

# Introduction: How We Read Now

As the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges once said, “Unlike the novel, a short story may be, for all purposes, essential.”<sup>1</sup> How is a short story essential? The American writer Valerie Trueblood describes how a short story can be “taken up mentally in one inhalation, as most novels cannot comfortably be, and remembered as a *thing*”.<sup>2</sup> In other words, like many poems, short stories are compact enough to inscribe or brand themselves upon the reader’s memory. The short story is “essential” in that it functions as the essence or crystallisation of a narrative, etching its own mark in the mind of the reader. At the same time, it is also “essential” in that it is a critically important form in literature, allowing readers to appreciate ideas and insights conveyed in the story in a focused and concentrated way.

What is a short story? It is precisely that—a **short story** is a narrative comprising fewer words than a novel, and often featuring just a few characters.<sup>3</sup> Within the space of just a few pages, the author can captivate and transport the reader to new heights of the imagination. The form favours a minimal and straightforward plot, leaving the development of characters to be suggested through their actions and interactions. The brevity of the short story means that it typically focuses on just one or a few key events or ideas, with every element of the narrative contributing to the larger arc of the story. Hence, the form of the short story is challenging for the writer, who must be mindful of how every word counts in conveying messages and engaging the reader.

This short story collection presents a valuable opportunity to understand, discuss and make sense of how stories can offer the reader insights into the human experience, besides helping us to develop greater empathy for others, think critically about the world, and gain a more nuanced perspective towards everyday situations. The title and subtitle of this collection—*How We Live Now: Stories of Daily Living*—are significant. By portraying memorable characters and relationships, set against the backdrop of contemporary Singaporean settings, the stories in *How We Live Now* invite a mature engagement with the complexities of daily living, with a significant emphasis on family relationships, in addition to the challenges of growing up and growing older. These challenges include how we form or shape our identities given the pressures we face, how we come to terms with loss or struggle, and how we make choices based on our hopes, fears, desires and dreams.

How should we approach the stories in this collection? Although most of the stories feature young or adolescent characters, they may or may not immediately resonate with all of us, depending on whether we have had similar life experiences. Nevertheless, we would do well to remain open-minded and receptive to the different ideas, messages and kinds of storytelling exemplified in this collection. When reading these stories, it will be helpful to approach them by expecting gaps and ambiguities. Some of the stories do not offer a clear resolution. As the writer and academic Paul March-Russell explains, the short story can be best understood as a kind of fragment, given its tendencies “to snap and to confound readers’ expectations, to delight in its own incompleteness,

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1 Halpern, D. (Ed.). (1986). *The Art of the Tale*. (Penguin. v)

2 Trueblood, V. (2001). What’s the Story? Aspects of the Form. *American Poetry Review*, 30(4), pp. 40–46.

3 Hansen, A. J. (1999, July 26). Short story. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/short-story>. Accessed 1 November 2022.

and to resist definition".<sup>4</sup> In these stories, what is left unsaid is often just as important as that which is articulated. By adopting an openness towards ambiguity, we can develop our imagination and creativity, besides deepening our understanding that there are usually multiple interpretations and perspectives to every given issue. When we learn to accept uncertainty and doubts, we can become more confident in approaching unfamiliar territory—this attitude is useful not just for Literature examinations but rewarding for life in general.

## How We Study the Short Story Now

In *The Lonely Voice* (1962), the Irish writer Frank O'Connor famously distinguishes between the novel and the short story. He argues that while the novel usually depicts people in society, the short story is often populated by characters from what he terms "submerged population groups" or "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society".<sup>5</sup> A defining trait of the short story, he contends, is "an intense awareness of human loneliness".<sup>6</sup> We can observe how many of the characters in this anthology are similarly lonely—not least Uncle Boon in "Letters", the narrator in "Child's Play", and Hwee Bin in "Before the Valley". Keeping an awareness of how characters live on the margins can allow us to reflect on our own biases and assumptions, and hence help us glean a more holistic understanding of the constraints and complexities of everyday life.

Given the differences between the novel and the short story, the way we study each form would also be different. As short stories typically do not reflect the complex plotlines and extensive character development of novels, they may oblige us to fill in the gaps with our own imagination, by making inferences and drawing conclusions from the text. The story may even conclude abruptly or open-endedly, which may invite the reader's questions and diverse interpretations of narrative possibilities. Accordingly, we should read each story carefully, paying attention to both literal and figurative elements, while developing our own informed personal response to the text based on details in the story.

When reading each story for the **first** time, you may wish to:

- Underline or highlight relevant words or phrases that strike you
- Annotate the text by drawing symbols (like stars, asterisks or question marks) or writing simple comments in brief in the margins to track your thoughts and feelings as they arise
- Note any predictions you may have about how the story will proceed, why they arise, and whether they are fulfilled

When reading each story for the **second** time, you could:

- Outline your impressions of each main character in the story, as well as notes about themes, setting, as well as recurring symbols and motifs
- Examine the story's beginning and ending to uncover why the writer has decided to write it as such, and for what effect

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4 March-Russell, P. (2009). *The Short Story: An Introduction*. (Edinburgh University Press. vii)

5 O'Connor, F. (2011). *The Lonely Voice*. (Melville House), pp. 87–88.

6 Ibid, p. 87.

- Make notes about the writer's technique, such as the use of narrative perspective and literary devices like metaphors and irony

Finally, by the time you reread each story, for the **third** time or more, you might like to:

- Craft simple flashcards to test yourself on your knowledge of characters, themes, symbols, motifs and other elements, including any key quotations
- Create a knowledge organiser or draw a mind map illustrating the various areas of study like plot, character, theme, setting and style of each story
- Practise writing paragraphs, and eventually whole essays, in response to discussion questions about each story

## Elements of the Short Story

When studying the short story, it can be helpful to consider five key elements of literary analysis, or areas of study: plot, character, theme, setting and style.

### 1. Plot

**Plot** is often regarded as the most important element of a narrative, as it relates to how the narrative unfolds. A classic example of plot—also known as Freytag's plot pyramid<sup>7</sup>—can be outlined as follows:

- a. Exposition:** The story is introduced, including the main characters' names, setting, mood, time and situation.
- b. Inciting incident:** Also known as the complication or conflict, this is where a problem or dilemma is presented to the characters to which they respond, which drives the story forward. This may also be the main goal for a protagonist to overcome or achieve.
- c. Rising action:** As characters respond to the conflict, they interact with one another. Key details of the backstory may be revealed. Characters' motives and attitudes are revealed and developed, themes are explored, and the climax is sometimes foreshadowed.
- d. Climax:** This is the highest point of tension and interest in the story, where the conflict is most heightened, and the fates of the main characters are decided. The central conflict is addressed here, often in a manner that cannot be undone.
- e. Falling action:** In this section, the writer explores the aftermath and consequences arising from the climax. This may include commentary on the story's central themes and the responses of characters to the irreversible changes in the climax. Loose ends from the main conflict begin to move towards resolution.
- f. Conclusion:** This is where a story reaches its end. Readers find out whether the problem is fully resolved, such as when characters gain new insights or become transformed in some way. The term 'denouement' [pronounced 'day-new-mawn', literally meaning 'untie the

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<sup>7</sup> Freytag, G. (1895). *Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art* translated by E. J. MacEwan. (S. C. Griggs & Company), pp. 114–140.

explicated approach or just offer open-ended suggestion-based prompts. Eventually, based on teachers' advice, we decided to adopt a middle path through a **scaffolded, detail-oriented approach**. By providing guided questions to chart your impressions and guide your analysis of each story, we aim to point you towards relevant examples. In this way, you are encouraged to move beyond a purely narrative and descriptive response to the stories, towards an interpretive and analytical level of response to these stories in writing. This format can provide greater structure for class discussions, besides offering an organised approach for the study of each story.

While we offer some preliminary responses to help you get started, we invite you to treat this study companion as a guided entry point into your study, rather than a collection of definitive right answers. Even though each chapter may be very detailed, the details in our framework are not exhaustive. Rather, each chapter is a launchpad for you to generate your own ideas so that you can develop further insights about the texts.

## How to Use this Study Companion

This study companion is best used with your own blank hard copy notebook or digital Literature journal in your class. There is some space available in the margins for you to jot down your initial thoughts after each question. However, since most questions call for extended responses that include analysis of evidence and further elaboration, a separate space for note-taking and ideation would be more helpful when organising your knowledge of these stories.

The chapters of this study companion are arranged in the order of each story's appearance in the collection. We have incorporated guiding points for all the editor's **Discussion Questions** from the back of the anthology, as well as worked examples, to support you in studying the text. The sample responses to all the questions in this study companion that are in the teachers' guide (available separately) are not prescriptive but suggestive. You are free to disagree with any of our interpretations.

Every chapter comprises the following segments:

### Part 1. Introduction

To commence each chapter, we share our opening thoughts, which can include the perceived level of difficulty of the story, potential connections across stories, the significance of the title, as well as real-world contexts that are relevant for consideration. We may also offer some broad recommendations for how best to approach your reading and study of the story.

### Part 2. Plot Summary

It is important to read and experience a story before discussing it in class. Our plot summaries are meant to support rather than replace your reading of the story. You are encouraged to regard them as guides that outline key episodes, moments and turning points, especially if you find yourself lost or confused while reading the stories.

## Part 3. Commentary and Analysis

### A. Characters

This section is meant to help you chart your impressions of key characters over the course of each story. We have identified multiple moments for you to interpret (which are not exhaustive). These moments can help to prompt your analysis and interpretation of the significance of characters' feelings, thoughts and behaviour.

### B. Themes

In this section, we offer specific ways to think about and elaborate on key themes in the stories. If you face any challenges in articulating complex ideas, this section will allow you to generate more specific and nuanced points about themes, ranging from family relationships to more abstract themes like memory, identity and nostalgia.

### C. Symbols/Motifs

In this section, we identify prominent or recurring symbols and motifs in the story. A symbol is a sign, representation or object used to represent abstract ideas, whereas a motif is a recurring element of a story that helps to reinforce the main ideas and themes in a text. In general, symbols are more subtle and open to interpretation, whereas motifs are more direct and explicit, recurring within the plot of the narrative. For instance, the tiger in "Painting the Tiger" is a symbol as its significance extends beyond the text, and it is open to multiple interpretations, such as strength, power and mystique. The yellow heirloom cloth in "LIVE! At the Wet Market", however, is a motif as it is a recurring element within the story and imbued with more specific associations of family heritage and ancestral traditions.

### D. Literary Focus

In each story, we foreground a literary focus to highlight a particular literary technique in the story. You are encouraged to explore the deeper focus indicated for each story and consider applying them to analysing other stories as well. For instance, you can apply the literary focus on "Tone and Dialogue" from the story "The Missing Clock" to most stories across the collection.

## Part 4. Glossary

We have selected a list of words and phrases which we believe require definitions or contextual information. These words or phrases are glossed, with their significance in the story explained for selected examples, especially for more difficult terms or sections of the text. You are not expected to know all these words and references beforehand. But the more knowledge you have about the terms and references in the text, the easier it will be for you to appreciate and understand the story. Furthermore, our decision to gloss many Singaporean terms stems from the recognition not only that there are more non-local/migrant students in our secondary school classrooms today, but that it would also be helpful to avoid presuming that every Singaporean student is aware of language use and references in local contexts.

### **Part 5. How We Connect Now**

In this section, we present connections to relevant social contexts, other literary texts, and wider concepts which you may find helpful to illuminate your understanding of a particular story. We aim to offer insightful connections to broader topics, issues and texts that are thematically relevant to the study of a specific story. You may also wish to apply some of the more general concepts across the study of the short stories as well, such as the five love languages, and the five stages of grief.

We hope this study companion will be a cherished resource as you enjoy reading the stories in *How We Live Now!*

# Close to Home

by Jinny Koh

## PART 1. INTRODUCTION

The title of this story, “Close to Home”, can be read on multiple levels. Following on from the literal and symbolic father-son relationship explored in “Painting the Tiger”, the second story expands the themes of family and care through the intertwining of intergenerational relationships. Nicky, the first-person narrator and protagonist, is sent to live with Aunt Loh whose house is close to their home, within the same block, because his parents wish to spare him the trials of his mother’s battle with cancer.

The meaning of the title shifts depending on how one reads the words “close” and “home”. When read as an adjective, the word “close” in the title literally refers to not only the short distance away that Aunt Loh’s house is from his own home, but also a relative that is part of one’s immediate family. In this second definition, the story’s title accumulates meaning as it shifts between varying levels of ‘closeness’ within and across families (we explore these in greater detail in Part 3). Apart from kinship by blood ties, how affectionate are these relations? Closeness as defined by separation and distance, can be thought of in both physical and relational terms. Can family members be brought closer precisely because of separation?

The word “home” also warrants closer unpacking. What constitutes a home for someone? Is the physical space of a house sufficient? When we say “home is where the heart is”, what counts as the “heart”? Is it a feeling of safety and comfort? Of companionship? What if one feels alone at home?

## PART 2. PLOT SUMMARY

In this story, the narrator Nicky recounts the circumstances of being made to live with Aunt Loh in the same block while his mother recovers from ovarian cancer, and his father juggles caregiving and work. While there, Nicky discovers Aunt Loh’s prowess with her sewing machine. He also learns about Aunt Loh’s past, meets her estranged husband Uncle Loh, and witnesses her attempts to reconcile with her daughter Pei Fen during the latter’s pregnancy. Unfortunately, Pei Fen suffers a miscarriage which leaves Aunt Loh in despair. One morning, Aunt Loh’s flat catches fire while Nicky is at school. After this incident, Nicky never sees Aunt Loh again and the flat is renovated and sold. The story ends one year later with Nicky’s mother sewing on a button for his trousers.

### Discussion Question 5: Why does this story leave you with mixed feelings at the end?

Step 1. Consider how the “clump of black thread” (p. 39) has been associated with Aunt Loh. Given Nicky’s relationship with Aunt Loh and her subsequent change of circumstances, identify these mixed emotions (using adjectives/abstract nouns<sup>1</sup> describing at least one positive and one negative emotion,<sup>2</sup> connecting them with the conjunction ‘yet’ or ‘but’) with supporting reasons for your feelings.

1 An adjective is a word that describes something, e.g. ‘sad’; an abstract noun indicates a quality, idea, or state rather than a specific object, e.g. ‘sadness’.

2 Do avoid such generic adjectives like ‘happy’ or ‘sad’—do be more specific.

Step 2. Consider how the “ball of hair” (p. 39) has been associated with Nicky’s mother’s life-threatening cancer. Given the changes in Nicky’s mother’s circumstances in the story, identify these mixed emotions (using adjectives/abstract nouns describing at least one positive and one negative emotion, connecting them with the conjunction ‘yet’ or ‘but’) with supporting reasons for your feelings.

Step 3. Incorporate the adjectives you have identified in steps 1 and 2 in your explanation, showing how such mixed feelings can co-exist.

For instance, the reality of the “clump of black thread” in the present moment downplays *[the negative feelings]* as *[insert supporting reason]*. At the same time, it also reinforces *[the positive feelings]* associated with the absence of the “ball of hair” because of *[insert supporting reason]*.

Hence, the very associations of the “clump of black thread” with the absent Aunt Loh triggers mixed feelings about her, with little resolution.

### **Extension questions:**

1. What does this moment tell you about Nicky’s feelings towards his mother?
2. Why would this be a significant moment upon which to end the story?
3. How would you compare the relationship between Nicky and his mother, and that of Nicky and Aunt Loh?

## **PART 3. COMMENTARY AND ANALYSIS**

### **A. Characters**

#### ***Nicky’s Family***

##### **1. Nicky**

As the narrator of the story, Nicky interacts with all the other characters in the story to varying degrees. Chart your impressions of Nicky’s characterisation by exploring his relationship with his mother and with Aunt Loh, as well as how he responds to the situation of moving out of home due to his mother’s illness:

*On Nicky’s relationship with his mother:*

1. Chart your own impressions of Nicky’s two visits home with his mother. In particular, consider the differences that Nicky’s retrospective narration reveals between:

- a. what he outwardly expresses to his mother, and
- b. what he thinks and feels inside but does not openly express.

Why would he choose to speak about or reveal certain thoughts, information and feelings to his mother, and not others?

2. Consider also Nicky's process of preparing his Mother's Day card for his mother.

- a. From his choices of words and images, what about his love and affection for his mother do you think he hopes to convey in the card?
- b. Why might he be "embarrassed" by his own card?

*On Nicky's relationship with Aunty Loh:*

Chart your impressions of Nicky's relationship with Aunty Loh over time. How can we begin to interpret the way their relationship grows and changes? Consider the following questions:

1. How does Nicky's perception of, and feelings towards Aunty Loh change over time?
2. How do you think Aunty Loh feels about having Nicky over to stay with her? How does she express this in her actions, behaviour, and speech?
3. What do their interactions suggest about how the nature of their relationship starts out, and gradually changes over time?

You can formulate and support your answer by considering the following moments:

1. Aunty Loh's first words of welcome to Nicky on his arrival (p. 24)
2. Nicky's initial impression of time spent with Aunty Loh at her home after school (p. 25)
3. Nicky's changing attitudes towards Aunty Loh who often chats with him while sewing, and his personal responses to her stories (pp. 26–27)
4. Aunty Loh altering Nicky's clothes that his father brought which were too large for Nicky (p. 28)
5. Aunty Loh bringing Nicky out to buy materials for the baby pillow and herbal soup for Pei Fen (p. 29)
6. The first mention of Aunty Loh calling for Nicky's help with her faulty stove (p. 31)
7. Nicky attempting to correct Aunty Loh for her mispronunciation of Pei Fen's child's name (p. 31)
8. Nicky helping to thread the needle for Aunty Loh when sewing the baby pillow; Aunty Loh teaching him how to thread the needle; Nicky clearing up the sewing materials when Aunty Loh falls asleep (p. 32)
9. Aunty Loh explaining to Nicky about the significance of the baby pillow (p. 33)
10. The evening when Pei Fen does not turn up for dinner (p. 34)

11. The second mention of Aunt Loh calling for Nicky's help with her faulty stove on the fateful school morning (pp. 36–37)
12. Nicky's recollections of his immediate and recent memories of Aunt Loh, as well as how he imagined what happened to Aunt Loh during the fire (pp. 37–38)

**Discussion Question 2: How does Nicky react to the situation and to his mother's illness?**

*The concept of 'ambivalence'*

From the story, we learn that Nicky does have mixed feelings in his reactions to the situation. We can say that Nicky responds in an ambivalent manner (i.e., having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone). The next step is for us to suggest what each of those mixed feelings are, and to support them with relevant evidence.

**Guided paragraph level response**

Answer the question, e.g. as follows:

In the story's beginning, Nicky reacts to the situation of having to move to Aunt Loh's place due to his mother's illness in ambivalent terms.

Introduce your first response, e.g. as follows:

On the one hand, Nicky expresses [insert point 1] when he is obliged to live away from his parents. This is because [insert relevant quote or evidence], which suggests his [link back to point 1] about moving out and his mother's illness.

On the other hand, Nicky feels that [insert point 2] in relation to his mother's illness. This can be seen when he reflects that [insert relevant quote or evidence]. This is also supported by the moment where [insert relevant quote or evidence].

**Advanced paragraph response**

Example:

On the one hand, Nicky **clearly yearns** for his mother while being separated from her, as he "peer[s] outside Aunt Loh's window at the common corridor, hoping to catch a glimpse of [his] mother" (p. 27) when he awaits his weekly return visit.

**On the other hand**, during these visits, **his excitable and restless behaviour** in "talk[ing] non-stop, filling the gaps of silence with [his] mindless chatter, hoping to keep her awake for as long as possible" (p. 27) **also further reveals his sense of helplessness in trying to create and maintain a sense of normalcy.**

Here, Nicky's recount reveals how "each time her eyes closed, [he] feared they might

never open again" (p. 27). This shows his **inner dread of confronting the worst-case scenario of his mother's condition**, of her possible passing at any moment.

## 2. Nicky's Mother

What are your impressions of Nicky's mother both as an individual and as a mother? Do they change over the course of the story? If so, how?

Chart how Nicky's mother is depicted over the course of the story. Along with her changing physical appearance and condition, observe her emotional expressions, speech and actions when interacting with Nicky.

You can consider the following moments:

1. Bidding goodbye to Nicky the first day he leaves for Auntie Loh's home (pp. 23–24)
2. The first mention of Nicky's visits back home (pp. 27–28)
3. The second mention of Nicky's visits back home with the Mother's Day card (pp. 35–36)
4. Back home together, Nicky's mother reflecting on the new owners of Auntie Loh's flat, her new physical appearance, and the act of sewing a button for Nicky's trousers (p. 39)

## 3. Nicky's Father

What are your impressions of Nicky's father both as an individual and as a father? Do they change over the course of the story? If so, how?

Chart how Nicky's father is depicted over the course of the story. Consider his emotional expressions, speech, and actions when he is interacting with Nicky, or observed by Nicky.

You can consider the following moments:

1. How he rationalises sending Nicky to live with Auntie Loh and how Nicky observes him caring for Nicky's mother (p. 23)
2. How he lays out expectations for Nicky's behaviour at Auntie Loh's home when they first arrive, including his last words for him before his departure (pp. 24–25)
3. How he delivers the good news of Nicky's mother's successful surgery (p. 28)
4. How he responds to the fire at Auntie Loh's home when Nicky first sees him, and to Nicky's request to visit Auntie Loh at the hospital (pp. 37–38)
5. How he spends the weekend restoring the walls of their front door after the fire and how he brings Nicky to the mall for new clothes (p. 38)