

SHORT STORY ELEMENTS

A.) Plot

Definition: sequence of events or what happens in the story. Typically plot involves a progression something like this:

1.) **introduction** - (exposition) introduces background material about the characters, setting, and dramatic situation. An example is when a character writes a letter home to tell his family (and the reader!) everything that has happened in the past month.

2.) **rising conflict or action** - Opposition involving forces and/or characters. The main human conflict in a story may be **external** or **internal**. Though both internal and external conflicts may be present in a story, we can often characterise the dominant conflict as *primarily emotional, intellectual, moral, or physical*. All stories are built on conflict. It provides the central source of tension and drama that make stories interesting to read. The following are different types of conflict commonly found in literature:

- a) Character against Character
- b) Character against Society
- c) Character against Nature
- d) Character against Self

3.) **crisis** - The point in a story, just before the climax, where the conflict has become so intense as to necessitate a resolution.

4.) **climax** - The moment when the conflict reaches its peak and is then resolved, such as when the "good guy" and the "bad guy" in a Western finally come to a showdown in the town square.

5.) **resolution of conflict** - The relaxing or dissolving of tensions following the climax of the story.

6.) **denouement** - The fast falling off of action in a story after the main conflict has been resolved.

7.) **end of story** - All loose ends are tied up.

Plot events usually occur in a logical order. Some stories, however, are atypical (not typical), having, for example, rather than a **horizontal** plot line such as that described above, a **vertical** structure - e.g., a **stream of consciousness** story, in which the "action" consists of "slices" of interior monologues, recollections, impressions, etc., jumping freely from past to future and to present. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is perhaps the most famous example of this latter type of story.

Another type of plot (which has been called "**convergent**") is exemplified by Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, a novel set in a Peruvian village. One at a time, each of five characters' lives is traced up to a point of convergence on a bridge, the point at which all five are hurled into a precipice as the bridge collapses. The story is built upon the attempt of a priest to find meaning in the tragedy, a pattern in the fatal destiny of the characters. ("Why *those* five?" he asks.)

B.) Character

Definition: An individual and his/her nature. The two main characters are:

- a) **Protagonist:** The main character (hero) in a story.
- b) **Antagonist:** The main character in opposition to the protagonist. The antagonist may also be any force or forces arrayed against the protagonist such as things, conventions of society, or traits of the protagonist's own character.

1.) Understanding characters:

Characters are defined by the qualities that make them think, feel, and act in certain ways. To understand each character completely, try looking at him or her from different angles:

- a) **Values:** What people, places, or things are most important in the character's life? What does he or she value most?
- b) **Feelings:** What emotions does the character feel most strongly? (Anger? Fear? Love? Hate?...)
- c) **Goals:** What are the character's greatest hopes? What is he or she working to accomplish?
- d) **Problems:** What other characters or circumstances are keeping the character from achieving his or her goals?

2.) Types of character:

- a) **flat character:** has only one or two distinct traits, ideas, or qualities.
- b) **round character:** is complex and multi-faceted; has many traits and is more fully developed.
- c) **static character:** remains the same throughout the story.
- d) **dynamic (developing) character** undergoes a permanent change in some aspect of his/her character, outlook, or personality.
- e) **stock character:** a special type of flat character; it a stereotyped character whose nature is immediately known.
- f) **character foils:** two characters who contrast so strongly that the traits of each emphasise by contrast the traits of the other.

3.) Methods of presenting character:

- a) **direct presentation:** the author tells us straight out, by exposition or analysis, what a character is like, or has someone else in the story tell us what he is like.
- b) **indirect presentation:** the author shows us the character in action; we infer what he is like from what he thinks or says or does.

4.) Character may be revealed: The nature of a character is revealed in the following five ways:

- a) what a character says
- b) what others say about a character
- c) what a character does
- d) direct author comment:
 - describing a character
 - revealing a character's private thoughts

C. Theme

Definition: The underlying idea in the story; illustrates some truth about life in general.

1.) Types of theme:

- a) **explicit:** the author or a character states the theme in the story.
- b) **implicit:** the reader must infer the theme.

2.) Principles of stating theme:

- a) The theme must be expressed in complete sentence form with a subject and a predicate.
- b) The theme may be expressed in more than one way.
- c) The theme must be a generalisation about life.
- d) The theme must not be too broad a generalisation, and must be supported and justified by the story.
- e) As the central and unifying concept of the story, the theme must account for all relevant details, cannot be contradicted by any detail, and must not rely upon supposed facts.
- f) The theme should not be reduced to a cliché (a trite, familiar saying).

3.) To determine theme, consider the following possible clues:

- a) The title of the story
- b) How has the main character changed and what did he/she learn in the story?
- c) Explore the nature of the central conflict and its outcome.
- d) Important images or symbols in the story.
- e) General observations made by the author, narrator, or characters in the story.

D. Setting:

Definition: When and where the story takes place.

- a) **Location:** where the action takes place.
- b) **Time period:** when the action takes place (when in history, what time of day, month year etc.?)
- c) **Conditions:**
 - location conditions - in a desert, on the ocean, or on a mountain top
 - weather conditions - hot cold, rain, blizzard etc.
 - social and political conditions
 - religious conditions

E. Point of View:

Definition: Who tells the story and how the story gets told.

1.) Types of point of View:

a) omniscient: From this point of view a writer can present inner thoughts of all characters. The story is told by the author using the 3rd person (he, she, it), and the writer's knowledge is unlimited. The author tells us what the characters do, say, think, or feel, and he may comment on the significance of his/her story. James Joyce's *Ulysses* is an example of omniscient narration.

b) limited omniscient narrator: The author tells the story in the third person, but tells it from the viewpoint of one character in the story. The author looks at the events of the story through the eyes and mind of this one character. (The definition in *The English 12 Handbook* is as follows: "presents inner thoughts of the main character(s) but not of all characters, nor about all things...") Ambrose Bierce's *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* is a story of this type.

c) objective point of view: A third person viewpoint without access to inner thoughts - an "objective" description of what is said and done, but not what is thought (for this some degree of omniscience is required, even if only the subjective omniscience of a first person narrator). The reader is placed in the position of a spectator at a movie or play. Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* is an example of a story told from this point of view.

d) first person point of view: Usually the main character, though sometimes a minor character, tells the story from the "I" point of view, having subjective knowledge of what is perceived, as well as what is thought, felt, etc., by him/herself. The story *Just Lather, That's All*, by Hernando Tellez is an example of a story told from this point of view.

F.) Literary Devices:

a) Imagery: "pictures" or "images" created through the effective use of words appealing especially to the senses. Imagery enables the reader to visualise setting, characters, and action, and is used to heighten the emotional effect of the story.

b) Symbol: something which stands for something else. It means both what is said and something more, as a dove is both a bird and a symbol of peace. **Name symbolism** is when an author chooses names for his characters which serve not only to label them, but also suggest something about them.

c) Irony: words implying the opposite of what is apparently meant (sometimes considered one mode of sarcasm) The ironic writer presents a surface meaning - what is said - and an intended meaning - what is really meant.

d) Sarcasm: use of witty and/or ironical, biting language to deride someone or something.

e) Dramatic irony: the use of irony to allow an audience to know what a character in a drama does not yet know.

f) Satire: a form of irony or wit used to ridicule something (person, institution etc.). It is a form of irony that ridicules the faults of humanity, but always in the interest of society. While sarcasm attacks only to hurt, and cynicism distrusts human nature and motives, satire has hope for humans and prods them to reform.

g) **Paradox:** a statement which seems absurd or impossible, but which actually contains truth.

h) **Mood:** the "feeling" imparted to a story by the use of carefully chosen words - joyful, gloomy, pensive, etc.

i) **Tone:** prevailing impression of a literary work, derived in large part from the author's attitude towards the subject - e.g., pity, reverence, anger, etc.

j) **Style:** peculiar manner of expression of a writer, inseparable from him/herself. Style has many aspects: choice of vocabulary, degree of figurative language used, complexity of sentence structures, typical mood(s) engendered in works, etc.

k) **Figurative language:** non-literal language used to make effective comparisons which, in turn, create imagery. Examples are as follows:

1) **Simile:** is a comparison, showing a likeness between two unlike things. A simile is introduced by words such as *like* or *as*.

i.e. Her hair was like woven straw.

2) **Metaphor:** is a comparison that does not contain words such as *like* or *as*. A metaphor is an implied comparison. It implies that one thing is something else

i.e. The path was a ribbon of moonlight.

3) **Personification:** attributes some human activity or quality to an animal or thing.

i.e. The leaves awoke and greeted the season.

4) **Hyperbole:** Hyperbole or overstatement is exaggeration used for humour or emphasis. Although inaccurate, hyperbole can be strong and effective.

i.e. Wordsworth writes of daffodils that "stretch in never ending line."

l) **Literary purpose:** Why did the author write the story?

1) **didactic:** to teach

2) **descriptive:** to create a picture

3) **narrative:** to tell a story

4) **dramatic:** to dramatise

5) **expository:** to explain how to do something