

GREG WICKENHOFER • ORBITER'S REWARD

The short story is a narrative of interrelated events, involving a conflict and a resolution. Short stories tend to be less complex than novels. Usually, a short story will focus on only one incident, has a single plot, a single setting, a limited number of characters, and covers a short period of time.

In modern short stories, there is a tendency to make an abrupt start, often from the middle of action and then the narration directs toward a specific ending, which is often abrupt and inconclusive. The genre demands economy of settings and precise narrations. The characters in a short story are often revealed through an action or a dramatic situation. One of the important aspects of the short story is that it focuses on the creation of a mood rather than narration of a story.

To summarise, its main characteristics are:

- it should be highly economical, with every word, all characters, dialogue and description designed to develop a single predesigned effect;
- most short stories revolve around a single incident, a single character or period of time;
- it should be capable of being read at one sitting;
- the opening sentence should initiate the predetermined or predesigned effect;
- once the climax is reached, the story should end rapidly. The climax is the highest point of interest and the turning point of the story: will the conflict be resolved or not?
- the characters should only be developed to the extent required by the story;
- usually, the narrative structure is composed of:
 - *exposition*:
 - it presents who, when, where, what and why;
 - it introduces the complication or the problem which triggers the action;
 - it focuses the readers' attention, engages them with the story, the character, the conflict;
 - *complication* (rising action, crises, conflict):
 - it presents a rising action or a series of crisis points consisting of actions and reactions;
 - *resolution* or *denouement* of the climax through a falling action:
 - the events begin to resolve.

The **conflict** is an essential element in the short story: without conflict there is no plot.

It may represent the struggle of man against man, or society, nature, environment, even against himself (psychological stories). The conflict may be internal or external and the tension created gives rise to drama and action in the story.

The **setting** involves the place and time of the incidents in the story: the location, the social environment, and the period of history form an essential element in the short story, and follows the rules of:

- Where: a specific place (e.g.: a house), a general place (Italy);
- When: a specific time (e.g.: October), a general period or era (e.g.: during the war, eighteenth century);
- Who: the character/s;
- What: the action;
- Atmosphere: the mood or feeling created in the reader in relation to the description of the setting (e.g.: a forest, a hospital);
- Emotional landscape: sometimes the setting of a story acts as an emotional landscape, that is to say it may mirror or contrast the main character's emotional state, influencing the reader.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GREG WICKENHOFER

Greg Wickenhofer lives in West Virginia, USA and has published science fiction short stories, such as “The Home Team” and “The Killbot”, that appeared in *AlienSkin Magazine*, while his non-fiction work has appeared in *The Toastmaster*, and *Creativity in Action*. Wickenhofer has published on *AntipodeanSF*, an online magazine that is devoted to the regular monthly publication of original science-fiction, fantasy, or horror mini-stories of about 500–1000 words each.

ABOUT THE WORK

ORBITER'S REWARD

Orbiter's reward is a very short 2008 science fiction story about a scrap metal business that finds a very helpful robot. It clearly shows the main features of this literary genre. It is composed of about 500 words: Wickenhorf's writing style is appreciated because, just like a poet, he **trims** every superfluous word creating a flash short story which only takes a few minutes to read.



THE TEXT

Angelo and his wife, Millie, were hard-working merchants. To make a living, they removed CPU cores from deactivated robots and sold the scrapped bodies — and they were always looking for extra hands to help in the shop. Until Orbiter, that is.

Orbiter was junk. He looked like a radiator welded onto an **ashcan**.

When Angelo first saw Orbiter, he said, “Little fellow, you’re going to give **scrap** a bad name.”

“Very funny,” Orbiter said.

“Whoa! You haven’t been deactivated yet!”

Orbiter **squealed** and **thrust**ed away.

“Millie,” said Angelo, “a little help please!”

“Wow. He’s fast. And cute!” Millie said.

“No, Millie! He’s a pain. Grab him!”

Orbiter laughed. “I can do this all day, lady.”

Orbiter zoomed away.

Angelo motioned for Millie to join him.

“Wait until he calms down,” he whispered.

“I can hear you,» Orbiter said.

Angelo smiled.

“You’re going to cooperate, then?”

“Not while you’re brandishing that wrench, you maniac!” said Orbiter.

Angelo dropped the wrench.

“Now, promise you won’t deactivate me.”

“No. I paid for you, so I have to harvest you.”

Orbiter pointed his laser at the *Help Wanted* sign. “What am I, an apple crop?”

Millie’s voice was shrill. “Don’t even consider it, Angelo!” she said.

But Orbiter did not hesitate. Within seconds, he’d cleaned the floor spotless.

“Not bad,” Angelo said.

Orbiter exuded a drill and blow-torch, and in seconds tore down a robot — a full day’s task for Angelo.

“How do you like me now?” Orbiter said.

“You’re hired,” Angelo said.

“But Angelo, he’s too cute,” Millie said.

“No, Millie. He’s not cute. In fact, don’t even think of him as a robot.”

Orbiter soon proved he could run the entire business, even disassembling the extra robots they brought him each morning. Angelo and Millie enjoyed their free time. Money rolled in.

Then, one day, Orbiter asked for payment.

“I want your shoes.” Orbiter said.

“You don’t have feet,” said Angelo.

“Angelo,” said Millie, “if Orbiter likes your shoes, give him your shoes. You got us into this.”

“I’m not giving him my shoes.”

“Remember, Angelo, you wanted to hire a cute little robot.”

“Don’t go there, Millie. Nothing cute about Orbiter.”

“Cute.”

“For crying out loud, Orbiter! For Millie’s sake, I’ll give you my shoes.”

The following week, police arrested Angelo for the murder of his neighbouring shop owner. They found the shoes given to Orbiter in Angelo’s closet, and matched them to bloody footprints near the victim.

Millie consoled Angelo in jail.

“Remember, Angelo, Orbiter is a cute little robot.”

“That helps,” Angelo said.

Later, Millie returned to the shop. She found Orbiter busy disassembling.

He zipped over to her. “Millie! Now it’s you and me. You think I’m cute.”

Millie crushed a wrench repeatedly into Orbiter’s head. Sparks flew. Millie jumped onto him.

She swung the wrench long after she had drenched herself in his oil. Millie hated robots.

Years ago, Angelo had started the scrap metal business to more conveniently conceal the robot bodies Millie dragged home each morning.

Especially cute little robots. She hated them the most.

ashcan: *pattumiera*
scrap: *rottame*
shrill: *acuta, stridula*
to squeal: *stridere*

to thrust away: *fuggire*
to trim: *tagliare, accorciare*
wrench: *chiave inglese*
to zip over: *sfrecciare*

COMPREHENSION

1 Answer the questions.

1. When is the story set? A specific or a general period of time? Can you find direct reference to time in the story? What elements make you understand the story is set in the past/present/future?
2. Where is the story set? A specific or general place?
3. How many characters are present in the story? Mention the main features of each character.

ANALYSIS

2 Answer the questions.

1. Does Orbiter show any human features?
2. Conflict. In this story, two different conflicts are present: one related to Orbiter and one to Millie. Explain them.

DISCUSSION

3 Discuss.

1. In your opinion, who's the main character? Give reasons for your choice and discuss with your classmates.
2. Look at these photos with different representations of 'small, cute' robots. Compare them and decide if any one of them corresponds to the idea you had of Orbiter.

