

Elements of a Short Story

Resource Package

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Elements of a Short Story

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:

- 1. The person in a work of fiction.*
- 2. The characteristics of a person.*

1. 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.

2. 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 lifelike (resemble real people)

Types of Characters

- Rounded Characters – many-sided and complex personalities that you would expect of actual human beings.
- Flat Characters – personalities that are presented only briefly and not in depth.
- Dynamic – many-sided personalities that change, for better or worse, by the end of the story.
- 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.

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:

Plot Structure

Most stories follow a similar plot structure that includes the following elements.

Introduction

- Establishes setting and atmosphere
- Introduces important characters

Initiating Incident

- This is the first incident that will generate much of the conflict in the story
- It does not have to be a large or obviously important event, but its effects will help shape the rest of the story
- This incident marks the beginning of a rise in conflict and action

Rising Action

- After the initiating incident, a series of other events propels the story and conflict builds
- The rising action is marked by this series of events and conflict
- Rising action keeps the audience interested and moves the story towards the climax

Climax

- The climax occurs when the action is at its highest point
- This is the most exciting part of the story

Dénouement

- The denouement comes immediately after the climax
- It is the brief period during which outstanding conflicts are resolved and loose ends are tied
- The denouement answers questions that may remain after the climax

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.

POINT OF VIEW

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.

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

Character Sketch Sample

In the film *Casablanca*, one character dominates the screen with personality and presence. Rick, played by Humphrey Bogart, is a cool, cynical café owner, handsome, impeccably dressed, and determined to protect his own interests. Having had his heart recently broken, Rick is careful not to become emotionally invested in anyone else. When his girlfriend asks if she will see him later that night, Rick replies that he “never plan[s] that far ahead.” Early in the film, Rick exclaims (in one of many classic lines), “I stick my neck out for no one.” However, Rick’s calloused exterior softens when he is faced with a great moral dilemma: whether or not to help Victor Lazlo and Ilsa escape. Ultimately, Rick proves he is a compassionate man, able to put the greater good ahead of his own selfish interests. He helps Lazlo escape, and even insists that Ilsa go with him. Though he didn’t get the girl in the end, *Casablanca*’s Rick has become an icon of masculinity and coolness.

Characterization

Characterization is the method through which an author reveals and develops the personalities of characters within a text or film.

There are three main types:

1. Direct Characterization – from the narrator

This occurs when the narrator makes direct statements about a character.

E.g. He was a brooding, temperamental teacher with a penchant for inflicting scholastic suffering.

2. Indirect Characterization – from the character’s own words and actions

This occurs when the words and actions of a character reveals aspects of his/her personality.

E.g.

3. Indirect Characterization – from the words and actions of other characters

We also learn about characters from the words and actions of other characters.

Eg.

Character Types Worksheet

Name: _____

Type	Name	Example
Protagonist		
Antagonist		
Round		
Flat		
Static		
Dynamic		
Foils		
Confidant		
Stock		

Protagonist - main character with whom the audience becomes most invested

Antagonist - character most in conflict with protagonist

Foils - two characters who are extremely different (even opposite) and create contrast

Confidant - a character in whom the protagonist confides. Provides insight to main character

Round Characters - characters that are developed and multi-faceted

Flat Characters - characters that are one-dimensional, have little depth, and play a limited role

Static Characters - one whose character does not change during the course of a story

Dynamic Characters - many-sided personalities that change, for better or worse, by the end of the story

Stock Characters - a stereotype or predictable, one-dimensional character who is recognizable to the reader as "of a type," for example, the jock, the brain, the yuppie, the absent-minded professor, and so on

How to Identify a Short Story Theme

Following the plot of a short story is fine, but the discerning reader will be able to identify the theme of the story. The theme is the message the writer uses the story to convey to the reader about life in general. Understanding the theme gives the reader an additional level of appreciation for a short story. You can identify a short story theme by following a few easy steps.

Instructions:

Step 1:

Understand the main character. Analyzing the main character is an important part of discovering the theme. List the physical and intangible attributes of the main character. Decide if the reader is supposed to identify with the main character or if she is someone the reader doesn't (or shouldn't) want to be.

Step 2:

Identify the conflict. The conflict in a short story always involves the main character. The conflict can be between the main character and another, society or some force of nature, or within the main character himself. Figure out specifically who or what the main character is struggling against in the short story.

Step 3:

Know how the conflict is resolved. The resolution of the conflict can give the reader a big clue as to the theme of a short story. Who wins the conflict is the writer's way of telling the reader which force was better. If an evil main character, one you wouldn't admire, wins out over some force of nature, the theme will have a negative slant.

Step 4:

Make a generalization. Look at the main character, her conflict and how it was resolved to determine the theme of the story. Start by understanding what the main character learned in the short story. Then, generalize that lesson to apply to everyone. If the main character learned not to trust her friend who just won the lottery, the theme of the short story may be that money changes people.

Analyzing a Story's Theme

Title: _____

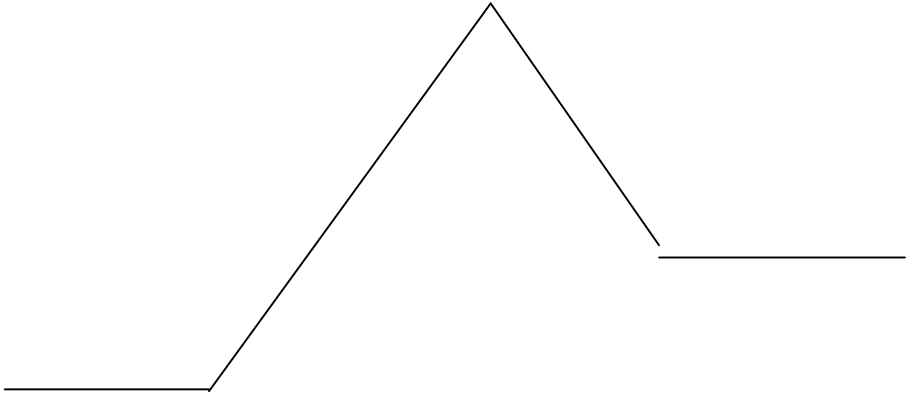
Author: _____

Questions to help clarify theme	Responses with examples from the story
1. Does the title signify something about the story? Does it point to a truth the story reveals about life?	
2. Does the main character change during the course of the story? Does the main character realize something he or she did not know before?	
3. Are any important statements about life or people made in the story, either by the narrator or characters in the story?	
4. Is the theme ever directly stated? If so, where is it stated?	
5. In one sentence, state the story's theme. Do you agree with the theme? Is the writer presenting a truth about life or forcing us to accept a false view?	

Elements of a Short Story Worksheet

Name: _____

Story Title: _____

Setting	Place: Time: Weather: Social Conditions: Mood/Atmosphere:
Plot	
Conflict	Human vs.
Point of View	
Character	Round: Flat: Dynamic: Static:

Characterization	Stock: Character's Name: Physical Traits: Personality Traits: 1) 2) 3)
Theme	List any themes in the story: