

## Lecture notes on Araby

What is a short story?

- Edgar Allan Poe's definition - a short story is a narrative that "can be read at one sitting".
- Anton Chekhov brought his short stories to life by giving up "the beginning-middle-and-end plot, by refusing to judge his characters, by not striving for a climax or seeking neat narrative resolution".
- William Boyd's classification of the short story
  - **The event-plot story:** plot is all important, the narrative is shaped to have a beginning, middle and end. Examples are "twist-in-the-tail" stories of O Henry, genre stories - ghost stories (WW Jacobs) and the detective story (Arthur Conan Doyle)
  - **The Chekhovian story** not to abandon plot, but to make the plot lifelike: random, mysterious, run-of-the-mill, abrupt, chaotic, fiercely cruel, meaningless. Katherine Mansfield and Joyce were among the first to write in the Chekhovian spirit.
  - **The modernist story:** characterized by Hemingway's short stories. His style: pared down, laconic, repetition of the known, opacity.
  - **The cryptic/ludic story** baffling surface; there is a meaning to be discovered and deciphered. Example - A Nabokov story, such as "Spring at Fialta", is meant to be unravelled by the attentive reader. Rudyard Kipling used "suppressed narration": stories like "Mary Postgate" or "Mrs Bathurst" are complex and multilayered.
  - **The mini-novel story** a hybrid - half novel, half short story - trying to achieve in a few dozen pages what the novel achieves in a few hundred: a large cast of characters, lots of realistic detail. Chekhov's great story, "My Life", for example, belongs to this category. It has a span of many years, characters fall in love, marry, separate, children are born, people die.
  - **The poetic/mythic story** In contrast, the poetic/mythic story gets as far away from the realistic novel as possible. includes writers such as Hemingway, the stories of Dylan Thomas and DH Lawrence, the long prose-poems of writers such as Ted Hughes. Has a poemlike feel and may employ stream-of-consciousness.
  - **The biographical story** the short story deliberately borrowing and replicating the properties of non-fiction: of history, of reportage, of the memoir. Examples - Borges's stories. Another variation is to introduce the fictive into the lives of real people.

## Araby

- The story follows a nameless narrator as he pursues a girl for the first time, seeking to win her affections by bringing her a gift from an Oriental bazaar.
- The ordinary everydayness/ monotony of the narrator's locality and life are contrasted with the idealized, frenzied state of the narrator's mind.
- "The darkness of muddy lanes" is then juxtaposed with sliver of light which illuminate the figure of Mangan's sister (but never completely) as something mysterious, unknown, sensual. The narrator is on the cusp of adulthood. His feelings are a mix of sexual desire and yearning for some abstract beauty.
- Religion and knightly love comingle as the narrator decides to embark on a pilgrimage for Mangan's sister.
- Critics have noted how the narrative progress of *Araby* overlaps with five stages of plot that mark medieval romance: the *enfance*, meeting the lady, committing to the quest, facing trials, and completion of the quest.
- The central thesis thus emerges: that Araby is just an ugly marketplace, and that the narrator has simply elevated it to a higher status due to his vanity. The narrator notices the absence of light, Araby is a huge disappointment to the narrator and he loses purpose, "remember with difficulty why I had come." Furthermore, the narrator is unable to afford anything—his quest to bring back the grail is a failure. Once the narrator is faced with these disappointments, all his other grandeurs fall apart too. He is no longer in love with Mangan's sister. The female seller at Araby does not heed him any attention, instead flirting with other men. The narrator's ego has been shattered; he is not the dashing knight he thought he was.