



Elements of Fiction

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Why do we read fiction?

- ◆ The eternal answers to this question are two: enjoyment and understanding.
 - ◆ There are two different types of fiction- Commercial and Literary
 - ◆ **Commercial Fiction-** Written and published primarily to make money, and it makes money because it helps large numbers of people escape the tedium and stress of their lives. *Examples- legal thrillers, romance novels, fantasy, horror, easy-to-read short stories and New York Times best sellers.*
 - ◆ **Literary Fiction-** Written by someone with serious artistic intentions who hopes to broaden, deepen, and sharpen the reader's awareness of life. Plunges the reader more deeply into the real world, enabling us to understand life's difficulties and to empathize with others.
 - ◆ These two styles are not clearly defined; many works fit both categories.
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The Elements of Fiction

There are eight elements of fiction:

- *Plot and Structure*
- *Characterization*
- *Theme*
- *Setting*
- *Point of View*
- *Style*
- *Symbol, Allegory, and Fantasy*
- *Humor and Irony*

While these elements are not all found in every work, they are critical to the understanding of each piece you read.

Plot and Structure

- ◆ **Plot**- The sequence of incidents or events through which an author constructs a story.
 - *The plot is not merely the action itself, but the way the author arranges the action toward a specific end (structure).
- ◆ Important elements of Plot:
 - ***Conflict**- A clash of actions, ideas, desires, or wills
Types of Conflict: Person vs. Person, Person vs. Environment, Person vs. Self.
 - ***Protagonist**- The central character in a conflict
 - ***Antagonist**- Any force arranged against the protagonist- whether persons, things, conventions of society, or the protagonist's own personality traits.
 - ***Suspense**- The quality in a story that makes readers ask "what's going to happen next?". In more literary forms of fiction the suspense involves more "why" than "what". Usually produced through two devices; either *mystery* (an unusual set of circumstances for which the reader craves an explanation) or *dilemma* (a position in which a character must choose between two courses of action, both undesirable)

Plot and Structure (cont.)

***Artistic unity**- Essential for a good plot. There must be nothing in the story that is irrelevant, that does not contribute to the meaning. Each event should grow out of the preceding one and lead logically to the next. The work should have a quality of natural inevitability, given the specific set of characters and the initial situation.

****Deus Ex Machina***- Latin for "God from a machine". The saving of the protagonist from an impossible situation. A form of plot manipulation.

Endings-

***Happy Ending**- Everything ends well for our protagonist. More often used in commercial fiction.

***Unhappy Ending**- Most instances in life do not have pleasant ends, so literary fiction that tries to emulate life is more apt to have an unhappy conclusion. These endings force the reader to contemplate the complexities of life.

***Indeterminate Ending**- No definitive ending is reached. This leaves the reader to ponder the many issues raised through the story without being handed a neat solution.

Characterization

- ◆ Analyzing characterization is more difficult than describing plot; human nature is infinitely complex, variable and ambiguous. It is much easier to describe what a person has done instead of who a person is.
- ◆ In commercial fiction, characters are often two-dimensional, and act as vessels to carry out the plot. The protagonist must be easily identified with and fundamentally decent, if he has vices they are of the more 'innocent' type, the kind the reader would not mind having.
- ◆ In literary fiction, the protagonists are less easily labeled. Because human nature is often not entirely good or bad literary fiction is made up of three-dimensional characters; 'real people'.
- ◆ Characters are presented in two different ways- directly and indirectly.
 - *Direct Presentation*- The reader is told straight out what the character is like.
 - *Indirect Presentation*- The author shows the character through their actions; the reader determines what the character is like by what they say or do.
 - *Dramatization*- Characters are shown speaking and behaving, as in a play.

Characterization (cont.)

Types of Characters

- * *Flat Characters*- Usually have one or two predominant traits. The character can be summed up in just a few lines.
- * *Round Characters*- Complex and many faceted; have the qualities of real people.
- * *Stock Characters*- A type of flat character. The type of character that appears so often in fiction the reader recognizes them right away.
- * *Static Character*- A character that remains essentially the same throughout.
- * *Developing Character*- A character that undergoes a significant change during the story. There are three conditions that regulate change:
 1. It must be consistent with the individual's characterization as dramatized in the story.
 2. It must be sufficiently motivated by the circumstances in which the character is placed.
 3. The story must offer sufficient time for the change to take place and still be believable.

Theme

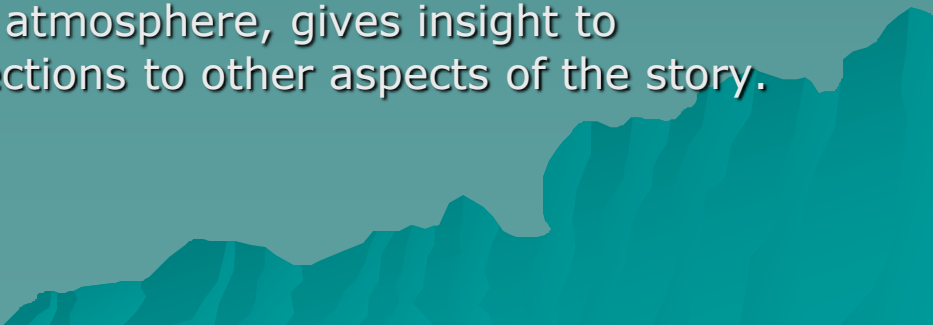
- ◆ The theme of a piece of fiction is its controlling idea or its central insight. It is the unifying generalization about life stated or implied by the story.
- ◆ Not all stories have significant themes. Theme exists only when the author has seriously attempted to record life accurately or to reveal some truth about it, or when the author has deliberately introduced as a unifying element some concept or theory of life that the story illuminates.
- ◆ While theme is central to a story, it is not the whole purpose. The function of a literary writer is not to state a theme by to vivify it.
- ◆ Theme does not equal “moral”, “lesson”, or “message”.
- ◆ Commercial themes uphold things we would like to believe are true. Literary themes are more true to life.
- ◆ There is no prescribed method for uncovering a theme, however, focusing on the protagonist, the central conflict and other pieces will make the task easier.

Theme *(cont.)*

- ◆ *Always keep in mind the following principals concerning theme:*
 1. Theme should be expressible in the form of a statement with a subject and predicate.
 2. The theme should be stated as a generalization about life.
 3. Be careful not to make the generalization larger than is justified by the terms of the story. Avoid terms like, *every, all, always*, in favor of words such as, *some, sometimes, may*.
 4. Theme is the central and unifying concept of a story. Therefore it accounts for all the major details of the story, is not contradicted by any detail of the story, and cannot rely upon supposed facts.
 5. There is no one way of stating the theme of a story. As long as the above requirements are met the statement is valid.
 6. Avoid any statement that reduces the theme to a familiar saying that we have heard all our lives.

Setting

The setting of a story is its overall context- where, when and in what circumstances the action occurs.

- ◆ *Setting as Place*- The physical environment where the story takes place. The description of the environment often points towards its importance.
 - ◆ *Setting as Time*- Includes time in all of its dimensions. To determine the importance, ask, "what was going on at that time?"
 - ◆ *Setting as Cultural Context*- Setting also involves the social circumstances of the time and place. Consider historical events and social and political issues of the time.
 - ◆ *Effects of Setting*- Creates atmosphere, gives insight to characters, and provides connections to other aspects of the story.
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Point of View

◆ **Point of View is simply who is telling the story.**

**To determine POV ask, "who is telling the story", and "how much do they know?"*

Omniscient POV- The story is told in third person by a narrator who has unlimited knowledge of events and characters.

Third Person Limited POV- The story is told in third person but from the view point of a character in the story. POV is limited to the character's perceptions and shows no direct knowledge of what other characters are thinking, feeling, or doing.

**Stream of Consciousness-* presents the random thoughts going through a character's head within a certain period of time.

First Person POV- The author disappears into one of the characters. Shares the limitations of third person limited. Uses the pronouns "I" and "we".

Objective POV- Records only what is seen and heard. In its purest form, objective POV would consist of only dialogue. Forces the author to refrain from interpretation.

Second Person POV- Uses the pronoun "you". Infrequently used.

STYLE

- ◆ **Style** is the manner in which an author uses words, constructs sentences, incorporates non-literal expressions, and handles rhythm, timing, and tone.
- ◆ When asked to discuss style, you are being asked to describe how or explain why the words, sentences, and imaginative comparisons are effective in terms of what is being created.

***Diction**- Central to an author's style. Includes:

1. Vocabulary- Choice of words

- a. Simple words- Everyday word choice. ("She was sick for a long time.)
- b. Complex words- Flexing intellectual muscle ("Garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood.)
- c. Concrete words- Things we can touch, see, etc. (Jeans, book,..)
- d. Abstract words- Words that express intangible ideas (freedom, heritage, something)

2. Syntax- arrangement of words, their ordering, grouping and placement within phrases, clauses, and sentences.

STYLE (CONT.)

3. Rhythm- The pattern of flow and movement created by the choice of words and the arrangement of phrases and sentences. Rhythm is directly affected by the length and composition of sentences, the use of pauses within sentences, the use of repetition, and the ease or difficulty in pronouncing the combinations of word sounds in the sentences.

SYMBOL, ALLEGORY, AND FANTASY

- ◆ **Symbol**- Something that means more than what it suggests on the surface. Can be a name, object, action, etc. Symbols serve to reinforce and add to the meaning of a story, or even sometimes carry the meaning of the story.

**The following cautions should be followed to avoid "over analyzing" a story-*

1. The story itself must furnish a clue that a detail is to be taken symbolically.
2. The meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the story. The symbol has to have meaning within the story.
3. To be called a symbol, an item must suggest a meaning different in kind from its literal meaning; a symbol is something more than the representative of a class or type.
4. A symbol may have more than one meaning.

- ◆ **Allegory**- A story that has a second meaning beneath the surface, endowing a cluster of characters, objects, or events with added significance; often the pattern relates each literal item to a corresponding abstract idea or moral principal. The creation of an allegorical pattern of meaning enables an author to achieve power through economy.

SYMBOL, ALLEGORY, AND FANTASY (CONT)

- ◆ **Fantasy-** A nonrealistic story that transcends the bounds of known reality. Requires the reader's "willing suspension of belief". Mainly used for commercial writing but there are several instances of literary fantasy as well.

Humor and Irony

- ◆ **Irony-** A humorous technique with a range of meanings that all involve some sort of discrepancy or incongruity. Often used to critique the world in which we live by laughing at the many varieties of human eccentricity and folly.
 - * **Verbal Irony-** A figure of speech in which the speaker says the opposite of what he or she intends to say. Sarcasm.
 - * **Dramatic Irony-** The contrast between what a character says or thinks and what the reader knows to be true.
 - * **Irony of Situation-** The discrepancy is between appearance and reality, between expectation and fulfillment, or between what is and what would seem appropriate.
- ◆ Humor and irony, like many other elements, are intended to create an emotional impact on the reader. We must FEEL the truth of a story not just understand it.

Humor and Irony

- ◆ **Sentimentality**- A cheap way of trying to create emotion with the reader. Uses stock response- an emotion that has its source outside of the story (babies, puppies, young love, patriotism...), a “sweet” view of life, and other techniques to avoid having to actually create emotion-inducing situations in the story. A good writer draws forth emotion by producing a character in a situation that deserves our sympathy and showing us enough about the character and the situation to make them real and convincing.

*Editorializing- The author’s commenting on the story in order to instruct the reader on how to feel.

*Poeticizing- Using an immoderately heightened and distended language to accomplish their effects.

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