FICTION

Fiction means something untrue or made up. In literature it refers to stories or narratives. Its commonest form is the novel which in Britain emerged at the beginning of the XVIII century. The novel has assumed a multiplicity of forms over the centuries (Historical, Picaresque, Gothic, Epistolary, Detective, Political, Allegorical, etc...).
However, although it has evolved considerably, the essence of a novel remains the telling of a story.

STORY AND PLOT

Written stories are usually the work of an individual writer and express his or her individual personality as well as reflecting his or her cultural, social and historical background. They are addressed to an ideal reader but only come to life when they are read by real individuals. Reading essentially involves extracting meaning from a text.

a) Features of plot

We will try now to give a definition of plot. If you have ever read a work of fiction with great interest, you can be sure that it was its plot that held your attention. The most obvious feature of plot is a story's title. This often serves as a guide to the prospective reader on the likely contents of the story. When you analyze a piece of fiction you must always remember that there is a difference between what the writer knows (that is *the story*) and what the writer tells the reader (that is *the plot*). The *story* is the mere chronological sequence of events, while the *plot* is the sequence of events and action as presented by the writer. It is not simply the story therefore, but the way the story is told to create a certain effect. Good plots arouse interest and maintain the momentum of the reader's reading until the end.
There are many kinds of plots; among the most common are:

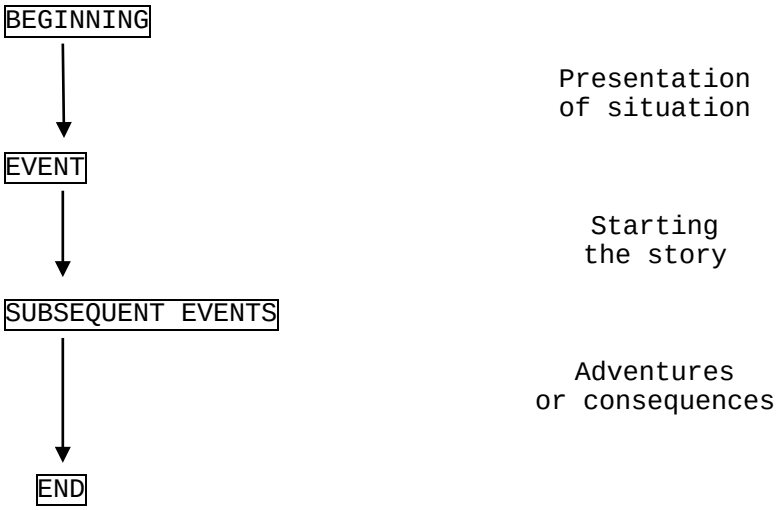
- plots based on the psychological or moral growth of one character;
- plots based on social or political issues;
- plots based on journeys, either realistic or fantastic;
- plots based on the development of personal relationships.

b) Time in fiction

The organization of a plot will probably involve interference with the strict linear sequence of chronological time. A writer may decide to anticipate or postpone some events in order to create a certain effect or he may decide to omit a whole stretch of time because it is irrelevant to his purpose while going into considerable detail on another. In fiction we are always faced with two sequences of time, that is the *time of the plot* and the *time of the story*. The time of the plot is sometimes called *fictional time*, while the time of the story is called *chronological time*. Fictional time is usually shorter (for example with a character's life story), but it may also be longer as, for example, in descriptions (what you see at a glance in real life takes longer to describe in a text).
The handling of time is one of the main components of the plot of a story.

c) Story pattern

We have seen that plot is the way a writer chooses to organize what he or she wants to relate. Quite different plots all have something in common: a beginning, a development and an ending.



The *story pattern* is the way the plot is organized as a whole. It may be a pattern in which the initial situation is changed, maintained or re-established, depending on the final outcome. The type of pattern a writer chooses is a significant aspect of the structure of a story since it may well have bearing on the overall meaning.

THE NARRATOR AND THE NARRATOR'S POINT OF VIEW

We have seen that fiction involves not only a writer or a reader but it also involves a narrator, someone who tells the story. In this chapter we turn to the way a story is told, i.e. by whom and from what point of view. We also examine the different positions a reader is placed in, by differences in narrative technique.

a) Point of view

Any story implies a *narrator*, who may or may not be present within it, and a *point of view*, that is the angle from which the story is told.
The narrator is not, of course, the same as the novelist but a "persona" created by the novelist to tell the story. It is through the narrator, if present in the story or not, and the narrator's point of view, that the author attempts to guide the reader's interpretations of fictional events. The narrator can employ different kind of *tone*, i.e. the way a narrator says what a character says (e.g.: seriously, nostalgically, mockingly, etc...).
The most obvious case of tone is *irony*, that is to say when there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is actually meant. The point of view, together with the tone employed to express it, is then the main way whereby a writer guides the responses of his readers.

b) First-person narrator

With the *first-person narrator* the reader has access to the narrator's mind, but the point of view is restricted because the fictional world is seen only through the eyes of the narrator and no other. For example in "Gulliver's travels", that is a form of autobiographical or first-person narration, the author, Jonathan Swift, pretends that the narrator, Gulliver, relates only what he sees and what he feels and thinks. Being alone he cannot report other people's impressions or discoveries. So the first-person narrator can be handled by the novelist in such a way as to make the reader accept completely what the narrator relates, as in an autobiographical novel. On the other hand it may encourage the reader to distance him or herself from the narrator's judgments.

c) Third-person narrator

Third-person narrations allow a much wider point of view than first-person narration. Third-person narrators may be *omniscient*, that is they know everything of the fictional world they are presenting; or they may be *non-omniscient*, that is they choose to know only a limited part of fictional world they are presenting. Third-person narrators in novels are more common than first-person narrators because they allow a greater variety of solutions. They are also potentially more powerful because they can know more characters.
Omniscient third-person narrators interpret everything for their readers, leaving little room for the latter's own interpretations. He can tell you everything about everybody, anticipate events and make comments outside the scope of the story itself. The reader may be caught, interested and amused but his interaction with the text is that of an onlooker.
Non-omniscient narrators, on the other hand, allow the reader greater freedom to infer and interpret. For example when a third-person narrator whose point of view is the limited one of a child, the reader is told only what the child sees. An adult reader can, of course, supply interpretations for events which are beyond a child's comprehension. In XVIII century novels, it was common practice for the omniscient narrator to remain invisible. There can be many variations to the narrator's role. For example, some novelists may limit omniscient narrators to the point of view of a single character, while others may combine first-person and third-person narrations or different first person narrations in a single novel.

d) Interior monologue

In some novels we can have two narratives; a narrative of physical actions and a narrative of thought. The first is related by an impersonal narrator and the second evolves in a character's consciousness by way of a free association of ideas. We will refer to the narrative technique of the *interior monologue* in which the point of view corresponds to the internal thought of one character. In Virginia Woolf's more experimental novels, such as "Mrs. Dalloway", a character's thoughts, emotions and recollections are strung together without apparent logical sequence, although their syntactic expression remains well formed.
This technique also does away with traditional descriptions and dialogues and often leads to the total disappearance of the narrator and of a structured plot. It was influenced by Freud's works and the new psychological theory of the concept of time which was non longer seen as a series of points in a objective chronological sequence, but as a flux of subjective consciousness in which present, past and future co-existed.

e) Stream of consciousness

Interior monologue is sometimes also referred to as *stream of consciousness* ('voce della coscienza '), a phrase coined to describe the mind's flux of thoughts.
Stream of consciousness, as exemplified by Joyce's "Ulysses", departs even further from fictional convention than interior monologue, as exemplified by Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway".
Punctuation has been almost completely abandoned. The only break in the flow of prose is for a new paragraph, but again without punctuation at the end or capital letter at the beginning. The syntax is often obscure and some sentences are incomplete or disjointed.
These departures from conventions are meant to reproduce in writing the movement of thought. The result is that reading may be quite difficult. The interpretation of stream of consciousness depends entirely on the existence of a shared knowledge of the world between the character or the narrator and the reader. When this link breaks down, fiction based on this technique becomes for most readers unreadable.

CHARACTER AND SETTING

This section has been selected in order to illustrate the way characters are created and developed.
They may be based on real people the author has known, and in the case of historical novels may even bear the names of people who actually existed. But they are not, of course, real people at all. However realistic their delineation may be, they exist only in the imaginary world the writer has created on the page.

a) Building characters

There are several ways in which a novelist can create *characters*. We shall look at the methods which are most frequently used in writing to characterize the person who populates a fictional world.

Basically there are two methods of characterization. Either a writer can *show* characters going about their daily lives (thinking, feeling, etc...), or he can *tell* the reader about them. In the first case these techniques are used:

- dialogue;
- monologue;
- interior monologue.

The reader is left to interpret and draw conclusions from what is said from the narrator. The narrator may occasionally intervene to confirm what monologue or dialogue have already shown.

Telling the reader about characters, on the other hand, will involve the writer in detailed descriptions of their personality and appearance and comments on their behavior. This second method allows the reader little discretion to form an opinion, indeed he is required to take on trust everything the writer says about a particular character.

In most fiction, characters are created through a mixture of the two methods. Writers may make greater or less use of one or the other depending on the effect they want to have. For example, telling a reader about a character helps to give psychological depth to his portrait, while showing a character in interaction with others helps to create a more realistic atmosphere in the novel or story.

b) Types of character

Any novel or story can include a wide range of characters from the very complex to the very simple, depending on the function they are meant to fulfil within this range we can draw a broad distinction between flat and round characters.

Flat characters are usually two-dimensional, based on a few features, and do not undergo any change in the course of the novel or short story. Because of this lack of development, flat characters are sometimes referred to as *closed*. A reader normally expects such a character to be consistent throughout the novel.

Round characters on the other hand are tri-dimensional, more complex, and more like real people. They usually undergo some kind of change, often a radical one, in the course of the novel, either in their feelings or in their outlook on life. Their motivation is rarely wholly clear and they are sometimes capable of surprising the reader. That is why they are sometimes called *open*.

It is important to stress that the division between flat and round characters does not imply a judgment of value. Simple characters may be as good as complex ones, provided they are coherent, consistent and fulfil convincingly their function in the world of fiction.

c) Setting

So for in this section we have concentrated on character, i.e. on the actions and personalities of the people in a novel or story; we want, finally, to take a brief look at the physical and social *setting* for their fictional lives.

By setting we mean:

- the physical background of the story;
- the social world of the story;
- the general atmosphere of the story.

All of which may help the reader to interpret the plot and the characters in it.

d) Theme

So far we have been analysing the main technical aspects of fiction, namely story and plot, the role of the narrator, character and setting. For pratical purposes we have artificially split an organic whole, that is to say a piece of fiction, into its constituent parts. All the aspects we have been examining separately are, of course, closely interrelated both in the story's structure and in its meaning. It is time now to reassemble the constituent parts and focus on overall meaning or *theme* of a work of fiction.

The *theme* is what the author says through the vehicle of the story. It is not simply its subject matter but what the author wishes to make of the subject matter. In trying to understand how a writer conveys meaning you should try to examine the contribution made by all the formal aspects of fiction and the interrelation between them.

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