

ELEMENTS OF FICTION

DEFINITION OF PLOT

Plot refers to the series of events that give a story its meaning and effect. In most stories, these events arise out of **conflict** experienced by the main character. The conflict may come from something external, like a dragon or an overbearing mother, or it may stem from an internal issue, such as jealousy, loss of identity, or overconfidence. As the character makes choices and tries to resolve the problem, the story's action is shaped and plot is generated. In some stories, the author structures the entire plot chronologically, with the first event followed by the second, third, and so on, like beads on a string. However, many other stories are told with flashback techniques in which plot events from earlier times interrupt the story's "current" events.

All stories are unique, and in one sense there are as many plots as there are stories. In one general view of plot, however—and one that describes many works of fiction—the story begins with **rising action** as the character experiences conflict through a series of plot **complications** that entangle him or her more deeply in the problem. This conflict reaches a **climax**, after which the conflict is resolved, and the **falling action** leads quickly to the story's end. Things have generally changed at the end of a story, either in the character or the situation; drama subsides, and a new status quo is achieved. It is often instructive to apply this three-part structure even to stories that don't seem to fit the pattern neatly.

conflict: The basic tension, predicament, or challenge that propels a story's plot

complications: Plot events that plunge the protagonist further into conflict

rising action: The part of a plot in which the drama intensifies, rising toward the climax

climax: The plot's most dramatic and revealing moment, usually the turning point of the story

falling action: The part of the plot after the climax, when the drama subsides and the conflict is resolved

DEFINITION OF CHARACTER

In fiction, character refers to a textual representation of a human being (or occasionally another creature). Most fiction writers agree that character development is the key element in a story's creation, and in most pieces of fiction a close identification with the characters is crucial to understanding the story. The story's **protagonist** is the central agent in generating its plot, and this individual can embody the story's theme. Characters can be either **round** or **flat**, depending on their level of development and the extent to which they change. Mrs. Mallard, in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," though developed in relatively few words, is a round character because she shows complex feelings toward her husband, and her character develops when she envisions the freedom of being widowed. Authors achieve **characterization** with a variety of techniques: by using the narrative voice to describe the character, by showing the actions of the character and of those reacting to her, by revealing the thoughts or dialogue of the character, or by showing the thoughts and dialogue of others in relation to the character.

protagonist: A story's main character (see also **antagonist**)

antagonist: The character or force in conflict with the protagonist

round character: A complex, fully developed character, often prone to change

flat character: A one-dimensional character, typically not central to the story

characterization: The process by which an author presents and develops a fictional character

DEFINITION OF SETTING

Setting, quite simply, is the story's time and place. While setting includes simple attributes such as climate or wall décor, it can also include complex dimensions such as the historical moment the story occupies or its **social context**. Because particular places and times have their own personality or emotional essence (such as the stark feel of a desert or the grim, wary resolve in the United States after the September 11th attacks), setting is also one of the primary ways that a fiction writer establishes **mood**. Typically, short stories occur in limited locations and time frames, such as the two rooms involved in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," whereas novels may involve many different settings in widely varying landscapes. Even in short stories, however, readers should become sensitive to subtle shifts in setting. For example, when the grieving Mrs. Mallard retires alone to her room, with "new spring life" visible out the window, this detail about the setting helps reveal a turn in the plot. Setting is often developed with narrative description, but it may also be shown with action, dialogue, or a character's thoughts.

social context: The significant cultural issues affecting a story's setting or authorship

mood: The underlying feeling or atmosphere produced by a story

DEFINITION OF POINT OF VIEW

Point of view in fiction refers to the source and scope of the **narrative voice**. In the first-person point of view, usually identifiable by the use of the pronoun "I," a character in the story does the narration. A first-person narrator may be a major character and is often its protagonist. For example, the point of view in Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" becomes evident when the protagonist responds, *"I don't sing benna at all on Sundays, and never in Sunday school."* A first-person narrator may also be a minor character, someone within the story but not centrally involved, as in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," which is told by a member of the town who is not active in the plot but has observed the events. The author's choice of point of view has a significant effect on the story's voice and on the type of information given to the reader. In first-person narration, for example, what can be shown is limited to the character's observation and thoughts, and any skewed perceptions in the narrator will be passed on to the reader. Third-person point of view occurs when the narrator does not take part in the story. *"I don't sing benna at all on Sundays"* might become, in the third person, *"She never sings benna on Sundays."* There are three types of third-person point of view. In third-person omniscient, the narrative voice can render information from anywhere, including the thoughts and feelings of any of the characters. This all-knowing perspective allows the narrator to roam freely in the story's setting and even beyond. In third-person limited, sometimes called third-person sympathetic, the narrative voice can relate what is in the minds of only a select few characters (often only one, the **point-of-view character**). In third-person objective, the narrator renders explicit, observable details and does not have access to the internal thoughts of characters or background information about the setting or situation. A character's thoughts, for example, are inferred only by what is expressed openly, in actions or in words. This point of view is also known as third-person dramatic because it is generally the way drama is developed. While the second-person point of view exists, it is not used very often because making the reader part of the story can be awkward: "You walk to the end of the road and pause before heading towards the river."

narrative voice: The voice of the narrator telling the story

point-of-view character: The character focused on most closely by the narrator; in first-person point of view, the narrator himself

DEFINITION OF STYLE, TONE, AND LANGUAGE

Style in fiction refers to the language conventions used to construct the story. A fiction writer can manipulate **diction**, sentence structure, phrasing, dialogue, and other aspects of language to create style. Thus a story's style could be described as richly detailed, flowing, and barely controlled, as in the case of Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," or sparing and minimalist, as in the early work of Raymond Carver, to reflect the simple sentence structures and low range of vocabulary. Predominant styles change through time; therefore the time period in which fiction was written often influences its style. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," written in the nineteenth century, uses diction and sentence structure that might seem somewhat crisp and formal to contemporary readers: "With this excellent resolve for the future, Goodman Brown felt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil purpose."

The communicative effect created by the author's style can be referred to as the story's voice. To identify a story's voice, ask yourself, "What kind of person does the narrator sound like?" A story's voice may be serious and straightforward, rambunctiously comic, or dramatically tense. In "Girl," the voice of the mother, as narrated to us in the daughter's first-person point of view, is harsh and judgmental, exposing an urgent and weathered concern for the daughter's development as she becomes a woman.

A story's style and voice contribute to its tone. Tone refers to the attitude that the story creates toward its subject matter. For example, a story may convey an earnest and sincere tone toward its characters and events, signaling to the reader that the material is to be taken in a serious, dramatic way. On the other hand, an attitude of humor or sarcasm may be created through subtle language and content manipulation. In the last line of Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," for example, an ironic spin emerges when we learn that "the doctors said she died of heart disease, of joy that kills."

diction: The author's choice of words

DEFINITION OF THEME

Theme is the meaning or concept we are left with after reading a piece of fiction. Theme is an answer to the question, "What did you learn from this?" In some cases a story's theme is a prominent element and somewhat unmistakable. It would be difficult to read Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" without understanding that the institution of nineteenth-century marriage robbed Mrs. Mallard of her freedom and identity. In some pieces of fiction, however, the theme is more elusive. What thought do we come away with after reading Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"? That mothers can try too hard? That oppression leads to oppression? That a parent's repeated dire predictions have a way of becoming truth?

Too much focus on pinning down a story's theme can obscure the accompanying emotional context or the story's intentional ambiguity (especially for contemporary fiction). In fact, the function of some contemporary short stories, such as Donald Barthelme's "In the Tolstoy Museum," is in part to make us confront the limitations of traditional processes of establishing meaning and coherence. In most cases, though, theme is still an important element of story construction (even in its absence), providing the basis for many valuable discussions.

DEFINITION OF SYMBOLISM, ALLEGORY, AND IMAGE

An image is a sensory impression used to create meaning in a story. For example, near the beginning of "Young Goodman Brown," we see Faith, Brown's wife, "thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap." While **visual imagery** such as this is typically the most prominent in a story, good fiction also includes imagery based on the other senses: **sound, smell, touch, and taste**.

If an image in a story is used repeatedly and begins to carry multiple layers of meaning, it may be significant enough to call a symbol. Symbols are often objects, like a toy windmill or a rose, or they may be parts of a landscape, like a river. While a normal image is generally used once, to complete a scene or passage, a symbol is often referred to repeatedly and carries meanings essential to the story. Some symbols are universal, like water for cleansing, but others are more culturally based. In some African societies, for example, a black cat is seen as good luck. Fiction writers use preexisting cultural associations as well as meanings drawn from the context of the story to create multiple levels of meaning. Faith's pink ribbons in "Young Goodman Brown" carry cultural connotations of innocence and purity, but the fact that the wind plays with the ribbons in one key image also brings to mind temptation, alluring chaos, the struggle with natural forces. Red is also a significant color in the story's final temptation scene, with its basin of "water, reddened by the lurid light? Or was it blood?" Faith's pink ribbons carry, of course, a tinge of red.

An allegory is a work of fiction in which the symbols, characters, and events come to represent, in a somewhat point-by-point fashion, a different metaphysical, political, or social situation. In Western culture, allegories have often been used for instructive purposes around Christian themes. For example, in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a protagonist named Christian goes on a journey in which he encounters complicating characters and situations such as Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Vanity Fair, and the Slough of Despair, thus depicting the struggles of a Christian trying to stay pure. In some ways Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" is structured as an allegory, as is evident in the character Faith, the Devil offering his snakelike staff, the temptation scene, and so on. Hawthorne skillfully manipulates the conventions of allegory, however, to resist a fixed meaning and create an ending that is open to interpretation.

visual imagery: Imagery of sight

aural imagery: Imagery of sound (e.g., the soft hiss of skis)

olfactory imagery: Imagery of smell (e.g., the smell of spilled beer)

tactile imagery: Imagery of touch (e.g., bare feet on a hot sidewalk)

gustatory imagery: Imagery of taste (e.g., the bland taste of starchy bananas)