," then maybe characterization is important to you. You can see where I'm going with this. Once you've thought about this, you will determine which techniques describe what it is you liked about those stories.

For me, I'd say Characterization, Setting, and Theme are important to me. Now I want to decide how to arrange the topics in my paper. I'm going to arrange them according to, for me, ascending order of importance (meaning, I start with the least important in the group--for me--and then build up to the most important).

Here's my order:

- Setting
- Characterization
- Theme

Writing The Thesis Statement

I want a thesis statement that states my subject (Short Story), makes my purpose clear (to show what techniques add to my enjoyment of a story), and the points (techniques) I will discuss in the paper.

Here's my thesis:

Of the many techniques a writer might use to create a short story, the three that most add to one's enjoyment of the story are setting, characterization, and theme.

How's that? Your thesis should reflect your choices of techniques.

Let's back up a minute.

As you already know, the thesis is the last part of an **introductory paragraph**. You also need a lead-in before you get to the thesis. The lead-in could be several sentences long. Usually, you start with a general overview of your subject; in this case, it could be fiction or the short story. Remember, I asked you in the assignment to define the short story, so, that needs to be part of your introduction. Make sure your definition encompasses things we have talked about during the term so far. Saying it's shorter than a novel doesn't say much. You might consider the definitions I attributed to Poe and Hawthorne. Then I would mention the various techniques a writer uses to create the story. Go back to your brainstorming list. At this point, you're ready to write or add your thesis statement.

Organizing (Outlining) Your Paper

Now you're ready to give form to your paper. I suggested in the assignment that you might want three body paragraphs, one for each technique you are discussing. This paper could be set up the way you would set up a comparison-contrast paper. In this case, you would be doing a point-by-point approach. Use the technique as the subject of your topic sentence for each paragraph. For example, "One of the techniques that a reader might find important to appreciating a short story would be setting." Then, you need to define the technique. Next, you will pick two stories to show how the use of that technique in the story enhances your appreciation of the story. This is a critical part of your essay. It's not enough to just say what technique is used and describe it. Tell how it impacted your reading of the story. For example, "Hawthorne's use of the dark woods gave the story an eeriness that made me expect something bad or evil to happen." You will repeat the process for each body paragraph. Notice, I'm not giving you any more concrete examples of what I would do as then you might say, "Great! Now what am I supposed to do since he already did it?"

Check out the outline on the next page.

Sample Outline

I. Introductory Paragraph

A. Lead-In

1. Definition of Short Story
2. Techniques

B. Thesis Statement

II. Setting

A. Definition

B. How The Technique Affects a Story

C. Examples of Stories and Techniques

1. "Goodman Brown"
2. "The Cask of Amontillado"

III. Characterization

A. Definition

B. How The Technique Affects a Story

C. Examples of Stories And Techniques

1. "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"
2. "Araby"

IV. Theme

A. Definition

B. How The Technique Affects a Story

C. Examples of Stories And Techniques

1. "Sonny's Blues"
2. "The Storm"

V. Conclusion

Here you just restate your thesis and review your points of discussion.

Write The Paper

At this point, you are ready to begin to write your paper. Review the guidelines I put on the assignment sheet. Don't forget to show how the techniques worked in the stories and how they affected your appreciation of them (the stories). Don't forget to cite examples from the stories.

Good luck!