

Creative Writing: Short Stories

This handout will help you understand and analyze the formal craft elements used by writers in the creation of short stories so that you can effectively employ them in your own.

Definition of the Short Story

By its very nature, the short story is difficult to define. In the words of Tobias Wolff, “Every time I come up with a definition [of the short story] I remember some indisputable classic that makes nonsense of my terms” (Bailey et al, *xi*).

So, a reframing of the definition might be in order. Perhaps the focus should be less on defining the short story and more on examining the ways in which one might be created. Tom Bailey’s essay on the formal craft elements in short story writing identifies five basics right in its title: “Character, Plot, Setting and Time, Metaphor, and Voice.”

Bailey posits that those five items are not necessities in the creation of a short story but simply some of the elements that writers develop to varying degrees when creating all kinds of stories, not just short ones. “Terms such as [these],” Bailey says, “help us to begin to define what it is we do when we make fiction” (28).

Prescriptive guidelines (i.e. hard and fast lists of “dos and don’ts”) might restrict creativity for fledgling writers. So, they should not take on the task of creating a short story with constraining rules in place. Avoiding that prescriptivism ought to allow writers of all skill levels to approach a creative writing project with excitement rather than trepidation.

Craft Elements of the Short Story

Let us examine the craft elements of character, plot, setting and time, metaphor, and voice so that they might do two things for you:

1. Guide your analysis of classic examples in the genre.
2. Encourage creativity in writing your own short stories!

The first analysis task will be two-fold: we will examine two widely anthologized stories—Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” and Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”—to see how the authors employ each element in their respective pieces. Then, we will attempt to measure the relative use of each element on a more objective rating scale. Using a rating scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 signifying minimal effect/development and 10 signifying maximal effect/development), we will rate the degree to which each author develops the elements explained below.

The second task—Activities 1 and 2 at the end of this handout—will guide you through analyses of old favorites and original stories of your own.

Character (The “Who” of Short Stories)

Character might be an obvious element of stories, but it is nonetheless important in their construction. Characters are the people (or sentient animals, creatures, beings, etc.) that populate a story. They are more than just their physical attributes and descriptions; characters *do* actions—talk, think, interact—within the world of a story. Writers evoke and build characters through many techniques, two of which are “**Point of View**” (POV) and “**Dialogue**.”

POV refers to the lens through which the story is told. A **first-person** POV takes the close, subjective perspective of a narrator using the pronouns of “I” and “me.” A **second-person** POV uses the direct address pronoun of “you.” A **third-person** POV employs a distanced perspective, with the narrator using the pronouns of “she,” “he,” and “it.”

Dialogue is the interactive talk between characters in stories. When they open their mouths to speak, characters reveal all sorts of characteristics: dispositions, affections, and motivations, to name a few.

Authors of short stories use the aspects of **POV** and **dialogue** to not only create unique characters but to show how they operate within an imagined world.

Character in Two Stories:

Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” and Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”

Carver uses a first-person POV in his story to create the perspective of his unnamed narrator (nicknamed “Bub” by the other characters). It is through this close first-person POV that readers are allowed access to all the narrator’s odd and eccentric ways of thinking. The other characters’ personalities and views are shown through dialogue, always considered through the narrator’s particular (and sometimes misanthropic) take on things. [**Character Rating: 8**]

Kincaid’s “Girl” is composed of only a single, albeit very long, sentence of 650 words! The piece primarily uses the second-person point of view. The narrator directly addresses the reader (who assumes the role of girl in the narrator’s charge), giving a long laundry list of instructions, admonitions, and maxims. Perhaps in keeping with the vagueness of the title, the story gives no explicit names, familial titles, or physical descriptions. [**Character Rating: 2**]

Plot (The “What” of Short Stories)

Plot is the element of stories that describes *what happens*—the sequence of events that carries characters through the world of the story. Plot is usually differentiated from a basic “storyline” in that the former is meant to capture the major conflict(s) and motivation(s), with all the trappings of an author’s trademark style, while the latter describes a simpler inventory of happenings.

Plot in Two Stories:

Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” and Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”

In “Cathedral,” the narrator’s wife has invited an old friend of hers, a blind man, to come visit. Arguments, philosophizing, and (relatively tame) hijinks ensue! This fairly straightforward plot

is given flavor and suspense through Carver’s careful rendering of the characters and their interactions, motivations, and insights. **[Plot Rating: 6]**

Many critics have argued that there is little or no plot to be found within Kincaid’s (very short) short story “Girl.” The editor of *The Seagull Reader: Stories*, Joseph Kelly, says it, “defies the conventions of story, especially plot” (231). With this limitation in mind, readers should closely analyze the other elements to see if they *imply* happenings or certain possibilities of plot. Do the mentioned chores, pastimes, and meals evoke certain actions or scenes in your mind? **Plot Rating: 2]**

Setting and Time (The “When and Where” of Short Stories)

Setting and Time are the spatial and temporal backdrops of a story. These backdrops provide spaces and eras for characters to act and interact within, allowing them to, say, buy stereos, plot bank robberies, leap over tall buildings, and, of course, fall in love. Characters can’t do any of these interesting actions if the writer doesn’t provide an appropriate backdrop in which to do them.

Setting and Time in Two Stories:

Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” and Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”

The immediate setting of “Cathedral” is a family’s home on the east coast. Through flashbacks, different homes in other parts of the country and past experiences in other eras are mentioned, but the primary story takes place in the dining room and den of the narrator’s house. The date is not explicitly mentioned, but cultural references to casual marijuana use and color TVs suggest a modern timeframe. **[Setting and Time Rating: 6]**

In much the same way that “Girl” has an amorphous plot, the time and setting of the story are also hard to pin down. Kincaid creates these elements mostly through implication and insinuation—mentioning “doukona” and “pepper pot,” traditional dishes of Antigua; “benna,” a style of Antiguan *carnival* song, and “warf-rat boys” also suggesting the West Indies. Despite some very specific items being mentioned, the element is still ambiguous, leaving much to reader interpretation. **[Setting and Time Rating: 3]**

Metaphor (The “Why” of Short Stories)

Metaphor refers to the figurative meaning(s) of a story, often achieved through figurative language and symbolism. Figurative language describes textual connection between the literal language of the story by using “like” or “as” (e.g., “The angry man’s face was red like a fire truck”). Symbols are elements in a story that are representative of something else. For example, a small church may symbolize the whole of a particular faith, or a greedy shopkeeper may represent the flaws of capitalism.

Identifying the major themes explored in a short story can help readers to understand the layers of metaphor embedded below the surface events of the text. Parables, urban legends, and fables

are common examples of short stories that have an apparent metaphorical meaning beyond the “literal” happenings of the tale.

Metaphor can be part authorial intention and part reader interpretation; that is to say, some readers’ estimations of metaphor might expand upon or invent meanings that were not originally intended by the author.

Metaphor in Two Stories:

Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” and Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”

At the close of Carver’s story, the narrator and the blind man watch TV and try to come to a common understanding of the onscreen images. They talk about cathedrals: spires, flying buttresses, gargoyles. Some critics believe the narrator’s struggle to communicate is *really* illustrative of the nature of experience and knowledge. Empathy, while never mentioned explicitly in the story, is a major theme. The shift in the narrator’s perspective suggests newfound empathy and understanding. **[Metaphor Rating: 10]**

In “Girl,” the instructions handed down from the narrator to the title character are very specific: don’t sing frivolous songs in Sunday school; set the table this way for tea and that way for an important guest. The specificity of the items is meant to evoke a certain time and place, but part of the final line (“you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman...”) suggests a larger message, something about the universal purpose and motive (childrearing, perhaps?) behind these kinds of instructions handed down to a girl from a guardian. **[Metaphor Rating: 10]**

Voice (The “How” of Short Stories)

Voice is the element that writers achieve through their unique implementation of language, such as diction (word choice), sentence structure, and paragraphing. By adjusting or manipulating the syntax, grammar, mechanics, and punctuation in a short story, authors can imbue their writing with a stylized, signature “voice.”

Voice in Two Stories:

Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” and Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”

In “Cathedral,” Carver reveals his narrator’s personality and perspective through careful diction: colorful language, biting criticism, snarky asides. The narrator is variously condescending, patronizing, and dismissive. He comes across as something of a know-it-all, yet he seems deeply dissatisfied and uncomfortable with anything unfamiliar. Then, in the final scene, the language shifts, and the narrator seems to experience an epiphany exemplified through his softer tone. When the narrator says, “It’s really something,” it reads without the sarcasm and pessimism that permeated his earlier thoughts and utterances (Carver 98). **[Voice Rating: 8]**

In “Girl,” the story is presented to the reader as a verbal communication from a guardian (mother?) to a girl. The story runs as one long paragraph, so the cadence of the story is achieved only through diction. There are fluctuations in tone and intensity as the content of the narrator’s words change from angry to tender, from reprimands to consolations: initially, the narrator insists that the title girl is “so bent on becoming” a woman of loose morals, but by the end she suggests that these lessons are meant to strengthen the girl’s character and moral fiber, for her to grow into “the kind of woman” a mother would intend her daughter to be (Kincaid 232). [**Voice Rating: 6**]

Activity 1: Scaling the Elements of an Old Favorite

The purpose of scaling the formal craft elements is not to rate the quality or literary value of a short story. Rather, it is simply to guide a reader or writer to quantify the elements’ apparent and respective uses. This not only aids a reader’s analytical skills but sharpens a writer’s creative strengths as well. For example, you might ask yourself the following questions: How could a revision of characterization in a short story raise that element’s rating from a 2 to a 10 on the scale? How might a heightened effect or deepened development of character have implications on the length, wording, or style of the piece? Does strengthening or dampening the character imply alterations to the other elements—plotting, setting, or voice—in the story?

First, pick a favorite short story. Re-read the story itself or a summary if you need to refresh your memory of how the author drew you into their unique and exciting fictional world. Using a rating scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 signifying minimal effect/development and 10 signifying maximal effect/development), determine the degree to which the author develops each of the elements explained above. In the space below each rating, jot notes or examples from the piece that give a rationale for the value you have assigned.

Scaling the Elements: _____ (story title and author)

1. Character Rating:

2. Plot Rating:

3. Setting and Time Rating:

4. Metaphor Rating

5. Voice Rating:

Activity 2: Scaling the Elements of Your Own Short Story

Now, pick a short story that you are developing, either a polished draft or a fresh idea. Like you did in Activity 1 for a published work, use a fresh template to rate the degree to which you will or do employ each craft element. Again, jot down notes to explain or justify the rating.

In a second blank template, get creative. For the same short story, reassign one craft element—character, plot, setting and time, metaphor, or voice—a new ranking, preferably one on the extreme opposite end of the scale from that which it currently occupies. For example, if you rated the “character” aspect of your story at 3, reassign it a 10.

Note the changes that you could possibly make to accommodate the new rating—characters you might delete or a different, newly imagined setting (as examples). Remember, we’re avoiding prescriptivism! There is no single method, no right or wrong way to make these changes. The point of these exercises is to employ your analytical skills to creatively, selectively heighten or diminish these elements and, therefore, their effect in your writing.

References

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