

Elements of a Short Story

PLOT

The plot is how the author arranges events to develop his basic idea; It is the sequence of events in a story or play. The plot is a planned, logical series of events having a beginning, middle, and end. The short story usually has one plot so it can be read in one sitting. There are five essential parts of plot:

1. **Introduction** - The beginning of the story where the characters and the setting is revealed.
2. **Rising Action** - This is where the events in the story become complicated and the conflict in the story is revealed (events between the introduction and climax).
3. **Climax** - This is the highest point of interest and the turning point of the story. The reader wonders what will happen next; will the conflict be resolved or not?
4. **Falling action** - The events and complications begin to resolve themselves. The reader knows what has happened next and if the conflict was resolved or not (events between climax and denouement).
5. **Denouement** - This is the final outcome or untangling of events in the story. It is helpful to consider climax as a three-fold phenomenon: 1) the main character receives new information 2) accepts this information (realizes it but does not necessarily agree with it) 3) acts on this information (makes a choice that will determine whether or not he/she gains his objective).

POINT OF VIEW

Point of view, or p.o.v., is defined as the angle from which the story is told.

1. **Innocent Eye** - The story is told through the eyes of a child (his/her judgment being different from that of an adult).
2. **Stream of Consciousness** - The story is told so that the reader feels as if they are inside the head of one character and knows all their thoughts and reactions.
3. **First Person** - The story is told by the protagonist or one of the characters who interacts closely with the protagonist or other characters (using pronouns I, me, we, etc). The reader sees the story through this person's eyes as he/she experiences it and only knows what he/she knows or feels.
4. **Omniscient**- The author can narrate the story using the omniscient point of view. He can move from character to character, event to event, having free access to the thoughts, feelings and motivations of his characters and he introduces information where and when he chooses. There are two main types of omniscient point of view:
5. **Omniscient Limited** - The author tells the story in third person (using pronouns they, she, he, it, etc). We know only what the character knows and what the author allows him/her to tell us. We can see the thoughts and feelings of characters if the author chooses to reveal them to us.
6. **Omniscient Objective** – The author tells the story in the third person. It appears as though a camera is following the characters, going anywhere, and recording only what is seen and heard. There is no comment on the characters or their thoughts. No interpretations are offered. The reader is placed in the position of spectator without the author there to explain. The reader has to interpret events on his own.

CHARACTER

There are two meanings for the word character:

1. **Persons in a work of fiction.** Short stories use few characters. One character is clearly central to the story with all major events having some importance to this character - he/she is the **protagonist**. The opposer of the main character is called the **antagonist**.
2. **The Characteristics of a Person.** In order for a story to seem real to the reader its characters must seem real. Characterization is the information the author gives the reader about the characters themselves. The author may reveal a character in several ways:
 - his/her physical appearance
 - what he/she says, thinks, feels and dreams
 - what he/she does or does not do
 - what others say about him/her and how others react to him/her
 - Characters are convincing if they are: consistent, motivated, and life-like (resemble real people)

Characters are...

- **Individual** - round, many sided and complex personalities.
- **Developing** - dynamic, many sided personalities that change, for better or worse, by the end of the story.
- **Static** - Stereotype, have one or two characteristics that never change and are emphasized e.g. brilliant detective, drunk, scrooge, cruel stepmother, etc.

SETTING

The time and location in which a story takes place is called the setting. For some stories the setting is very important, while for others it is not. There are several aspects of a story's setting to consider when examining how setting contributes to a story (some, or all, may be present in a story):

1. **Place** - geographical location. Where is the action of the story taking place?
2. **Time** - When is the story taking place? (historical period, time of day, year, etc)
3. **Weather conditions** - Is it rainy, sunny, stormy, etc?
4. **Social conditions** - What is the daily life of the character's like? Does the story contain local color (writing that focuses on the speech, dress, mannerisms, customs, etc. of a particular place)?
5. **Mood or atmosphere** - What feeling is created at the beginning of the story? Is it bright and cheerful or dark and frightening?

CONFLICT

Conflict is essential to plot. Without conflict there is no plot. It is the opposition of forces which ties one incident to another and makes the plot move. Conflict is not merely limited to open arguments, rather it is any form of opposition that faces the main character. Within a short story there may be only one central struggle, or there may be one dominant struggle with many minor ones.

There are two *types* of conflict:

1. **External** - A struggle with a force outside one's self.
2. **Internal** - A struggle within one's self; a person must make some decision, overcome pain, quiet their temper, resist an urge, etc.

There are four *kinds* of conflict:

1. **Man vs. Man** (physical) - The leading character struggles with his physical strength against other men, forces of nature, or animals.

2. **Man vs. Circumstances** (classical) - The leading character struggles against fate, or the circumstances of life facing him/her.
3. **Man vs. Society** (social) - The leading character struggles against ideas, practices, or customs of other people.
4. **Man vs. Himself/Herself** (psychological) - The leading character struggles with himself/herself; with his/her own soul, ideas of right or wrong, physical limitations, choices, etc.

THEME

The theme in a piece of fiction is its controlling idea or its central insight. It is the author's underlying meaning or main idea that he is trying to convey. The theme may be the author's thoughts about a topic or view of human nature. The title of the short story usually points to what the writer is saying and he may use various figures of speech to emphasize his theme, such as: symbol, allusion, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, or irony.

Some simple examples of common themes from literature, TV, and film are:

- Things are not always as they appear to be.
- Love is blind.
- Believe in yourself.
- People are afraid of change.
- Don't judge a book by its cover.

SIGNS

A sign designates something which stands for something else. Any content-word in the language is a sign, being a spoken or written vehicle for an immaterial meaning that refers to some experience. For example, the word *dog* is a sign for a certain kind of four-legged mammal. Another example is the word *run*. It is a sign for an action, i.e. to move quickly on foot by moving your legs more quickly than when you are walking. In other words, a sign is literal.

SYMBOL

A symbol is a sign which has further layers of meaning. In other words, a symbol means more than it literally says. (Signs are literal; symbols are not). For example, water is often used to symbolize things in literature. Since water is often a sign of life, many times water represents life. Water can also be broken up into two categories: fresh water and bad/polluted water. Fresh water can represent good health, and bad water symbolizes bad health.

Notice that a symbol can have more than one layer of further meaning. The more profound the symbol, the greater the complexity of the layers of meaning (although the symbol itself may be quite simple).

When the author of Ecclesiastes (9.4) tells his readers that it is better to be a living dog than a dead lion, he uses the literal significance of "dog" and "lion," coupled with their cultural associations, to refer to conditions of human life.

There are three layers (at least) in this saying:

- The literal meaning of "lion" and "dog" (two different species of mammals), i.e. a sign;
- The cultural associations of both animals (The lion is noble, strong, and courageous; the dog is ordinary, weak, and cowardly), i.e. a symbol.

- The application to human character: The cultural associations are transferred from dogs and lions to human beings; the application makes a point about life, i.e. a symbol.

Symbols can have three kinds of association; often a symbol will have all three. The associations are

- **Personal:** We all have associations with things in our experience. One person may have strong affection for dogs while another person may fear them intensely.
- **Cultural:** Different symbols may have quite different meanings in different cultures. A lion can represent Christ in Christian culture; in Sumerian culture, the sun represents the god Marduk. In Chinese culture, dogs represent devotion and faithfulness; in Islamic culture, they represent impurity.
- **Universal:** Jungian psychology, along with other theories, argues that some symbols have universal meaning. Lions suggest deity in a variety of cultures, for instance. Trying to discern and express the universal meaning of a symbol is tricky.

Interpretation

In interpreting literature, it is important to remember that a poem or a short story means more than the writer consciously intended. It can have this surplus of meaning because of the way language works. Many images ("signs") in a work of literature will have personal, cultural, and universal associations for both reader and writer.

Neither writer nor reader is in control of these associations. We acquire the associations all through our life, and usually without being aware that we are acquiring them. When we speak, write, read, dream, or engage in any symbolic activity, these meanings are there naturally and unavoidably.

Thus, while a writer may intend to express certain meanings, the meaning he or she expresses will exceed what was consciously intended. Literature is rich and has lasting value because of its surplus meaning, the many layers of meaning it can convey to varied readers.