

Romance and the Short Story

By Julia Ann Charpentier

A romantic short story is like a love song. It grabs your attention at once, takes you to emotional peaks and valleys, then releases you. No time for digression or pondering. It happens fast.

The short story is the oldest type of prose fiction. Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome produced tales as early as 2000 B.C. Brief narratives with accounts of supernatural experiences have existed throughout history in various forms such as parables, fairy tales, folktales, legends and fables. The Middle Ages in Europe was a prolific time with romances about the knights of King Arthur's court popular in France.

In the eighteenth century an English magazine called *Spectator* broke ground with semifictional sketches of contemporary characters. In the early nineteenth century the *Sketch Book* (1819-1820) continued in this tradition with descriptive passages, providing the first short stories in the United States. Romanticism was a heavy influence. Popular and literary publications increased in number.

As writers looked beyond what happened to what motivated their characters, the genre evolved into an art form familiar today. Technique, structure, focus, point of view, and appropriate diction now

mattered.

Edgar Allen Poe receives credit for establishing the genre in 1842. He called it, "An artistic composition controlled to produce a single unified effect." The newspapers and periodicals that first published this work had a wide audience. Nathaniel Hawthorne was the first American to master this genre. Later in the nineteenth century the form declined in popularity in favor of the novel. By the 1880's and 90's the short story became less of a moralizing parable and regained its status with the talent of authors like Henry James and Joseph Conrad.

Since 1900 the short story has flourished throughout the world, especially in the United States. Experimental and traditional pieces compete for space. James Joyce, an Irish author, changed the course of fiction writing for our century. He was known for stream-of-consciousness and blending naturalism with symbolism.

The novelette or novella is similar with no strict characteristics, but the pacing is slower because the length is longer. Boccaccio and Chaucer made this form famous in the Middle Ages. In nineteenth century Germany the *novelle* developed, a version that focuses on a striking event, a significant character or group of characters, and a high-impact conclusion. Compared to a



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novel, however, the action is brisk. Like a concert filled with songs of conflicting moods, the romance novel provides a broad spectrum of feeling that shorter forms of fiction cannot achieve.

Short is not for everyone. Not all readers appreciate a jog when they'd prefer to walk. Not all writers can narrow their focus on a story to such an extent. Short story writing is difficult. Nobel Prize winner Ernest Hemingway was a master of the art and based much of his stories on his own adventurous life. Personal experience plays a greater role than in any other type of composition. It doesn't mean write autobiographical tales with a little fabrication thrown in for good measure. This is *fiction*, not a diary. Even when written in the first person a

story is just a story, not the contents of an author's journal.

Marian Gavin, author of *Writing Short Stories for Pleasure and Profit*, discusses the personal experience story, advice that applies especially to romance. "Actually, it doesn't have to be much of an experience, but it sure had better be *personal*, intimate, with meaning and value to you. *Fictionalized* --never neglect that element of it." Gavin differentiates between personal experience and personal emotion stories. The latter has the advantage of being written out of emotions so strong that they can carry even a slim story with little or no physical action. All you carry over is the emotion.

Most love stories are personal emotion in which the character loves, remembers love, or wishes to be loved. "One of the great advantages of the personal emotion story over the personal experience story is that the emotional wellspring seldom runs dry. From the same source you can produce innumerable stories, each a standout in its own right, whereas the specific personal experience yields only one--or, at the most, several stories for even the most cunning and thrifty of writers."

Gavin says stories often come out of nowhere based on everything a writer has seen, done, felt and smelled, touched, tasted, heard, thought, dreamed, feared and loved, won, lost, imagined and read. This author states that the short story is not a trick. "It is people, real people caught in a moment of truth, exaggerated, perhaps, but still truth."

Deliberate obscurity is not recommended. Show the reader all the cards.

In *Write the Short Short*, Maren Elwood explains the creation of characters, a procedure different from the development of characters for a novel. Keep them simple and permit them to display only one dominant trait in action, while giving only significant details. The main character should be the most interesting and individualized person in the story. Elwood advises, "Build in the reader one definite emotion toward each character."

Elwood outlines numerous patterns that make a story: misunderstanding, discovery, and reversal of a plan of action or belief. The story built on emotion can arouse sympathy, admiration, and amusement in the reader, while creating suspense and leading to a surprise ending. A foible, psychological twist, irony, or an unusual standard of conduct get attention.

The arousal of emotion is crucial to success. Readers take pleasure in recognizing the truth of a theme, dramatic presentation, defeat and punishment, and resolution. Pity is sometimes effective.

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The romance genre in the recent past has adopted the short story format in several ways, usually anthologies. Here, several authors write a short story within the novel, and a thematic presence draws the stories within the anthology together. The stories, though thematically linked, are independent of each other. The common elements that pull them together are varied and may include sub-genre, i.e. Regencies or Westerns; holidays (as can be noted in the review section of this issue), animals such as cats, characters, events or a location like the beauty shop in Arabesque's anthology *Rosie's Curl and Weave*. The popularity of anthologies is evidenced by the increasing numbers issued each year.

F.A. Rockwell describes making the scene in *The Writer's Digest Handbook of Short Story Writing*. Delineated characters should clash or work their way through conflict until something happens within a time, place, and emotional boundary.

In *The Handbook* Fred Grove tests a scene by examining the meeting of two opposing forces. There must be emotion and purpose. Their encounter contains one or more of the following elements: an attempt to interrogate or seek information, desire to inform or

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Short story (continued)

convey information, and intent to convince, persuade, influence, impress, or compel. In the final action one character will win, lose, or quit. The aftermath, or this character's state of mind, will lead to the next scene. Maybe the next story.

Additional sources:

Grolier Encyclopedia (1993)

Encarta Encyclopedia (1997)