

## **Elements of Story or Fiction - Character, Setting, Plot, Point of view**

Elements of fiction and elements of story in general can be used by the reader to increase their enjoyment and understanding of different literary pieces. Once students are aware that all stories have elements of character, setting, plot, theme, point of view, style, and tone; they can be encouraged to ask themselves to identify the characteristics of each for a particular story. The more familiar they become with the different kinds of elements the better they will understand and critically analyze stories.

### **Plot**

Plot is the order in which things move and happen in a story. The plot is how the author arranges events to develop his 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:

- a) Introduction - The beginning of the story where the characters and the setting is revealed.
- b) 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).
- c) Climax - 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?
- d) 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).
- e) Denouement - This is the final outcome or unangling of events in the story.

Chronological order is when a story relates events in the order in which they happened.

Flashback is when the story moves back in time. Jean George, *Julie of the Wolves* or dreams in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. Dreams are easier for children to understand because of their experience with them. Flashbacks are more problematic.

### **Pattern of action**

Rising action builds during the story and reaches a peak at the end as in *The Borrowers* by Mary Norton.

Steady action maintains the same amount of action throughout the story, rising and falling from time to time - *Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Rise and fall action: the action rises to a climax and then trails off - *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor.

Suspense is what makes us read on. *Charlotte's Web*: Wilbur's fate. Will he live? Will Charlotte run out of words? Is Templeton too selfish to help? Will Wilbur win at the fair? Can Charlotte go? Lose to Uncle? New category? Dead pig! Templeton bites tail...

Cliffhanger: *Trouble River* by Betsy Byars, *The Borrowers* by Mary Norton, and the *High King* by Lloyd Alexander.

Foreshadowing is the planting of clues to indicate the outcome of the story. Not all readers will be alert to these. Some may notice them subconsciously and describe their inferences as guesses or feelings. *Charlotte's Web*: When we first meet Charlotte we are told that she eats living things and the friendship looks questionable. But White adds that "she had a kind heart, and she was to prove loyal and true to the very end - a prophetic statement. Another clue is when Charlotte assures Wilbur, after he learns of the slaughter, with, "I am going to save you."

Sensationalism: the thrilling and the startling - achieved at the expense of the character and the idea. A writer must be careful with sensationalism, so as not to weaken the character or theme, to balance suspense over action, and then hint at the outcome, as not to overpower small children but provide relief as needed.

Climax: The peak and turning point of the conflict, the point at which we know the outcome of the action. Children call it the most exciting part. In *Charlotte's Web* when the pig survives. The Borrowers when the boy ventilates the fumigation. *A Wrinkle in Time* when Meg discovers what she has that IT does not.

Resolution is the falling action after the climax. When the reader is assured that all is well and will continue to be, so the plot has a closed ending. If the reader is left to draw their own conclusions about the final plot then the ending is open. Many adults as well as children are disturbed by open endings. Inevitably is the property of it had to be. This is high praise for a writer.

Coincidence: events that happen by mere chance. *The Incredible Journey* has some coincidental events that remove credibility from the plot. First, a handwritten note blows into the fire and leaves the housekeeper baffled. She therefore does not know that the two dogs and cat have struck out on their own, and does not search for them. Later a crumbling beavers' dam gives way at just the right moment to sweep the frightened cat downstream. Later a boy hunting for the first time with his own rifle saves the cat from a lynx with one remarkable shot.

Sentimentality is a natural concern or emotion for another person. The way a soap opera or a tear-jerker plays on its viewers. *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell is told by the horse and stuffed with sentimentality.

"Poor Ginger" a title of a chapter concludes with these observations. "A short time after this a cart with a dead horse in it passed our cab-stand. The head hung out of the cart-tail, the lifeless tongue was slowly dropping with blood; and the sunken eyes. But I can't speak of them, the sight was too dreadful. It was a chestnut horse with a long, thin neck... I believe it was Ginger; I hoped it was, for then her troubles would be over. O! If men were more merciful they should shoot us before we came to such misery."

Because of the sentimentality, the reader/listener/watcher may sob more soulfully over Ginger's death than over that of a human being; although there is little confusion in some minds as to which misused creature is more deserving of grief.

The rapid pace of folktales does not allow time for tears by false sentiment. We do not anguish over the fate of *Rumpelstiltskin*, when he stamped his feet and split in two and that was the end of him.

The most destructive element from the over use of sentimentality is not boredom, but the fact that the young reader, faced with continual sentimentality, will not develop the sensitivity essential to recognize what is truly moving and what is merely a play on feelings. If, after all, we regard the death of a pet mouse with the same degree of emotional intensity as the death of a brother, we have no sense of emotional proportion.

By contrast Katherine Paterson in *Bridge to Terabithia* uses a wide range of emotions that children wrestle with or the genuine sentiment that a small child, reading or being read to, experiences during the relationship with Charlotte and Wilbur. The child fed only on such surface sentimentality as soap operas, the average television program, and Walt Disney, with their sterile and stereotyped pictures of human beings and their distorted sensationalism with simplistic solutions, risks developing emotional shallowness.

## **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.

Conflicts occur when the protagonist struggles against an antagonist (villain that goes against the protagonist), or opposing force. Conflict and order make plot. The author creates the conflict by describing one of the following types of interactions.

Person-against-self: Tom Sawyer's fear of Injun Joe and guilt, can't sleep, fear of talking in sleep, ties mouth shut, struggle with moral responsibility even in the face of danger. In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, by Ursula K. Le Guin, Ged struggles against the flaws in himself, as the shadow, must make himself whole. "a man who, knows his whole true self cannot be

used or possessed by any owner other than himself. He will now live his life for its own sake, not for hatred, pain, ruin, or the darkness of evil.

Person-against-person: Meg and IT in *A Wrinkle in Time*, Michael and his mother in *The Hundred Penny Box* by Sharon Bell Mathis, *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Three Little Pigs* versus the wolves.

Person-against-society: Child will probably call it "will Wilbur live?", but it is really Wilbur Vs. dinner table, Wilbur Vs. good business. Kit Vs. the Puritans in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth George Speare.

Person-against-nature: Julie in *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean George. Karana in *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell.

Lack of conflict: A story that lacks struggle, lacks suspense, lacks alternatives, lacks a sense that it had to happen, and therefore, satisfaction. All the reader can say at the conclusion of such a story is "So what does that prove? *A Wrinkle in Time* shows Meg in a powerful planet saving person-against-person conflict. The author builds the plot, character, ... so well that the reader/listener cares very much what happens to Meg. Even simple stories like *Goldilocks*, *The Three Little Pigs*, and *The Billy Goats Gruff* have conflict and tension. *Double Fudge* by Judy Blume has a different sense of conflict. There are little incidents that happen throughout the book but nothing of significance to anyone but Fudge and maybe some family members. However the reader's attention is maintained by an attachment to Fudge and his struggle with childhood.

## 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):

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

Backdrop setting is when the setting is unimportant for the story and the story could take place in any setting. *Winnie-the-Pooh* by A. A. Milne is an example of a story in which could happen in any setting.

Integral setting is when the action, character, or theme are influenced by the time and place, setting. Controlling setting controls characters. If you confine a character to a certain setting it defines the character. Characters, given these circumstances, in this time and place, behave in this way. *The Tail of Peter Rabbit* is an example of how the setting is an integral part of Peter's behavior. *Charlotte's Web* is another example of an integral setting.

Functions of setting: *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth Speare creates a setting of Puritanical austerity: hand-rubbed copper, indicating hard work, the heavy fortress-like door, the dim little mirror, the severe wooden bench, the unpainted Meeting House, the whipping post, the pillory, and the stocks. The tasks of a typical day performed by Kit: mixing soap with a stick, the lye fumes stinging her eyes, tiring muscles, with one of the easiest tasks: making corn pudding, which keeps her over a smoky fire with burning and watering eyes. A frightening and uncompromising environment compared to her carefree Barbados upbringing.

Setting as antagonist: Characters must resolve conflict created by the setting: *Julie of the Wolves*, *The Incredible Journey*, and *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.

Setting that illuminates character: The confining setting of the attic in *Anne Frank* and *Flowers in the Attic* help the characters find themselves and grow as individuals.

Setting as symbolism: a symbol is a person, place, object, situation, or action which operates on two levels of meaning, the literal and the figurative, or suggestive. Children will understand only obvious symbols. Forest: unknown; garden: natural beauty; sunlight: hope, goodness; darkness: evil, despair. A grouping of symbols may create an image called an allegory. The *Narnia* books by C. S. Lewis are allegories. In *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Spere uses symbols in the usual way and to create conflict, as when she describes Hannah as a kind and harmless woman who lives in the sunny meadows - when you would expect a witch to live in the deep dark shadowy forest or swamp.

## Character

Character is the mental, emotional, and social qualities to distinguish one entity from another (people, animals, spirits, automatons, pieces of furniture, and other animated objects).

Character development is the change that a character undergoes from the beginning of a story to the end. Young children can note this. The importance of a character to the story determines how fully the character is developed. Characters can be primary, secondary, minor, or main.

Characters are developed by:

**Actions:** In *Charlottes' Web*, Templeton, creeps up cautiously to the goslings, keeping close to the wall. Later he grins when Wilbur falls trying to spin a web. At the fair he bites Wilbur's tail as hard as he possibly can. His actions portray him as sneaky, ill-tempered, and pleased at others' discomfort.

**Speech:** In *Charlottes' Web*, Templeton after Wilbur asks him to play, frolic or have fun. Replies, "...I never do those things if I can avoid them... I prefer to spend my time eating, gnawing, spying, and hiding... I am a glutton not a merry-maker. Right now I am on my way to your trough to eat your breakfast, since you haven't got sense enough to eat it yourself"

**Appearance:** In *Charlottes' Web*, Templeton after his night at the fair returns swollen to double his usual size. He agrees to fetch the egg sac so that he may eat first every day and grow fatter and bigger than any other known rat.

**Other character's comments:** Other characters' comments help form judgment of the characters by supporting other characters' actions speech, appearance, and author's comments.

**Author's comments:** The wording the author uses in the narrative adds to characterization. In *Charlottes' Web*, White describes Templeton ...had no morals, no conscience, no scruples, no consideration, no decency, no milk of rodent kindness, no compunction, no higher feeling, no friendliness, no anything. He would kill a gosling if he could get away with it. These statements certainly develop character.

**Unity of character and action:** the character must be credible. If the character changes then the change must be shaped by events which the author is obligated to explain how they impacted to create the character's change. Stories with main character change: Meg; *A Wrinkle in Time*, Claudia; *From the Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, the Duck; *The Ugly Duckling*, Wilbur; *Charlotte's Web* and Jess; *Bridge To Terabithia*.

## Types of characters

Round characters are those the reader/listener/viewer gets to know well. They have a variety of traits that make them believable. Central characters are well developed in good literature. Meg, Claudia, Duck, Wilbur, and Jess are the central character, or protagonist (hero or heroine).

Flat characters are less well developed and have fewer or limited traits or belong to a group, class, or stereotype. Fern in *Charlotte's Web*. A character foil are minor characters whose traits contrast with a main character. The lamb is young and naive as Wilbur, but she is smug instead of humble.

Anthropomorphic characterization is the characterization of animals, inanimate objects, or natural phenomena as people. Skilled authors can use this to create fantasy even from stuffed toys (Winnie-the-Pooh). The characterizing of inanimate objects from tiny soldiers to trees and so on is represented in Andersen's works and the ballet *The Nutcracker*.

Animal characters in realism are best when the animals act only like animals as in *The Incredible Journey*.

## Character Change

Dynamic characters are rounded characters that change. Wilbur as the panicky child. "I can't be quiet," screamed Wilbur, racing up and down. "I don't want to die. It is true... Charlotte. Is it true they are going to kill me when the cold weather comes? Later: "Listen to me? ... Charlotte ... has only a short time to live. She cannot accompany us home, because of her condition. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that I take her egg sac with me. I can't reach it, and I can't climb. You are the only one that can get it. There's not a second to be lost... Please, please, please, Templeton, climb up and get the egg sac. This desperate plea does not come from personal need. Further, he tells Templeton to "stop acting like a spoiled child.", and he who once planned his day around his slops offers Templeton to eat first and take his choice of all the yummys. Other dynamic characters are Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time*, Jess in *Bridge to Terabithia*, and Claudia in *From the Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*.

Static (stock) characters are round or flat characters that do not change during the story. Charlotte is the same wise and selfless character at the end of the story as at the beginning. Folktales, fairytales, and other types use static and flat characters whose actions are predictable, so the listener or reader is free to concentrate on the action and theme as it moves along toward an often times universal discovery.

## Point of view

Point of view is determined by the authors' descriptions of characters, setting, and events told to the reader throughout the story.

1. Innocent Eye - The story is told through the eyes of a child (his/her judgment being different from that of an adult) .
2. 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.
3. First Person - The story is told by the protagonist or one of the characters who interacts closely with the protagonist or other characters (using 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.
4. Omniscient- The author can narrate the story using the omniscient point of view. He can move from character to character, event to event, having free access to the thoughts, feelings and motivations of his characters and he introduces information where and when he chooses. There are two main types of omniscient point of view:
  - a) Omniscient Limited - The author tells the story in third person (using pronouns they, she, he, it, etc). We know only what the character knows and what the author allows him/her to tell us. We can see the thoughts and feelings of characters if the author chooses to reveal them to us.
  - b) Omniscient 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 own.

Objective or dramatic point of view: There is no explanation to the reader of what is going on or what the characters think or feel. The camera selects and we see and draw our own conclusions. *The Incredible Journey*, is an example. Since the characters are animals we are not able to know what they think, if indeed they do. We must imagine their actions and movements or other sensory images. The old dog walked gingerly into the shallow water, shivering... turning his head away. Once more the Labrador swam the river, climbed out... shook himself, and barked. There was no mistaking the command. The old dog took another reluctant step forward, whining piteously, his expressive tail tucked under... again the Labrador swam across...