
UNIT 4 NARRATION

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4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit aims at telling you about one very important aspect of the writing of short stories—narration. Since narration is an important element of several other forms of literature as well, you will here learn about

- the distinctive mode which a writer of short stories has to adopt, and the constraints which this genre imposes on **him**;
- the narrative strategies employed by the great masters of fiction in the writing of short stories;
- the difference between narration in a full-length novel and that in a short story; and, finally
- the different modes of narration used by the great Russian and French masters and the great practitioners of this genre in English.

All this should help you in choosing the narrative mode for your own specific needs.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the **preceding** three Units of this Block, you have learnt something about **three** important elements of the short story, namely **plot/structure**, atmosphere and character. The present **Unit will** discuss another basic **element—narration**. Narration in the short story, it is easy to see, is different from that in the novel or other types of narrative writing. One can learn a great deal about this art by studying the short stories of the great masters. Remember that narration in the short story is more closely linked with its other elements than it is in other forms of writing. One might even say that it is the atmosphere, or the character, or the plot which **determines** the narrative mode in the short story.

4.2 THE ART OF THE SHORT STORY

The story is **one** of the most ancient forms of literature: it is almost as **ancient** as the **conscious use** of **human** speech. Stories in oral form have been circulating for thousands of years, **and even the** written story is an ancient form.

But the short story, as a **well-defined** sub-genre, is a modern literary **form**.—**and** epics have stories in them—and **tragedies**, comedies, and the novel tell a **story** or **many** stories at **the same** time. **But** the short story breaks off **from all** of **them and** acquires

its **own** distinct form. In **English literature**, this may be said to have happened **in the** nineteenth century. Various explanations have **been** given for the rise of the short story—among them, the **lack of time** for reading a full-length novel as life became busier and busier. **Obviously**, this is not a reason, but a **rationalisation**—for the novel has continued to flourish at **the** same time as the short story.

Story telling is an art—the **arousal** of interest, the **creation** of suspense, the satisfaction of the **ending, etc.** are all techniques based on the use of language, or style. The short story **has inherited**, after some modifications, some of these modes of narration.

4.2.1 Characteristics of narration in the short story

In order to **define** the characteristic narrative mode of the short story, **we** can use the **words** compression, brevity **and** pointedness; but none of them really gets to the heart of the matter. It is not **something** we know **already** that is being **compressed** by means of style—the effect of compression is really in **the feeling** of expanding into life which a short story, on **its** completion, induces. There is more of life in a short story than it **actually presents**. It is **this** greater life expanding into our consciousness by means of the style that **produces** a sense of authenticity and richness.

4.2.2 The difference between narrative methods of the novel and the short story

The narrative **method** of the **short** story is **an invention**, a discovery that **answers** the challenge and **necessity** of **brevity**. There is a difference **between the** events and episodes in a novel and those in a short story. In the **novels** of **Dickens** and **Thackeray**, which **used** to be published **serially**, **there was** a strong element of episode—each chunk of the serial had to provide its own satisfaction as **well** as whet the appetite and prepare the ground for what **was** to follow.

The **finality**, the definiteness of style in the short story springs from the fact **that** there is nothing to follow, **nothing** to fall back upon, no further space of life to look forward to. **The end of the story** is the end—it **is either achievement** or **failure**. The style of the novel has a **rhythm** of peaks **and** valleys—it may meander its way though life. The great novelists, **Dickens** and **Hardy**, too have written short stories which, however, do not achieve the **status of** a true short story. This is because of the inherent relaxation that comes into their work from a feeling of the amplitude of time available.

The narrative **style** of the **short** story is all peaks—no valleys. It is all achievement, **completedness** here and **now**, within the confines of the story. **This** imposes a tension on its style, a **tautness from beginning** to end. All forms of writing **have** a unity—a **beginning**, a middle **and an** end—but the short story, the most modern among them, **has** this **unity** raised to a higher level. It is **not** a **unity** of different **parts**, a flow of **unity between beginning** and end—but it is the **overwhelming unity** of a piece of life, self-contained. **It is** in this sense **that** the style of every short story must **communicate** the sense of a **discovery**. Just **as** the journalist **finds** a 'story', the **short** story writer also **finds** his **piece**, fully **formed** in his **imagination**, **eager** to find its way into **his** words before **the** freshness, the **first** sharpness of its **taste vanishes**.

4.3 THE RUSSIAN AND THE FRENCH SHORT STORY—CHEKHOV AND GUY DE MAUPASSANT

Therefore, the style of the **short story** demands both **objectivity** and **suggestiveness**. From the **beginning** to the **end**, the short story **must convey** a unifying sense. **Of the** two classic **virtues** of **objectivity** and **suggestiveness**, **there** are two exponents among the international **masters of the short story**—**Guy de Maupassant** and **Anton Chekhov**. If you think of stories like **A piece of string** or **That pig, Morin**, you get a **sense** of **that** transparency towards **objective** life, which is, in fact, a sign of **the** highest art. It **seems** **subservient** to reality and it implies **mastery** over it. **Among** the

French literary influence as an obvious counterbalance to his Anglo-Saxon character, and Poe is both a theoretician and an intellectual, an artist and a practitioner. He is conscientious as well as gifted. Qualities of successful narration may be seen exemplified in Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. It is a detective story, and such a story is invariably concerned with an event, and a discovery, a peak of solution. The storyteller is often a 'character' himself—his flippancy, his ratiocination are a match to the characters of the story he portrays. The story has a narrator and confidant—a recipient both of its narrative and its ratiocination. Consider the opening paragraph of the story:

At Paris, just after one dark, gusty evening in the autumn of 18—, I was enjoying the twofold luxury of meditation and a meerschaum, in company with my friend C. Auguste Dupin, in his little back library, or book closet, au troisieme, No. 33 Rue Dunot, Faubours St. Germain. For one hour at least we had maintained a profound silence; while each, to any casual observer, might have seemed intently and exclusively occupied with the curling eddies of smoke that oppressed the atmosphere of the chamber.

This is the flesh and blood of life which makes a story real—a place and time, both not only mentioned with appropriate precision, but given distinct character. A dark gusty evening when it is a pleasure to be indoors, in a confined space, familiar, warm, habitual, a library in the fashionable quarter of Faubourg St. Germain in Paris, the centre of the civilised world. The details of sophisticated luxury are the physical counterpart of the elegant mental world which the characters of *The Purloined Letter* inhabit. This shows not only the delicate artistry of Poe—but the spirit of being in keeping with the place, the time, the circumstances of life, which is the key to the style of his short stories. Arthur Conan Doyle, with his world-famous Sherlock Holmes, is a literary descendant of Edgar Allan Poe. Sherlock Holmes, like Dupin, is an odd character, a connoisseur of tobacco. They both like surprise and paradox, which are, however, not necessary to the style of the short story, though they are the characteristics of this particular short story.

This brings us to the Point that the narration has to be appropriate to the discovery, the 'story' which the short story incorporates. The style has to be infinitely malleable, responsive, delicately suggestive, and in intuitive sympathy with the process of life within the short story. Dupin says, 'I dispute the availability and thus the value, of that reason which is cultivated in any special form, other than the abstractly logical. I dispute in particular the reason deduced by mathematical study.' From which Poe, in the character of Dupin, goes on to say something extremely relevant to the short story—'If the minister had been no more than a mathematician, the Prefect would have been under no necessity of giving me this check. I knew him, however, as both mathematician and poet.'

'Both mathematician and poet'—that is the crux of the problem of narration in the short story—a balance of technique and imagination appropriate to the event, crystallised, the leading to an insight into the nature of life and human character. Poe kept his intellectual powers and suggestive imagination in compartments, for the writing of stories of two types—the detective story and the tale of atmosphere. The Conan Doyle stories, by their style, create the atmosphere of a world and a character so odd and individual that his fiction creates the illusion of reality.

4.4.2 Somerset Maugham: conscious art

All short story writers do not necessarily think about style, but at least one outstanding writer, Somerset Maugham, has both thought about style and written remarkably good short stories. In style and structure, the stories of Maugham are models of lucidity, of that twist of event which at one turn records an insight into human life and character. Apparently, and in their technical skill, his stories seem to deal as little with atmosphere as possible. But that apparent impression is only due to the fact that we think of atmosphere in one particular way. Just as there is a limited sense to the word poetic, there is a sense of atmosphere which limits it to the description of nature, or of an interior, or of an emotional situation predominantly of one tone, and in that sense the stories of Maugham have little atmosphere. Maugham writes about the usual mix of human nature which has its own complexity, and with the neutral clarity and sharpness of his eye he lends to his story

a **distinct** artistic style. Take, for **instance**, the feeling and tone of dislike in his story Mr. Know-all. It has a negative atmosphere of positive dislike—like the title of the story **itself**. The atmosphere of the **disagreeable** is built up slowly out of innumerable small details, petty in themselves, but reinforcing the total effect of moral discomfort **arising** out of physical details.

Like Poe, Maugham specified the 'period' quality—"The war had just finished and the passenger traffic in the ocean-going liner was heavy". It is the milieu of **cosmopolitan** travel between the First and Second World Wars. Atmosphere is **sometimes** a matter of class atmosphere, a difference not only of the rich and the poor but of the hundred different things which make up social caste, the world of **snobbery**. The description of Max Kelada's luggage is vivid,

When I went on board I found Mr. Kelada's luggage already **below**. I did not like the look of it; there were too many labels on the suitcases, **and the** wardrobe **trunk** was too big. He had unpacked his **toilet** things, and I observed he was a patron of the excellent Mr. Coty; for I saw on the washing stand his scent, his hair-wash, and his brilliantine. Mr. **Kelada's** brushes, ebony with his monogram in gold, would have been all the better for a scrub.

Max Kelada is ostentatiously rich and dirty.

A **kind** of racial prejudice—the prejudice against the un-English—is made vivid, **almost** as a **matter** of taste. Again, as in the case of the **luggage**, the distaste is against a **physical type**—

King George has many strange subjects. Mr. Kelada was short and of a sturdy build, **clean-shaven** and **dark-skinned**, with a fleshy, hooked nose and very large, lustrous and liquid **eyes**. His long black hair was sleek and curly. He spoke with a fluency in which there was nothing **English**, and his gestures were exuberant.

Maugham's command of the idiom of dislike, the language of snobbery, is used with **impressive** competence—indeed with such thoroughness that the event of the **short** story produces a mixed effect of **bewilderment**. The gist of the story is that **Ramsay**, an American in the **Consular** Service, is **returning** to Kobe with his wife. Pretty Mrs. **Ramsay** has been **alone** in New York for a year and is going back with **Ramsay**. Max **Kelada** is an expert on pearls, and just by way of illustration he points to a **chain** **Mrs. Ramsay** is **wearing** and says, 'You take my word for it, Mrs. **Ramsay**, that chain you're wearing **will** never be worth a cent less than it is **now**.' **Mrs. Ramsay**, guilty slips the chain inside her dress. **Ramsay** wants to know how much Kelada **thinks** it is worth—and he values it at around 15,000 dollars, whereupon **Ramsay** says that his wife bought it for a mere eighteen dollars. There is a heated **argument** and a bet on whether it is real or imitation. But after **taking** the bet Kelada **examines** the pearls, and while examining them, he looks at Mrs. **Ramsay**. He turns **around** and **says** the pearls are imitation and pays up his hundred dollars. Maugham describes the effort that Kelada has to make in reversing his stand and bearing up under **Ramsay's** taunts on his experience.

The **denouement** of the short story is the anonymous return of the hundred dollars **Kelada** had lost in the bet. The **pearls** were real, they were **payment** for Mrs. **Ramsay's** infidelity, and **Max** Kelada, having read the story in her face, was decent enough to lose his bet, and lose face rather than show her up—a case of **unsuspected**, unexpected decency, a touch of pity for a poor woman in a hard situation. The **end** of the story, Somerset **Maugham's** about-turn, is: 'At that moment I did not entirely dislike Mr. Kelada. He reached out for his pocket book and **carefully** put in it the hundred dollar note.'

Maugham's men and women are real and realists. One may, under the pressure of pity and decency, be prepared to lose a hundred dollars, but a hundred **dollar** note is a hundred dollar note. There is a compact, modern simplicity and economy in Maugham's style, an emphasis on vivid and exact visual detail, and a sense of the spoken idiom in which his men and women not only conduct **the ordinary** business of **their** life but by **which** they express their nature and what they value.

The overall **sense** of dislike **Somerset Maugham** records is an aspect of **social** snobbery! It must be accepted as part of the limits of **Maugham's horizon** as **an artist** that our feeling is that he does not **disagree** with this dislike of Kelada. In **fact**, the

There is an effortless limpidness in **this sight** of a common enough reality. But Sun's **reaction** is, though typical of a child's response, a surprise, a break in **on the** acceptance of the **tawdriness** of some **real things**, because we **take so** little account of the view that children carry of **things**.

But Sun did not move from the door. Suddenly he put up his head and gave a loud wail. "I think it's homd-horrid-homed," he sobbed.

Unless we sometimes become as little children, it may be **difficult** to enter even the world of the artist which we erroneously take to be an entirely adult preserve.

4.4.4 James Joyce: the autonomy of style

There is an intimate **link** between the short stories of James Joyce (*The Dubliners*) and his great novel *Ulysses*. The **Dublin** pictures of the life of frustrated imagination have **the** potential of branching out into the whole landscape of the city—physical, **intellectual** and spiritual. What we usually think of as style in any literary sense exists in its **own** right in the short stories of Joyce. And, indeed that style has a **rightful** place **in the** short story as in the novel, given the depth and richness of situation which may require such a style to do it **justice**. Joyce is a great experimenter and practitioner of style, and even his intimate knowledge of the frustration that **imaginative** richness of style may **suffer from** the **poverty** of human circumstances, is itself a suitable subject for such style. Even common life hankers for style, **for** style is what imagination and art can make of our drab, common language. Here's a passage from his *A Painful Case*.

She asked him, why did he not write out his **thoughts**. For what? he asked her, with **careful scorn**. To compete with **phrasemongers**, incapable of thinking **consecutively** for sixty seconds? To submit himself to the criticisms of an obtuse middle class which entrusted its morality to policemen and its fine art to impresarios?... Her companionship was like a warm soil about an exotic plant. Many **times** she allowed the **dark** to fall upon them, refraining from lighting **the lamp**.

4.4.5 Hemingway: a rigorous and bare style

This account of **narration** in the short story may be ended with a reference, however **brief**, to a great and modern stylist—whose application of the rigorous and **experiments** of style applied to the novel appear to have great relevance to the **growth** of style inside **the form** of the short story.

A Day's Wait is a story about a boy Schatz and his temperature,

Back **in the** room I **wrote** the **boy's temperature down** and made a note of the 'time to give the **various capsules**.... His face was very white and there were dark areas **under his** eyes. He lay still in the **bed** and seemed very detached **from** what was going on.

Then there's a diversion to the world outside—the impressions of the father **independent of** the boy and **his temperature**:

It was **a bright**, cold day, the **ground** covered with a sleet that had frozen so that it seemed as if **all the bare ground** had **been** varnished with ice.

This is an original, clean, **objective** first hand **impression**.

When he goes back to the house, **the boy** is in a state—he asks out of the blue:

About what time do you think I'm going to die? he asked.
what?

About how long will it be before I die?

You aren't doing **to** die. What's the matter with you?

Oh, yes, **I am**, I heard him say a hundred and two.

People don't die with a temperature of **hundred** and two. That's a silly way to talk.

I know they do. At school in France, the boys told me you can't live with forty four degrees. I've **got a** hundred and two.

He had been waiting to die **all** the day, ever since nine o'clock in the morning.

4.6 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

- i) Compression, brevity and pointedness are important characteristics of **narration** in the short story, as against the novel, where there is room for diffuseness and prolixity. The short story writer, within limitation, aims at achieving **completedness**, a unity of a piece of life.
- ii) + iii) Yes. It is a **challenge** to a writer to write in more than one genre. In India, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, **Mulk Raj Anand**, Shiv K. **Kumar**—all write both novels and short stories.

Activity 2

- i) Somerset Maugham, as a writer of short stories, has bestowed considerable thought on the problem of the narrative art as is evident from his books *A Writer's Notebook*, *The Summing Up* and *Ten Novels and their Authors*. **Maugham** tries to relate the elements of plot, atmosphere and character to the narrative method that he adopts.
- ii) Maupassant, among French writers, and D.H. Lawrence among the **English**, are two other writers in whose case narrative style assumes a great deal of importance.

Activity 3

For (a) I would write a romance; for (b) I would use the mode of realism and for (c) I would **prefer** satire.

The opening paragraph of an adventure story is given below as an example.

THE BEAR

He was ten. **But** it had already begun, long before that day when at last he wrote his age in two figures and he saw for the first **time** the camp where his father and Major de Spain and old General Compson and the others spent two weeks each November and two weeks again each June. He had already **inherited** then, without ever having seen it, the tremendous bear with one trap-ruined foot which, in an area almost a hundred miles deep, had earned for itself a name, a **definite designation** like a living man.

4.7 GLOSSARY

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

Denouement: the unravelling of a plot's complications at the end of a story or play; the events following the major **climax** of a plot.

Realism is the portrayal of life with fidelity; it is **concerned with the** 'here and now', **with** everyday events. The hero of a realistic novel is **tkordinary** man.

4.8 ADDITIONAL READINGS FOR BLOCK 1

Boland, John. *Short Story Techniques* (enl. rev. ed.) The Red House, Mardens Hill, 1960.

Cawetti, John. G. *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (Formula Series on Art and Popular Culture). Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976.

A *Handbook for Writers*. S.K. Kaul (ed.) pub. India International Centre, 40 Max Mueller Marg, New Delhi.

Reid, Mildred *Writers, Let's Plot*. rev. ed. 1979. Burkehaven, Pr.

Some stories (listed below) have been referred to in this Unit:

- | | | |
|---------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Ernest Hemingway | : | <i>A Day's Wait</i>
<i>Killers</i> |
| Edgar Allan Poe | : | <i>The Purloined Letter</i> |
| Somerset Maugham | : | <i>Mr. Know-all</i> |
| D.H. Lawrence | : | <i>St. Mawr</i> |
| Katherine Mansfield | : | <i>The Last Laugh</i> |
| James Joyce | : | <i>The Dubliners</i> |

You are now advised to go to any university or college library closeby and read as many of these stories as possible.