THE ELEMENTS OF SHORT FICTION

With me it's story, story, story
Bernard Malamud

PLOT

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) is the father of literary analysis. In the fragments that survive of his *Poetics,* we find the earliest attempt to evaluate literary works by breaking them down into their component parts. Discussing tragedy in the *Poetics,* Aristotle gives first importance to plot, and most readers would agree that it holds a central position in a work of fiction. Indeed, many of our traditional ideas about plot derive from Aristotle. He made the famous formulation that a **plot** is a sequence of events that "has a beginning, a middle, and an end." Aristotle explained further:

> A beginning is that which does not come necessarily after something else, but after which it is natural for another thing to exist or come to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which naturally comes after something else, either as its necessary sequel or as its usual [and hence probable] sequel, but itself has nothing after it. A middle is that which both comes after something else and has another thing following it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, will neither begin at some chance point nor end at some chance point, but will observe the principles here stated.

Reading this passage more than two millennia after it was written, we may at first glance conclude that Aristotle is stating the obvious; yet, as many teachers of fiction writing will attest, stories by fledgling writers rarely observe such obvious balances of proportion. A typical first attempt at a short story may include an elaborate beginning of four or five pages, a page or two of summarized dramatic events, and a slam-bang ending of a single paragraph that includes a hail of gunfire and screeching brakes.

The plot of a story, then, is first a movement in time; second, a movement in causality; and, third, a movement in dramatic tension. The first of these aspects would appear to be the simplest. Our lives are governed by time, and we expect the lives of fictional characters to follow the same rules. A simple chronological ordering of events is, therefore, the obvious choice for most writ-

ers, and the vast majority of short stories follow a sequence that imitates "real" time. The neoclassical critics of drama during the Enlightenment insisted on the "unity" of time, place, and action as necessary characteristics of a plot. Good drama, they believed, should limit its action to a single day in a single place. Many short stories restrict time to an even briefer span. Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" limits itself to the time specified in the title. Jack London's "To Build a Fire" closely follows the last hours of a Yukon traveler's life. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" records the real-time confession of a deranged killer as he reveals his crime to investigators, and Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" covers four or five hours in a suburban home, stretching from supper time to late-night television viewing. Such stories present their **unified plots** in the manner of realist drama; the action is more or less continuous, and it takes place in a carefully limited locale.

But many plots involve longer periods of time, so-called **episodic plots,** a form that obliges the writer to make transitions between scenes. Other stories reach beyond simple chronology and depart from the ordinary sequence of events, moving backward to provide additional information about characters or leaping forward over periods that hold little dramatic interest. In Willa Cather's "Paul's Case," for example, the author includes much **flashback** material detailing Paul's humdrum family life and his love affair with the theater. Then, after Paul absconds with his employer's money, Cather moves the action forward a week or so to show how he spends the last hours of his life.

Flashbacks can also provide a level of irony that a simple chronological account would lack. Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych" begins at the title character's wake. This scene reveals how his family and friends are too caught up in their mercenary and mundane concerns to show much sympathy for the dead man. When Tolstoy moves back from the opening to give a straightforward account of Ilych's childhood, education, marriage, rise to prominence in the civil service, and, finally, his consuming fatal illness, the reader interprets the events in light of the conclusion. Tolstoy's unusual time scheme underscores his assertion that his protagonist's life "had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible."

Modern writers have grown increasingly fond of playing tricks with time. Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" recounts the main character's miraculous escape from execution only to reveal that the escape is a fantasy that flashes through the man's mind in the split second before the hangman's rope reaches its end. This technique is exploited later by Jorge Luis Borges in a story called "The Secret Miracle," in which a condemned playwright asks God, as he faces a firing squad, for a year to complete his unfinished play; the miracle is granted as, in the time it takes the fatal bullets to make their trajectory, the protagonist imagines the whole of his play and even has time for final revisions. J. G. Ballard's "Time of Passage" plays an even more profound trick, reversing chronology to detail his main character's life moving inexorably from grave to cradle.

Sometimes discontinuity is closely bound up with a story's total effect. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" moves backward and forward in time to conceal

what, in chronological sequence, would be a fairly obvious case of murder that the townspeople, either through incredible obtuseness or willful complicity, have failed to "solve." Had Faulkner described the events in chronological order, the grotesque shock of its final sentences would evaporate. In similar fashion, writers employ **foreshadowing,** hints at what is to take place later, so that the events of a story do not seem to be arbitrarily assembled but fit together in some larger pattern that in some cases resembles the unrelenting workings of fate in a Sophoclean tragedy. Consider, for example, the first paragraph of Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find":

> The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the *Journal.* "Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."

Not only does this brilliant opening characterize the grandmother ("She would of been a good woman," The Misfit later says, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."); it also sets in motion the family's eventual collision with the murderer, a coincidence that directly results from the grandmother's mistaking the location of a house, which in her obsession with vacationing in Tennessee, she has placed in the wrong state.

Is it possible for a plot to dispense with chronology—however altered—entirely? Some modern writers have successfully managed the feat. Borges's "The Library of Babel," which describes a structure that seems almost timeless and infinite, has no real plot or chronology—just supposedly factual exposition. Donald Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising" dispenses with sequence to appropriate the musical structure of the fugue, with images, events, and motifs whirling in a pattern of repetition and variation. Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer" mimics the structure of the "process essay" that every freshman composition student knows. Her engaging story employs no plot sequence in any usual sense of the term. Julio Cortázar anticipated the computer technology of "hypertext fiction" when he wrote his novel *Hopscotch* in 1963—with chapters that could be read in any order the reader chose. Clearly, the possibilities of plots that use time in original and unsettling ways have not yet been exhausted.

Causality and dramatic tension work hand-in-hand in successful plots. Causality refers to how a story's events are linked by patterns of cause and effect. One event in a story causes subsequent developments until some sort of resolution of the events occurs. As one can note from the excerpt from O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," even a one-in-a-million coincidence can be

made to seem plausible, indeed inevitable, through the careful foreshadowing and development of events.

Writers can play tricks with causality just as they play them with time. The mystery story, as invented by Poe and elaborated by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and others, depends on a sequence of events that are linked by a pattern that the characters and, if the author is successful, the reader, cannot initially discern. It remains the function of the brilliant sleuth, Dupin or Holmes, to supply, at the story's conclusion, the missing links in the chain of events. Similarly, a successful ghost story must ultimately depend on some kind of "rational" explanation for the irrational events that have occurred. In stories such as these the writer must stay one step ahead of the reader, for nothing is so unsatisfactory as a mystery in which the reader figures out "whodunit" halfway through the plot.

As we read, we experience the events of a story vicariously and invest emotional energy in the work. We want to be moved or amused, scared or intrigued—depending on the genre. In a compelling story, we experience the excitement of turning pages faster and faster until our emotional tension is released in the conclusion. The reader's gradual change in psychological stress is sometimes graphed as a slowly ascending curve that peaks and then levels out as the story is finished. This dramatic curve, which students of drama know as Freytag's pyramid (named after nineteenth-century German critic Gustav Freytag), charts a typical plot as a series of escalating actions. The average plot resembles a poker game: the rules are set, the stakes are raised, called, raised again, and eventually the game ends in a final showdown. A brief look at the dramatic structure of a model plot can reveal how the basic elements operate.

The first part of this dramatic structure is the **exposition,** which provides the reader with the essential information—who, what, when, where—he or she needs to know before continuing. While writers of sophisticated fiction may try to disguise the fact, they often begin their stories with a variation of the "Once upon a time" opening common to fairy tales. A variation on this type of beginning, called the ***in medias res*** ("in the middle of things") opening after the conventions of the old epic poems, may actually open with a "blind" bit of action before supplying its context.

D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner," a story that has obvious links to fairy tales like "Jack and the Beanstalk," opens with a passage of exposition that seems almost a parody of the Brothers Grimm. Faulkner's "Barn Burning," on the other hand, opens in the midst of a trial in a country store small-claims court; it is not until somewhat later in the story that the characters and their relationship to one another are clarified. Because exposition in a story deals with events, places, and relationships that are pre-existing, it usually describes a stable situation, even if it is not an entirely happy one.

The appearance of "trouble" constitutes the second part of a plot, the **complication** or **conflict,** which takes the form of some circumstance that shakes up the stable situation. This conflict begins the **rising action** of the story, what Aristotle would have called its "essential middle." Complications in a story may be either external or internal; that is, they may take the form of external events that are beyond the characters' control or they may stem internally

from a character's change of attitude. In most stories, external and internal complications and conflicts work together; in Faulkner's "Barn Burning," for example, Ab Snopes's prior act of arson has provided the occasion for the trial at which his son is being interrogated, but Sarty's own psychological and moral conflict over whether or not he should lie to save his worthless father creates the central conflict, which eventually becomes a violent clash between father and son, that will build throughout the story. A stroke of fortune such as illness or accident that affects a character may provide an external complication, a problem that the character cannot turn away from, like Ivan Ilych's accident while decorating his house which leads progressively to his fatal illness. An internal complication, on the other hand, might not be immediately apparent, the result of a character's deep-seated uncertainties, dissatisfactions, and fears; Ivan's illness and the reactions of his family and friends to it cause him to question his values and the way he has lived. In this story, the protagonist's external suffering is of the body, but his internal struggle is with his own soul.

The body of a story is called the **rising action** and may contain a number of scenes, containing action and dialogue, which build to moments of **crisis** as a resolution of the complication momentarily seems at hand but just as quickly disappears. Aristotle used the term **peripeteia** for these moments of reversal, as the hopes of the characters rise and fall. Ivan sees a new doctor, receives a new diagnosis and new medicine, and temporarily feels better. Soon enough the dull pain in his side returns and his condition worsens. The protagonist of Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited," hoping that he has sufficiently rehabilitated himself in his family's eyes to reassume a relationship with his young daughter, is crushed when visible reminders of his checkered past show up unexpectedly. In Bret Harte's tale of western justice, "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," the storm-bound group of "pilgrims" sees their chances of survival wax and wane as each event makes their situation more hopeless.

The central moment of crisis in a plot is the **climax,** the point of greatest tension, which inaugurates the **falling action** of the story, in which the built-up tension is finally released. Some stories, particularly those involving a heavy use of suspense, have a steep "dramatic curve" and the writer uses all of his or her skills to impel the reader toward the final confrontation. Poe is a master of such plot construction. Often one encounters the trick ending (also called the **O. Henry ending** after its chief popularizer). An effective climax depends on a quick reversal of the situation from an unexpected source; its success is always relative to the degree to which the reader is surprised when it occurs. Modern short stories typically rely on climactic devices that are subtler than unexpected plot twists. Many modern writers have followed James Joyce's lead in building not to a physical confrontation but to a moment of spiritual insight or revelation, what Joyce termed an **epiphany.** There is very little dramatic action, in the usual sense of the term, in Joyce's famous story "The Dead." Its climax depends on two epiphanies, one in which Gabriel Conroy sees his wife in sentimentally romantic terms and a later one in which he realizes that the insight he thinks he has gained from the first epiphany is totally false.

The final part of a plot is the **dénouement** or **resolution.** The French term literally refers to the untying of a knot, and we might compare the emotional

release of a story's ending to a piece of cloth that has been twisted tighter and tighter and is then untwisted as the action winds down. The dénouement returns the characters to another stable situation. Just as a fairy tale traditionally ends with "And they lived happily ever after," many stories conclude with an indication of what the future holds for its characters. As an example, consider the final sentence of Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation." Shocked by his complicity in the execution of two English prisoners, the Irish narrator concludes, "And anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again."

A story's dénouement may be either closed or open. A **closed dénouement** ties up everything neatly and explains all unanswered questions the reader might have, as in the "Elementary, my dear Watson" explanation found at the end of so many mystery stories (a line, by the way, that does not appear in any of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales). On the other hand, an **open dénouement** leaves us with a few tantalizing loose ends, and has been the type of ending favored by writers in this century who perhaps wish to demonstrate that life usually lacks the neat closures of conventional stories.

Before leaving this discussion of plot, we might consider one final matter—originality. Despite what Poe and others have argued on the question, the writer who attempts to invent a totally original plot is doomed to failure, and it is no exaggeration to say that there is nothing new under the sun where plots of short stories are concerned. These plots often draw upon what psychologist Carl Jung called **archetypes,** universal types of characters and situations that all human beings carry in their unconscious minds. Plots deriving from these archetypes may be found equally in ancient myths, fairy tales, as well as contemporary fiction and films. A few of the most familiar plots are the triangle (a love story involving three people), the quest (which is unified around a group of characters on a journey), and the transformation (in which a weak or physically unattractive character changes radically in the course of the story). Another enduring archetype is the rite of passage or **initiation story.** Perhaps because many writers begin to conceive of themselves as awkward outsiders during the troubling periods of their own adolescence, the story that deals with a character's "coming of age" is ubiquitous. Many stories in this anthology explore this universal situation.

Show me a character without anxieties
and I will show you a boring book.
Margaret Atwood

CHARACTERIZATION

While many stories of the nineteenth century hinged on surprising plot developments—the sort of ingenious twists we expect from stories by Poe,

Maupassant, and O. Henry—modern writers have tended to see characterization as an element of fiction that is equal to plot or even more important than it. Because of the limitations of space, characters in short fiction must be painted with a few deft strokes, but the way a master writer handles his or her characters often results in portrayals of human beings with which we identify and remember. Carver's blind man in "Cathedral," O'Connor's Ruby Turpin in "Revelation," or Oates's Arnold Friend in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" are characters that have justly earned the adjective "unforgettable."

Throughout the history of literature, authors have taken pains to create memorable characters, but their approaches have varied with changes in religious beliefs, historical circumstances, and scientific assumptions about human behavior. The ancient Greeks conceived of their epic and tragic heroes as men and women controlled by the unalterable will of fate, a mysterious agency with which even the Olympian deities could not tamper. The Greeks added complexity to characters in tragedy by making them subject to *hamartia,* a tragic flaw or weakness that eventually brings about a character's downfall.

In the Middle Ages, a period when most authors wrote anonymously, a similar lack of interest in individualized characterization seemingly prevailed. Medieval authors idealized the knights and ladies in chivalric romances and enjoyed the strictly allegorical characters of morality plays like *Everyman.* In the late Middle Ages the impulse toward individualism reasserted itself. Some of the most memorable characters in the history of literature are to be found in the narrative poems of Dante and Chaucer. By the early Renaissance certain scientific (or what we would now term pseudoscientific) approaches to character began to gain prominence, especially the notion of the four "humours," fluids found in varying proportions in the body, that tended to define characters as predominantly "choleric," "melancholic," "sanguine," or "phlegmatic." In more recent times, the sciences of genetics, sociology, and psychology have dominated literary approaches to characterization. In the late nineteenth century, **Naturalist** writers, led by Émile Zola, applied the scientific approaches of Charles Darwin and Cesare Lombroso to fictional characters, resulting in a deterministic view of human destiny as largely shaped by forces of heredity and environment that are beyond the individual's control. Freudian psychology later led to further probing into the unconscious motives of actions, and new advances in science will doubtless provide future writers with methods of investigating human behavior that are barely conceivable now.

No matter what approach to characterization a writer employs, every story hinges on the actions undertaken by its main character, or **protagonist** (from the Greek word meaning literally "first debater"). Drawn from ancient tragedy, the term is perhaps more useful in discussions of fiction than such misleading classifications as hero or heroine. Additionally, stories may contain an opposing character, or **antagonist,** with whom the protagonist is drawn into conflict. In many modern stories there is little, in any traditional sense, that is heroic about the protagonists. It may be more often accurate to use a negative term, **antihero,** to designate one who occupies center stage but otherwise seems incapable of fitting the traditional heroic mold. Tolstoy, for example, described Ivan Ilych (the name is the Russian equivalent of "John Smith") as "most ordinary."

Indeed, modern writers have often been so reluctant to seem didactic in presenting characters that are "moral beacons" that they go to the opposite extreme in presenting conspicuously flawed protagonists whom we regard with pity or even disgust instead of with admiration.

Characters in short stories are often described as **flat characters** or **round characters,** depending on the depth of detail the writer lavishes on them. Some stories, like Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," may consist almost totally of flat characters, perhaps in keeping with the random manner of the sacrificial selection process. Flat minor characters in stories are often **stock characters,** stereotypes who may be necessary to advance the plot but otherwise are not deserving of more than the barest outlines of description. Round characters, on the other hand, are given more than one trait, some of which may even seem contradictory. They are also explored in depth as the author delves into the character's past and even into his or her unconscious mind. Round characters are usually the protagonists of stories. Their depictions begin to approach the level of complexity that we associate with real human beings. When we finish a deeply realized story like Flaubert's "A Simple Heart" or Joyce's "The Dead," we feel that we have been in the presence of lives that we seem to know better than those of our friends and neighbors.

Development and motivation are also important in any consideration of fictional characters. Characters can be termed either **static** or **dynamic** depending on the degree to which they change in the course of the story. The mother in Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" is incapable of change. She is too embittered and rooted in the pessimism of her own past. Her daughter, on the other hand, has developed from an ugly duckling to a comedian and performer for whom there remains, in spite of the mother's doubts, some chance of a better future. Perhaps Olsen's title phrase "I stand here" offers an insight in the mother's static character.

Character development is usually apparent to the reader. But **character motivation,** which is the rationale the reader is given for a character's actions, may not be so obvious. In many cases an author will simply describe what is going on in a character's mind, but in others we are denied access to this level of understanding. We do not know what has caused Faulkner's Sarty Snopes to turn away from his father's self-destructive habits, though the author seems to hint that an innate sense of right and wrong may occasionally spring up in the most unlikely places. Although we can speculate, playing the amateur psychiatrist, about the reasons for characters' sometimes bizarre actions, we may have to proceed from subtle, almost nonexistent clues that the author provides. We do not know what has made O'Connor's Misfit into a serial killer, but his remarks on Jesus imply that religion did not serve him well in his earlier life. We do not know what has driven Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown into the dark woods on a mission that will destroy his happiness, but, given the psychological and theological dimensions of the story, we can perhaps arrive at some sense of what Hawthorne is trying to tell us about human nature.

Motivation, of course, may be supplied directly by an author's comments, but in other stories writers may try to present a character's thoughts directly

by using **interior monologue,** a method of narration that is somewhat like a soliloquy in drama, or **stream of consciousness,** an attempt to duplicate raw sensory data in the same disordered state that the mind receives it. As useful as these devices can be in explaining motivation, they sometimes place excessive demands on readers and are thus comparatively rare.

Physical description of characters also helps us to understand the author's intent. In real life we are told from an early age not to judge people by external appearance, but in fiction the opposite is usually the case. Physical description is often a sign of what lurks beneath the surface. Given the brevity of most short stories, the physical details may be minimal but revealing in their lack of particulars. Think of Robert, Carver's independent blind man in "Cathedral." (Carver does not even provide a last name—an omission that forces the reader to be on a first-name basis with him.) We also learn that Robert has a beard and wears all-brown clothes. Not having to shave or worry about color coordination allows him, as the narrator notes, always to look "spiffy" and tells us a great deal about this remarkable man's independence.

An author in his book must be like God in his universe,
present everywhere and visible nowhere.
Gustave Flaubert

POINT OF VIEW

When we speak of a politician's point of view on an issue we mean his or her attitude toward it, pro or con. In fiction, however, the term **point of view** is employed in a specialized sense, referring to the question of who narrates the story. Every story has a **narrator,** a voice or character that provides the reader with information about and insight into characters and incidents, but in some cases the identity of this voice of authority is not immediately apparent.

Being too literal-minded about the matter of point of view is usually a mistake. We often have to accept certain narrative conventions without questioning them too seriously if we are to enjoy reading stories. When we finish reading a detective story narrated by the sleuth himself, we should not worry too much about when such a busy character found time to jot down the account of his case. Similarly, we accept as a convention the fact that a narrator may suddenly jump from simply recording a conversation to telling us what one of its participants is thinking. Very early in our lives we learn how stories are told, just as we do not think twice, in watching a movie, when our perspective shifts, in the blink of an eye, from one man's frightened stare, to the flashing barrel of a gun, to a hand clutching a chest, to another man's sneer of triumph.

Almost all narrative points of view can be classified as either first-person or third-person. In **first-person narration,** the narrator is a participant in the

action. He or she may be either a major character (as in Andre Dubus's "A Father's Story") or a minor character. Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is a classic case of a minor character narrator; Arthur Conan Doyle's Dr. Watson is another. Some first-person narrators are close to the events they describe; others are removed from it in time or place. In general, first-person stories may seem more immediate than third-person stories, but they are limited by the simple fact that the narrator must be present at all times and must also have some knowledge of what is going on.

The ability of the narrator to tell the story accurately is also important. An **unreliable narrator,** either through naivete, ignorance, or impaired mental processes (the case with many of Poe's first-person narrators), relates events in such a distorted manner that the reader, who has been tipped off, has literally to turn the narrator's reporting on its head to make sense. Another possibility is a first-person speaker who performs a **dramatic monologue** (similar to the verse dramatic monologues of Robert Browning), the case with Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," in which the authoritative voice of the mother (perhaps representing a composite of *all* mothers) gives stern advice to her daughter.

Third-person narration, by definition, employs a nonparticipant narrator, a voice of authority, which never reveals its source and can usually move from place to place to describe action and report dialogue. In third-person stories the question of reliability is rarely an issue. The key issue is the matter of omniscience, the degree to which the "all-knowing" narrator can reveal the thoughts of characters. An **omniscient narrator** means just that—the narrator knows everything about the characters and their lives, even perhaps their futures, and may reveal the thoughts of anyone in the story. (Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych" is a good example of an omniscient narrator.) An **editorial point of view** goes even further by allowing the godlike author to comment directly on the action (also called **authorial intrusion**), a device favored by Victorian novelists such as William Thackeray.

Many contemporary authors avoid total omniscience in short fiction, perhaps sensing that a story's strength is dissipated if more than one character's perspective is used. Instead, they employ **limited omniscience,** also called selective omniscience or the method of "central intelligence" (Henry James's term), limiting themselves to the thoughts and perceptions of a single character. This point of view is perhaps the most flexible of all since it allows the writer to compromise between the immediacy of first-person narration and the mobility of third-person.

A further departure from omniscience is the **dramatic point of view** (also called the **objective point of view**) which is present in many of Ernest Hemingway's stories. Here the narrator simply reports dialogue and action with minimal interpretation and no delving into characters' minds. The dramatic point of view, as the name implies, approaches the method of plays, where readers are provided only with set descriptions, stage directions, and dialogue, and thus must supply motivations that are based solely on this external evidence.

Technically, other points of view are possible, though they are rarely used. Stories have been told in the second person (such as Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer," which begins, "First, try to be something, anything else" and continues to address the reader directly), or first-person plural (William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," where the narrative "we" represents the opinion of the town of Jefferson, provides one example). Such points of view, however, are difficult to sustain and may quickly prove distracting to readers. There is also an unwritten rule that point of view should be consistent throughout a story, although occasionally a writer may utilize multiple perspectives to illustrate how the "truth" of any incident is always relative to the way in which it is witnessed.

What are the three key rules of real estate?
Location, location, location!
American Business Proverb

SETTING

Given the expansiveness of their form, novelists can lavish pages on details of setting, just as they can describe characters down to such minutiae as the tears in their clothing or the contents of their pockets. But short-story writers, hemmed in by limitations of space, rarely have such luxury and must ordinarily limit themselves to very selective descriptions of time and place. When a writer like Poe goes into great detail in his descriptions, it is likely that **atmosphere,** the emotional aura surrounding a certain setting, is more important than the actual locale. The house of Usher is carefully described, right down to the cracks in its facade, but Poe is perhaps more concerned here with establishing the physical setting as a metaphor for the crumbling psyche of his title character, Roderick Usher. The "house" takes on a double meaning; it is both the literal house that Roderick, his sister, and the narrator occupy, and the decayed lineage of the Usher family, both of which come to an end at the story's conclusion.

Setting is simply the time and place of a story, and in most cases the details of description are given to the reader directly by the narrator. A story may employ multiple locations in its different scenes, and its time frame may encompass only a few hours or many years. Carver's "Cathedral" is a story with relatively few details of setting—a middle-class home, a dinner table, a television set. Because the story emphasizes the humdrum nature of his narrator's life, further description is unimportant. (Such restraint is also indicative of Carver's "minimalist" approach.) Borges's "The Library of Babel," however, is almost entirely composed of description of setting for the simple reason that the library is strange, exotic, literally "out of this world."

A writer usually makes certain assumptions about his or her readers. A writer whose stories will be read almost exclusively by subscribers to *The New Yorker,* for example, would not be likely to expend much energy on describing a midtown-Manhattan office. Similarly, the time setting of a story may be omitted entirely, mentioned only in passing, or described in detail. The circumstances of the individual story will dictate its treatment of time. John Cheever's "The Swimmer" depends heavily on the way time in the story progresses from a balmy noontime beside a suburban swimming pool to the chilling autumnal climax. It is symbolically important that the main action of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," which takes place during the dead of night, is bracketed by an opening and closing section set during the daylight hours.

Some stories, however, depend on their **locale** or time setting much more heavily and thus demand fuller exposition of setting. **Historical fiction** usually requires great attention to the different landscapes and customs of bygone eras. A writer who carelessly lets an alarm clock go off in a story set in 1776 has committed an anachronism that may be only slightly more obvious than another writer's use of contemporary slang in the same setting. **Local color fiction** depends heavily on the unique characteristics of a particular area, usually a rural one that is off the beaten path. Such places have become increasingly rare in contemporary America, but such regions as the deep South, the Southwest, or the Pacific Northwest still provide locales that possess intrinsic interest because of their strangeness to many readers.

Some writers establish reputations as practitioners of **regionalism,** setting most of their work in one particular area or country. Bobbie Ann Mason showed her deep roots in her native Kentucky in virtually every story in her first collection. The Latin American writer Gabriel García Márquez continually draws on the strange world of Colombian villages cut off from the contemporary world, places where past and present, natural and supernatural, seamlessly join in what has been called **Magic Realism.** William Faulkner, of course, invented a complete fictional universe (which is not at great variance with the Mississippi where he spent most of his life) in the Yoknapatawpha County where many of his stories and novels are set.

Stories contain both specific and general settings. The specific setting is the precise time and place (or times and places) where the action occurs. The general setting of a story, what is called its **milieu** or enveloping action, is its sense of the "times" and how its characters interact with events and social currents going on in the larger world. We have already mentioned how the specific setting of a story often is a microcosm that reflects the doings of society at large. It is impossible to read stories by Flannery O'Connor or Alice Walker and not be made aware of the social changes that have transformed the rural South in the last thirty years. Stories sometimes depend on readers' abilities to bring their knowledge of history and culture to bear on the events taking place. In reading Ralph Ellison's "A Party Down at the Square," for example, younger readers may be unaware of the widespread prevalence of racial lynching in the South before the Civil Rights Era. Such stories gain additional resonance from being seen in their historical context.

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain.
William Butler Yeats

THEME

Fables, parables, and other types of didactic literature make their purposes clear by explicitly stating a moral or interpretation at the end of the story. Literary fiction, however, is usually much more subtle in revealing its **theme,** the overall meaning the reader derives from the story. Most of the reading we did as children probably fell into two distinct categories—sheer escapism or overt didacticism—with little middle ground. Thus, many readers, coming to serious fiction for the first time, want to avoid the search for "hidden meanings" and read a story simply for its surface events. Others complain, "If the writer was trying to say that then why didn't she just come right out and say it!" To further complicate matters, the manner in which we analyze stories, and the preconceptions we bring to bear on them may result in multiple interpretations of meaning. No single statement of theme is likely to be the only correct one, even if the author insists upon it. Still, some interpretations seem more likely than others.

How do we determine the theme of a story? A reader insistent on finding a moral might judge the actions of the characters by his or her own system of values. This approach may, however, encounter obstacles when the values of the author differ from those of the reader. Flannery O'Connor's strict Roman Catholic morality may be difficult for readers of other religious beliefs to comprehend. Or another reader, versed in socioeconomic or feminist theory, might judge the theme of a story such as Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh" along the lines of social class or gender. A knowledge of modern Irish history brings out the underlying political theme in Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation" or William Trevor's "The Distant Past." Obviously, many writers return again and again to the same themes (alcoholism in the stories of Raymond Carver, for example). A reader may have to interpret the theme of one story in the light of what he or she knows of the author's total work.

Modern stories can seem extremely reticent in revealing their themes. We are never explicitly told, to cite one example, that the young protagonist of Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" is a World War I veteran who is experiencing difficulty in adjusting to peacetime society. Yet this knowledge (gained perhaps from Hemingway's other stories and his biography) is implicit in the story's theme of self-imposed isolation and escape. Not all modern writers are so indirect. A moralist like Flannery O'Connor sees characters and judges them according to Roman Catholic ethical standards. Margaret Atwood's feminism is rarely hidden in her stories and poems. Tillie Olsen's involvement with workers' struggles and radical politics informs the bitterness of her narrator in "I Stand Here Ironing."

Some modern stories are allegorical tales in which the literal events point to a parallel sequence of symbolic ideas. (Allegory was more common with earlier writers like Hawthorne in "Young Goodman Brown.") In many of O'Connor's stories, to cite one notable example, the literal setting of the story, a doctor's waiting room or a crowded city bus, is a **microcosm**—a "small world" that reflects the tensions of the larger world outside—and the author often uses symbols drawn from religion to make her point. Thus, despite their outward sophistication, many of the stories included here reveal their debt to the ancient ethical functions of fables and parables.

Style has no fixed laws; it is changed by the usage of the people, never the same for any length of time.
Seneca

ANALYZING STORIES: FINDING MEANINGFUL FACTS AND DRAWING APPROPRIATE INFERENCES

FACT-FINDING

Any detail, quoted word, line, passage or description in a story is considered a **fact** since the detail's existence is inarguable. A detail is not an interpretation; but details need to be interpreted in order to get to the implied meanings and themes of the story. If you read a lot of fiction, you probably have developed an intuitive sense about which details carry significant inferences—even if you are not always immediately clear about what their significance is. If you don't yet have an intuitive sense, then you will want to adopt a method for finding significant facts to be interpreted. While you might begin by dividing the story into types of facts known as the elements of fiction: setting, character, plot, symbols, point-of view, style, beyond these types, there are other kinds of crucial details, (or other ways of categorizing facts)—"*contrasts*" and "*repetitions*" and "*anomalies.*"

Contrasts are sets of details that clash, are opposite or paradoxical. Contrasts can occur within an element, as in two contradictory character traits. For example, in James Joyce's "The Dead" there are some details that support that the protagonist, Gabriel Conroy, is a character who is generous with his money; other details, however, suggest he is stingy with his emotions. Contrasts can also occur between two different elements: In William Faulkner's "Barn Burning"

the conflict revolves around an inarticulate, intellectually unformed boy, yet William Faulkner employs a sophisticated and reflective narrative style. The jarring quality, created by the collision of opposing forces, draws the reader's attention to these contrasting details as significant facts ripe for interpretation.

Repetitions are details that purposefully repeat and thus set up a *pattern* or a *motif.* Often symbols—objects, names, phrases, ideas, images that stand in for or represent something else—formulate repetitions in stories. In *The Great Gatsby*, critics have commented on the reoccurring references to the symbolism of "yellow" throughout the novel; yet the color is used to describe many different objects, each with their own associations: the yellow car that kills Myrtle Wilson, Daisy and Jordan's yellow hair, the yellow street lamp, "yellowing trees" and the yellow framed glasses of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. Critics argue that the many yellow symbols in *Gatsby* underscore the themes of moral decay. Repetitions set up patterns that help reinforce a mood or theme in a story.

Anomalies are odd, unusual, or unexpected details that stand out to the reader. Detecting anomalous details involves relying on your intuitive and/or acquired sense of what to expect in a story. For instance, a reader expects a plot to be organized chronologically; however, if a work of literature deviates from that expectation—as in the film *Pulp Fiction*—then this variation results in an anomaly of plot. An anomaly can also be the purposeful absence of a detail—something the reader expects to find in the story but which is not there. For instance in, Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," a reader expects to be given the names of the main characters; but the characters are referred to only as "the American" and "the girl." A reader usually can rely on a character's name to help understand the character; however, by the withholding of an expected detail of the character's name also has The omission of characters' names has implications. Anomalies upset our expectations as readers thus signaling to us that these purposeful deviations and omissions must carry significant inferences.

DRAWING INFERENCES

After gathering facts/details the critical thinker begins drawing inferences or interpreting the details. Unlike the facts or details, the **interpretation** or **implication** or **inference** is arguable; in fact an interpretation *is an argument.* The interpretation is the reader's claim of or position on what the detail/fact means. Or the interpretation is an argument for how the detail shapes meaning. Drawing inferences is tricky business. Important considerations in drawing solid inferences are the **context** and **function** of the details.

The **context**—what surrounds the details and how the detail is used—determines the direction of the implication or interpretation. For instance, out of the context of other details, the color white universally represents innocence and purity. But purity and innocence may not be relevant to the concerns of a particular story, and instead, the color might be used as an "original" symbol to represent stupidity or an emotional void or other ideas not typically

associated with the color. Or a writer might be using the color white as a contrasting detail: maybe a guilty or impure character is described as wearing white, and by associating the symbol in a way that is diametrically opposite to its universal association, the symbol becomes ironic.

While interpreting a fact is a way of discovering the implied meaning behind the facts, not all details actually **function** to *imply* meaning. Consider other ways a detail might function. There are many details (anomalies, for example) that *suggest*, *represent*, *symbolize* or *allude* to an idea. Other anomalous details *create* or *generate* or *produce* a certain kind of mood or effect, while contrasts *defy* expectations or *complicate*, *challenge* and *contradict* meaning in a story. Still other details (repetitions, for instance) may *reinforce*, *reiterate*, *fortify* or *highlight* other meanings and interpretations in the story.

STYLE

Style in fiction refers equally to the characteristics of language in a particular story and to the same characteristics in a writer's complete works. The more idiosyncratic a writer's style is, the easier it is to parody, as the well-publicized annual "Faux Faulkner" and "International Imitation Hemingway" contests will attest. A detailed analysis of the style of an individual story might include attention to such matters as diction (including the use of slang and dialect), sentence structure, punctuation (or the lack thereof), and use of figurative language.

In English we usually make a distinction between different types of words—standard versus slang usage, Latinate versus Germanic vocabulary, abstract versus concrete diction, and so on. While such matters are most meaningful only in the context of an individual story, there is obviously a difference between the character who says, "I have profited to a great degree from the educational benefits of the realm of experience," and another who says, "I graduated from the school of hard knocks."

In analyzing style we must be sensitive to the literary fashions of periods other than our own. The particular qualities of a story are best understood in the context of fiction written in the same period and place. It is senseless to fault Poe or Hawthorne for "flowery diction" when we compare their use of language to the equally ornate style of their contemporaries. The prevailing fashion in fiction today is for the unadorned starkness of writers like Bobbie Ann Mason and Raymond Carver, what has been labeled **minimalism** or—less respectfully—**Kmart realism** by some critics. One should not be surprised if, a decade from now, writers are trying to outdo Faulkner at his most ornate.

Another element of style in fiction does not so readily yield itself to analysis as do matters of vocabulary or sentence structure. The **tone** of the story—that is, what we can indirectly determine about the author's own feelings about its events—is equally important but may escape many readers. The satirical tone of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* may fall on deaf ears if the reader is not prepared to understand Swift's disillusionment with the European society of his own day. It is possible for an inexperienced reader to miss the keen edge of Flannery

O'Connor's irony or the profound philosophical skepticism of Jorge Luis Borges. This failure should not be laid at the feet of the writers, who have usually taken great pains to make their own attitudes clear.

In describing tone in stories, we often fall back on such vague terms as "sentimental," "tragic," "ironic," or "satirical". Essentially, we try to describe the attitude the author has toward his or her material (or in some cases, toward the reader). Is the tone solemn or satirical, intimate or formal? The tone of the work gives us a clue on how to read the story. A satirical tone might let us laugh at a story that an intimate tone would have turned into a tragedy. In some cases, the deliberate absence of an identifiable tone of voice represents the essence of a story; the flatness with which the horrific conclusion of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is described is a major contributor to the story's compelling strangeness. In the right hands any style can work well. As the French philosopher Voltaire once remarked, "All styles are good except the tiresome kind."