
UNIT 2 OPENING

Structure

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'2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit ^{is} ~~reference~~ ^{to} on the technique of 'opening' in creative writing with particular reference to the short story. It does not give you any readymade **recipé** for writing a short story, but talks about details which you will have to keep clearly in your mind in attempting this form. At the end of the lesson you should understand:

- ♦ the importance of 'opening' in a short story;
- ♦ that every genre of creative writing, be it poetry, drama or fiction, has its own particular requirements which **determine** the opening of each;
- ♦ that there can be two types of openings—the planned and the improvised—and this is applicable to both novels and short stories; and that
- ♦ in a short story the nature of the opening is determined by the target audience and by the conventions and requirements of the publication you are writing for.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, we dealt with the genesis of themes in the mind of the writer, **the** genuineness of the **creative** impulse, its connection with the writer's motivation, **and** the art of combining experience and observation with an eye on relevant facts **concerning** the locale, atmosphere and characters.

In this Unit, we examine the importance of opening in a fictional narrative, acquaint **you** with the dominant narrative modes, and offer hints and suggestions about how to begin a story effectively.

2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF OPENING

In all types of creative writing, the first thing that teases the writer is the question of 'opening'. That is to say, he has to face the problem of **finding** a suitable answer to the question: 'How do I strike the right note at the start? He **must** solve it, if he is going to be able to continue at **all**, even when he happens to be an experienced artist. **Naturally**, then, the apprentice would be even more put to the **test, for** though certain helpful suggestions could, at times, lead him into the right street, no set rules or formulae could make him achieve the desired effect. There is a kind of mystery **about** the whole creative process, and the opening of a narrative is a part of that mystery. There is, as Oscar **Wilde** put it, pain at 'the birth of a star', and **each** new poem or play, story or novel, essay or biography, presents that problem. There is **distress** and despair when the blank paper seems to mock one's efforts, or, soon **enough**, becomes a pitiful **scrawl** of writing and scratching.

However, there is **nothing to worry about**, for **any** genuine engagement with **human** reality and any true **impulse** to create will **eventually** produce **the** desired **effect**. It is chiefly a matter of **trust**, application and insight.

2.2.1 False starts

False starts are **really** a part of the creative process, and need not cause undue anxiety. Even the greatest writers, as their diaries, manuscripts and letters, *etc.* show, have had to battle their **way** through after a series of **agonising** and awkward starts. What is important then, is the ability of the writer to act as his own critic, and see if he has been able to put **across** clearly and economically the **ideas** his imagination is struggling to organise. Indeed, to secure the right note, and the right tone, he may have to labour over the first few lines or even paragraphs. Maybe the scene or the idea will have to be written down in more than one narrative form, and from more than one angle, to test **which** of these modes suits him best in that particular case. And once the **imagination** is beginning to tick, as it were, the narrative often finds its own rhythm, and begins to take off on its own steam. Revision, then, is a part of one's vision of things, and must not be taken as a sign of failure.

2.2.2 Different genres and conventions

Obviously, there cannot be any standard advice with regard to the opening of a narrative. Each kind, **poetry**, drama, fiction, *etc.*, **has its own** peculiar requirements. Even now, daring experiments can only be made within the norms of **each kind** of writing. What may be an apt opening in a narrative poem may sound awkward in a novel or a short story. In other words, the opening of a narrative is organically linked to the requirements of **the** type.

Clearly, what has **been** suggested above applies chiefly to different **forms of fiction**—**the** novel, the novella, **the** tale or the short story—and is not intended to cover drama and poetry, though the question of opening is, in its own way, important in those genres also. True, a **poem** may begin with a startling line that makes the reader sit up, but we are not **talking** of openings here in that sense and context. The opening, in our context, is an **integral part** of the narrative process, and in a lyric or a song or a sonnet, there is hardly a **narrative** to tell. For the birth of **a poem** is often a matter of luck, sudden **illumination** or breakthrough, though even a great poet like W.B. Yeats is known to have **prepared** a prose version of a contemplated poem, and lifted some lines from it to fit the poetic frame. We are also leaving **drama** out of this account, for the theatre has its **own** conventions and constraints, and **therefore**, a separate statement would be needed for it.

2.2.3 The opening as a unit of composition

As a unit of **composition** in a novel or a short story, **the opening** is a part of an organic whole, moving (a) towards a visionary centre and (b) and then a logical ending.

2.3 PLANNED NARRATIVES AND OPENINGS

Some novelists and **short** story writers plan their narratives very carefully, and go on to prepare a **full outline** to be fleshed out later. In such cases, the opening is carefully devised so that it becomes a part of **the** operative vision and structure. It impinges directly or indirectly upon the **middle** (development and process), and more significantly, upon the ending of the novel or the tale in question. In the hands of a great artist like **Henry James** such a plan usually, though not always, works well. For **basically**, such constraints do not augur well for the health of the tale. Some novelists, therefore, **depend** a good deal on improvisation en route, and leave the narrative to take its **significant form** out of its own inner compulsions and **energies**. One may recall here **Thackeray's** statement that his characters took him where they liked; he **was**, so to **speak**, in their hands. A modern novelist like Saul Bellow, for instance, moves away **from** the **planned**, tight structures of his earlier novels (**Dangling Man, Seize the Day, The Victim**) to the open, **relaxed**, picaresque, catch-all form in later novels (such as **The Adventures of Augie March, Henderson**

the **Rain King** and **Herrzog**). The point we are trying to make is that the opening as a unit of composition may not be fully planned in advance where the novel in particular is concerned. It may even be desirable not to do so.

2.3.1 The opening in the novel

Since this Unit is more directed toward the shorter fiction, only minimal comments are offered as regards general rules or ideas governing the opening in the novel.

As we have hinted already, it hardly matters how the first sentence or even the first paragraph or paragraphs begin in a novel, though should the opening in this limited-sense be arresting, startling or amusing, it straightaway arouses the reader's interest. Eventually, of course, it is the full body of the novel and its total effect that would tend to measure its value, not a flashy sentence or two at the start. Still, there are some **interesting** examples of such startling openings, and one of the **well-known** examples is Jane **Austen's Pride and Prejudice**. Its celebrated opening sentence has already passed into the realm of sayings and aphorisms. 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a **wife**.'

Again, **Tolstoy's Anna Karenina** starts **thus**: 'Happy families are all **alike**, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' These are good examples, but, **as** a rule, the opening sentence or sentences in a work of longer fiction would hardly be remembered by the reader when he is through with the book. Or, take another opening:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a **moocow** coming down along the road that a **nicens** little boy named baby tuckoo. . .

The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
—James Joyce

The appeal of such an opening is almost purely linguistic, and it has hardly any **significant** bearing on the theme of the novel, but its 'fairy story' air **and** its repetitive pattern and slang make it an admirable example of an **arresting opening**.

2.3.2 The opening paragraph or paragraphs

A good opening may set the tone away as in Saul Bellow's **Henderson the Rain King**:

What made me take this trip to Africa? There is no quick explanation. **Things** got worse and worse and worse and pretty soon they were too complicated.

When I think of my condition at the age of **fiftyfive** when I bought the ticket, all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in the chest. A disorderly rush begins—my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my **farm**, my animals, my habits, my money, my music, lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! I have to cry, 'No, no, get back, curse you, let me along!' But how can they let me along? They belong **to** me. They are mine. **And** they pile into me from all sides. It turns into chaos.

Now, the two-line opening **paragraph** has hardly any great merit, but the condensed, capsuled second paragraph springs upon the reader all in a rush to whet his appetite, and soon plunges him into the whole mad world of this American **millionaire**. And somehow, **amazingly**, the high comic tone persists till the end. The opening has done the trick, so to speak. But equally, the raciness of the tone **characterises** the tempo of this rambling novel. So, here, the opening paragraphs tie up with the opening **as** a unit of **composition** in a long narrative.

Activity 1

- i) Why is 'opening' important in a fictional narrative? (50 words)
- ii) Distinguish between a 'planned' and an 'improvised' **opening**. (35 words)
(Check your **answers** with those given at the end of the Unit)

2.4. THE OPENING AND THE SHORT STORY

Since our business here **is** chiefly with the short story (and the apprentice-writer has often to start there), it is important at the outset to decide what kind of story is being **planned** and for whom. Any potential writer **will** have to take note of the 'target' audience. And since he must, more or less, begin with magazine and Sunday-paper short stories he may have to sort out his priorities straightaway. For when a subtle and refined imagination **is** at work (as in the case of Henry James), a writer may not, indeed **cannot**, write below a certain level even if he were inclined to court popularity and hanker after the 'best-seller' status. That is the theme of **James's** story, 'The Next Time', and the narrator laments, 'You cannot make a sow's ear of a silk purse! It is **greivous indeed** if you like—there are people who cannot be vulgar for trying...'

Choose carefully the area of your interest and operation. Art, however, is a wild cat, and no one really knows **how** it springs to life out of some bush to carry the author along.

2.4.1 Different types and targets

The magazine story has **roughly** been described as (a) 'pulp', (b) 'slick', and (c) 'quality' or 'art'. This **division** parallels the one in cinema. We have the 'commercial', the 'slick' **and** the 'art' film catering to low-brow, middle-brow and high-brow audiences **respectively**. So, if you are writing for, say, a ladies' glossy magazine, the conventions and requirements of such a magazine **will** have to be kept in **mind**, and that too will determine the nature of the opening. .

With a view to guiding the Bpprentice-writersome general hints and suggestions (not rules) are set down below.

2.4.2 General hints and suggestions

- i) Try to finalise the **title** of the story before you plunge into the unknown territory ahead. Generally speaking, a **kind** of outline is in one's mind, **even** if not sketched out on paper. The title naturally has to indicate the spirit of the story, and should, **therefore**, be apt and **effective**. It may even be ironical or humorous, if such is **your** intention, and such the nature of your **theme**. As part of the opening **process**, the right title will automatically set brakes on your imagination, which may sometimes **run** away with the situation. Of course, this is not a strict **practice**, and you may well be obliged at times to write out the full story first, and then **ponder** over the problem of the title. And here also, you may have to score **out** several headings before you hit upon the right title.

If it is a character study as 'Miss Brill' by Katherine Mansfield, the name of the chief protagonist is often quite convenient. Similarly, if it is about some place or institution of common interest such as a hospital or a station, you may highlight that part of the proceedings which concerns the theme of the story. One is reminded of H.E. Bates's stories like 'The Waiting Room' and 'The Station'.

Sometimes, a governing symbol may be the most appropriate title as in the case of 'The Rocking-Horse Winner' by D.H. Lawrence.

- ii) In fact, even as the title is being finalised, you have to decide the question of the focus in the proposed short story. Is it primarily a study of (a) character, (b) incident or situation, or of (c) mood or atmosphere? Is it again, a specimen of (a) thriller or murder mystery, (b) the supernatural (ghost stories etc.), (c) humour/farce, (d) fantasy/allegory, or (e) science fiction, etc.? The opening of your tale will naturally be determined by the type of fiction you plan to write. For instance, a loaded hint or a startling comment or speech in a murder mystery may be just the right thing, and a joke in the case of a humorous narrative or sketch.
- iii) Never give 'the game' away in the opening itself unless, of course, that is the whole point of your story.
- iv) Avoid a show of artiness as far as possible. A flamboyant but forced opening, even when attractive, will not do in the end. However, a genuinely startling opening gives your narrative a head-on advantage.

Edgar Allan Poe's celebrated statement, made in his review of Hawthorne's Tales, seems to sum up the matter: 'If his very first sentence tends not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step.' Says Poe, concerning a story-writer. This should not, however, be taken as gospel truth or as a 'sure-success' formula, though Poe is right to add that each sentence must logically be linked to the one that precedes and the one that follows. Consider R.K. Narayan's opening sentences of 'Half-a-rupee Worth'.

Subbaiah sold rice at the marketgate. In his shop you found, heaped in wicker baskets, all varieties of rice: from pebbly coarse rice to Delhi Samba. White as jasmine and slender as a needle. His shop was stuffy and dark but there was no place like it on earth for him. . . .

This beginning foreshadows Subbaiah's end: 'death due to accidental toppling off of rice bags'.

Or consider the opening of Raja Rao's famous story 'The Cow of the Barricades'.

They called her Gauri, for she came every Tuesday evening before sunset to stand and nibble at the hair of the Master. And the Master touched her and caressed her and he said: 'How are you Gauri?' and Gauri simply bent her legs and drew back her tongue and, shaking her head, ambled round him and disappeared among the bushes. And till Tuesday next she was not to be seen. . . .

Thus the central character of the story, the divine cow, is built up step by step. The details establish her as a figure of mythology, invested with signs of divinity. As the story ends in an incredible finale, the reader can accept the incident as well as the myth that immediately grew round the cow, because the storyteller has, right at the beginning, given us hints that as this is no ordinary cow, the story he is about to relate is no ordinary story.

- v) Also, it is important not to prolong the opening, or stretch it out so that it begins to look a thing apart, hanging separately like a bunch of balloons. A good opening should glide comfortably, unobtrusively and economically into the next 'gear'. The germinal idea is to be developed into a certain set length, and you cannot afford to linger over 'effects', etc.

Bonheim goes on to talk of closed versus open beginnings and endings. 'Closed' openings are static as compared to 'open' openings which are dynamic and suggestive. Modern writers prefer to use the modes of report and speech, for they are, as in **Hemingway**, 'dynamic' modes. Of course, there can be a judicious mixing of the modes to achieve optimum effects. In any case, long and leisurely passages in the nineteenth century style, **and** expository passages in the manner of the essay, are now out. And even if a description (time, place, earlier history of a character, etc.) is necessary, it is often embedded in the 'dynamic' modes. Even authorial comments, **much** preferred by the earlier writers, are now frowned upon, for they tend to rob the story of that air of surprise and expectancy which a good short story writer **would** always like to create and maintain. The modern trend, thus, is to start without an exposition or description, if possible. For the opening matters much more in a short story than in a novel or in a novella. The novel has an incremental character, **and** it can gather weight and momentum as it proceeds, but the short story is more like a poem; it requires speed, concentration and brevity. Its economy is a matter not of expenditure but of saving.

2.6 SUMMING UP

These are the main points made in this Unit:

- The importance of an opening lies in its capacity to arouse straightaway the reader's interest and curiosity.
- The opening leads to the middle and end of the story and hence it is an important unit of composition.
- A distinction is made between a 'planned' and an 'improvised' opening.
- The opening and its effectiveness will depend upon the kind of story you plan to **write** and the readers for whom you write.
- It is not advisable to give away the story in the beginning.
- It may be useful to ponder over a suitable title to help you get along with a particular theme or subject.
- The opening should not be elaborate, nor the language flashy or rhetorical.
- The four dominant modes of opening are—(a) description, (b) report, (c) speech, (d) comment.

2.7 ACTIVITIES : AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

- i) A good opening holds the attention of the reader and straightaway arouses his interest. Also, it generates its own momentum, leading the writer to the high point of the story.
- ii) A planned **opening is** carefully plotted and organically connected with the middle and end of the story. An improvised opening, conversely, is relatively unplanned and depends on the inner compulsions of the narrative.

Activity 2

- a) The suggestions listed are:
 - i) **finalise** the title
 - ii) decide the focus
 - iii) avoid 'showy' openings
 - iv) do not reveal everything
 - v) the opening must **glide** unobtrusively into the story proper
 - vi) avoid cliched openings and
 - vii) try to cultivate a **personal** style.
- b) Try to **think** of some more possibilities. For instance,
 - i) **an** appropriate quotation
 - ii) plunging right into the **middle of** an interesting event **and**
 - iii) an engaging bit of dialogue.
 - iv) now explore some more **possibilities**.

2.8 GLOSSARY

You will find in the **glossary** a short list of the literary terms **used** in this Unit.

Genre: Imaginative literature is divided into **types** or classes, defined according to their structure, called **genres**. The major genres are epic, lyric, tragedy, **comedy**, satire, novel and short story.

Mode: When a **literary** work is defined by its theme and tone, it is said to be in a certain mode. For **example**, a novel may be in the comic, ironic, romantic or tragic mode.

Narrative: An **account** which develops its theme **within** the limits of a **time-scheme—chronological** sequencing-is known as a narrative.

Picaresque: A novel is picaresque when its central character is a rather likeable scoundrel, who moves from adventure to adventure, without **settling down**.