

Literature: What Makes a Good Short Story?

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Page one: **Constructing Plot: The Elements of Plot Development**

If an author writes, “The king died and then the queen died,” there is no plot for a story. But by writing, “The king died and then the queen died of grief,” the writer has provided a plot line for a story.

A plot is a causal sequence of events, the “why” for the things that happen in the story. The plot draws the reader into the character’s lives and helps the reader understand the choices that the characters make.

A plot’s structure is the way in which the story elements are arranged. Writers vary structure depending on the needs of the story. For example, in a mystery, the author will withhold plot exposition until later in the story. In William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” it is only at the end of the story that we learn what Miss Emily has been up to all those years while locked away in her Southern mansion.

Page two: **Constructing Plot: What Goes into a Plot?**

Narrative tradition calls for developing stories with particular pieces – plot elements – in place.

1. **Exposition** is the information needed to understand a story.
2. **Complication** is the catalyst that begins the major conflict.
3. **Climax** is the turning point in the story that occurs when characters try to resolve the complication.
4. **Resolution** is the set of events that bring the story to a close.

It’s not always a straight line from the beginning to the end of a short story. In Ernest Hemingway’s story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” the action shifts from past to present. This shifting of time is the way we learn what happened and why, and it keeps us interested in the story. But good stories always have all the plot elements in them.

Ask yourself the following questions regarding “A Jury of Her Peers,” – “Why did the author arrange the story elements the way she did? How does she control our emotional response and prepare us for reversals or surprises?”

Page three: **Exploring Point of View: Point of View**

An automobile accident occurs. Two drivers are involved. Witnesses include four sidewalk spectators, a policeman, a man with a video camera who happened to be shooting the scene, and the pilot of a helicopter that was flying overhead. Here we have nine different points of view and, most likely, nine different descriptions of the accident.

In short fiction, who tells the story and how it is told are critical issues for an author to decide. The tone and feel of the story, and even its meaning, can change radically depending on who is telling the story.

Remember, someone is always between the reader and the action of the story. That someone is telling the story from his or her own point of view. This angle of vision, the point of view from which the people, events, and details of a story are viewed, is important to consider when reading a story.

What is the point of view in “A Jury of Her Peers?” Is it fixed or does it change? Does it stay the same distance from the events of the story, or like a camera lens does it zoom in and zoom out, like a camera lens? Who is telling the story?

Page four: **Exploring Point of View: Types of Point of View**

Objective Point of View

With the objective point of view, the writer tells what happens without stating more than can be inferred from the story's action and dialogue. The narrator never discloses anything about what the characters think or feel, remaining a detached observer.

Third Person Point of View

Here the narrator does not participate in the action of the story as one of the characters, but lets us know exactly how the characters feel. We learn about the characters through this outside voice.

First Person Point of View

In the first person point of view, the narrator does participate in the action of the story. When reading stories in the first person, we need to realize that what the narrator is recounting might not be the objective truth. We should question the trustworthiness of the accounting.

Omniscient and Limited Omniscient Points of View

A narrator who knows everything about all the characters is all knowing, or omniscient.

A narrator whose knowledge is limited to one character, either major or minor, has a limited omniscient point of view.

As you read a piece of fiction think about these things:

How does the point of view affect your responses to the characters? How is your response influenced by how much the narrator knows and how objective he or she is? First person narrators are not always trustworthy. It is up to you to determine what is the truth and what is not.

Think about the ways that point of view is used to help you solve the murder in "A Jury of Her Peers."

Page five: **Creating character: Characters**

Memorable characters come alive for us while we read. They live on the page and in our hearts and minds. We cannot forget them. Yet, they are fictional; they don't really exist.

Be alert to characters in the same way you are when you meet someone. Observe their actions. Listen closely to what they say and how they say it. Notice how they relate to other characters and how other characters respond to them. Look for clues as to their purpose and significance in the story.

Page six: **Creating character: Learning About Characters**

Characters are either major or minor and either static (unchanging) or dynamic (changing). The character who dominates the story is the major character.

Don't be fooled however – you might never even see the story's major character. Is Minnie Wright the major character in "A Jury of Her Peers?" Also, major characters do not have to be dynamic. Emily Grierson doesn't change at all in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," yet she is the major character.

Readers can learn about characters in many ways, including:

Physical traits

Dialogue

Actions

Attire

Opinions

Point of view

There are no limits on the types of characters who can inhabit a story: male or female, rich or poor, young or old, prince or pauper. What is important is that the characters in a story all have the same set of emotions as the reader: happiness, sorrow, disappointment, pain, joy, and love.

As Nathaniel Hawthorne said, "Blessed are all the emotions be they dark or bright." In emotions lie the motivations of the characters who drive the story.

Page seven: **Describing Setting: Setting**

Eudora Welty said, “Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else... Fiction depends for its life on place. Place is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of, What happened? Who’s here? Who’s coming?...”

Writers describe the world they know. Sights, sounds, colors, and textures are all vividly painted in words as an artist paints images on canvas. A writer imagines a story to be happening in a place that is rooted in his or her mind. The location of a story’s actions, along with the time in which it occurs, is the setting.

Setting is created by language. How many or how few details we learn is up to the author. Many authors leave a lot of these details up to the reader’s imagination.

Page eight: **Describing Setting: What Setting Tells Us**

In William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” the narrator carefully describes the house that Miss Emily lives in. This description helps us picture a decaying Mississippi town in the post-Civil War South. We also learn about Miss Emily’s resistance to change.

It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily’s house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps – an eyesore among eyesores.

Later we enter the house itself and, eventually, end up inside one particular room. The physical details of the setting become linked with the values, ideals, and attitudes of that place in different times.

Setting can add an important dimension of meaning, reflecting character and embodying theme.

Notice how the details of the setting provide the clues for solving the murder in “A Jury of Her Peers.” As a result, they illuminate the deeper meaning of the story.

Page nine: **Analyzing Theme: Theme**

What exactly is this elusive thing called theme?

The theme of a fable is its moral. The theme of a parable is its teaching. The theme of a piece of fiction is its view about life and how people behave.

In fiction, the theme is not intended to teach or preach. In fact, it is not presented directly at all. You extract it from the characters, action, and setting that make up the story. In other words, you must figure out the theme yourself.

The writer’s task is to communicate on a common ground with the reader. Although the particulars of your experience may be different from the details of the story, the general underlying truths behind the story may be just the connection that both you and the writer are seeking.

Page ten: **Analyzing Theme: Finding the Theme**

Here are some ways to uncover the theme in a story: Check out the title. Sometimes it tells you a lot about the theme.

Notice repeating patterns and symbols. Sometimes these lead you to the theme.

What allusions are made throughout the story?

What are the details and particulars in the story? What greater meaning may they have?

Remember that theme, plot, and structure are inseparable, all helping to inform and reflect back on each other. Also, be aware that a theme we determine from a story never completely explains the story. It is simply one of the elements that make up the whole.

The play version of Susan Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers” is called Trifles. What do both titles suggest about the theme?