

Elements of Short Stories

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):

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

CHARACTER

There are two meanings for the word character:

- The person in a work of fiction.
- The characteristics of a person.

Persons in a work of fiction - Antagonist and Protagonist

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 person (or force) that opposes the main character is called the **ANTAGONIST**.

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:

- Through direct statements by the author/narrator (Direct Characterization)
- 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)

Types of Characters

1. **Rounded Characters** – many-sided and complex personalities that you would expect of actual human beings.
2. **Flat Characters** – personalities that are presented only briefly and not in depth.
3. **Dynamic** – many-sided personalities that change, for better or worse, by the end of the story.
4. **Static** – These characters are often stereotypes, have one or two characteristics that never change that are emphasized e.g. brilliant detective, drunk, scrooge, cruel stepmother, etc.

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PLOT

The plot is how the author arranges events to develop his or her 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:

Introduction - The beginning of the story where the characters and the setting is revealed.

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).

Climax / Turning Point - 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?

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).

Resolution / 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).

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:

External - A struggle with a force outside one's self.

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:

- **Human vs. Human** (physical) - The leading character struggles with his physical strength against other men, forces of nature, or animals.
- **Human vs. Nature** - The leading character struggles the forces of nature.
- **Human vs. Society** (social) - The leading character struggles against ideas, practices, or customs of other people.
- **Human vs. Self** (psychological) - The leading character struggles with himself/herself; with his/her own soul, ideas of right or wrong, physical limitations, choices, etc.

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POINT OF VIEW

Point of view, or P.O.V., is defined as the angle or perspective from which the story is told.

First Person: The story is told by the protagonist or another character that interacts closely with the protagonist or other characters (using first person 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.

Innocent Eye: The story is told through the eyes of a child (his/her judgment being different from that of an adult).

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.

Second Person: (not used very often) The main character in the story is referred to using the second person pronoun "you". Second Person is most often used in training manuals, role-playing games and *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels.

Third Person: The story is told using a narrator who is located outside of the action of the story and uses third person pronouns such as "he", "she", "his", "her", "they" etc.

The third person point of view can be broken up into three different types:

Omniscient – Omniscient literally means, "all knowing". Using the third person omniscient point of view the narrator can move from character to character, event to event, having free access to the thoughts, feelings and motivations of any character and can introduce information where and when he or she chooses.

Limited Omniscient – The story is told by a third person narrator but from the viewpoint of a character in the story, usually the main character or protagonist. The reader has access to the thoughts and feelings of only one character.

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 or her own.

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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