

The Short Story



Definition

“a story that can be read in one sitting” (Edgar Allen Poe)

General characteristics

- limited number of characters, often only one main character (=protagonist) and little/no character development (cf. novels e.g. by Charles Dickens with over 20 main characters)
- limited time span: only a few hours, days or weeks (cf. novels that cover a whole lifetime or even several generations)
- a single theme/plot (cf. novels that can deal with several/many themes and can have various sub-plots)

Typical structure of the plot

- exposition: introduction of main character(s) and setting (place, time, general social background), hints at theme and/or atmosphere; often no or very short exposition: story begins “in medias res”, e.g. in the middle of a dialogue
- rising action: development of the conflict
- climax: conflict reaches its highest point
- [turning point: a change in the conflict]
- [falling action: reduction of suspense]
- ending
 - denouement: conflict is resolved
 - open ending: conflict is not resolved, reader wonders what might happen next
 - surprise ending: reader’s expectations are not fulfilled