

Fiction: An Overview

Ch. 2

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Notes from *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*, Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs

Historic Overview of Fiction

- Since 1599, “fiction” has referred to long or short prose stories
- The work of fiction may include biographical and/or historical fact, but its narrative core comes from the author’s imagination.
- Origin of story telling is probably as old as humanity itself.
- Oral tradition dating back to ancient legends and myths, as shown in the narratives of ancient Egypt.

Historic overview of fiction, cont

- Traveling storytellers would visit town and villages and sing verse stories about gods and heroes, often playing stringed instruments in accompaniment.
- Although these stories were fictionalized accounts about people who probably never existed, the listeners accepted them as fact or history.
- Examples include Myths about gods like Zeus and Athena (Greece), Jupiter and Minerva (Rome), and Baal and Ishtar (Mesopotamia).
- Examples of human heroes celebrated in these stories include Oedipus, Helen of Troy, Hercules, Archilles, and Odysseus.

Historic overview, cont.

- Moralistic-argumentative aspect of storytelling can be seen in the fables of Aesop (6th century BC), and the parables of Jesus.
- Storytelling became a more specifically written art about 800 years ago with the work of such writers of Marie de France (a Frenchwoman who wrote in England near the end of the 12th century), Giovanni Boccaccio (Italian, 1313-1375), and Geoffrey Chaucer (English 1340-1400). William Shakespeare (1564-1616) drew heavily on history and legend for stories and characters for his plays.

Modern Fiction

- Fiction in the modern sense began to flourish during the 17th and 18th centuries, when a change in the perception of human nature began.
- Earlier, human nature was seen as primarily flawed and sinful. The only forces that could control depraved human nature were the church and the monarchy.
- With the rise of the Renaissance (and its re-discovery of ancient Greek and Roman humanism), however, people began to be viewed as capable of moral growth and goodness through their own individual efforts.
- In literature, it became possible to view humans of all social stations as literary topics.
- As the British writer, Anthony Ashley Cooper, put it in 1709, human nature is governed by complex motives like “passion, humor, caprice, zeal, faction, and a thousand other springs.”
- Characters became real, with names, homes, families and friends (and enemies), and thus became familiar to the reader; the reader could see him or herself in the character.

Modern Fiction, cont.

- Along with an emphasis on characterization, fiction is concerned with the influence of setting on the lives of people.
- The first true works of fiction in Europe were adventure stories called *Romances*, popular in Spain and France during the 16th and 17th centuries.
- In English, the term *novel romances* was borrowed from the French and Italian to describe these works, and to distinguish them from medieval and classical romances as something that was new (novel). In England the word *story* was used along with novel in reference to the new literary form
- With the rise of literacy in the 18th century, a market for the new form also arose, and people began buying published works.

The Short Story

- As we all know, novels are often long and take a long time to read.
- Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849) developed a theory of the short story, which he described in a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*.
- Poe was convinced that “worldly interests” prevented people from gaining the “totality” of comprehension and response that he believed reading should provide.
- A short, concentrated story (he called it “a brief prose tale” that could be read at a single sitting) was ideal for producing such a strong impression.

Elements of Fiction I

- Fiction has a basis in *realism* or *verisimilitude*.
- The characters, settings and situations, although they are the author's inventions, are like people, places and events in real life.
- Even when authors, in works of fantasy or science fiction, create characters and settings very unlike real life, they remain consistently true to the world they create.
- The assumption that authors make about the nature of their story material is called a *postulate* or a *premise*, what the American novelist Henry James called a *donee* (something given).
- The *donee* of a story like Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" is the realistic environment of a poor and simple home.
- In Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" the *donee* might be phrased, "Suppose that a small, ordinary town held a lottery in which the prize was not something good, but something bad."

Elements of Fiction I, cont.

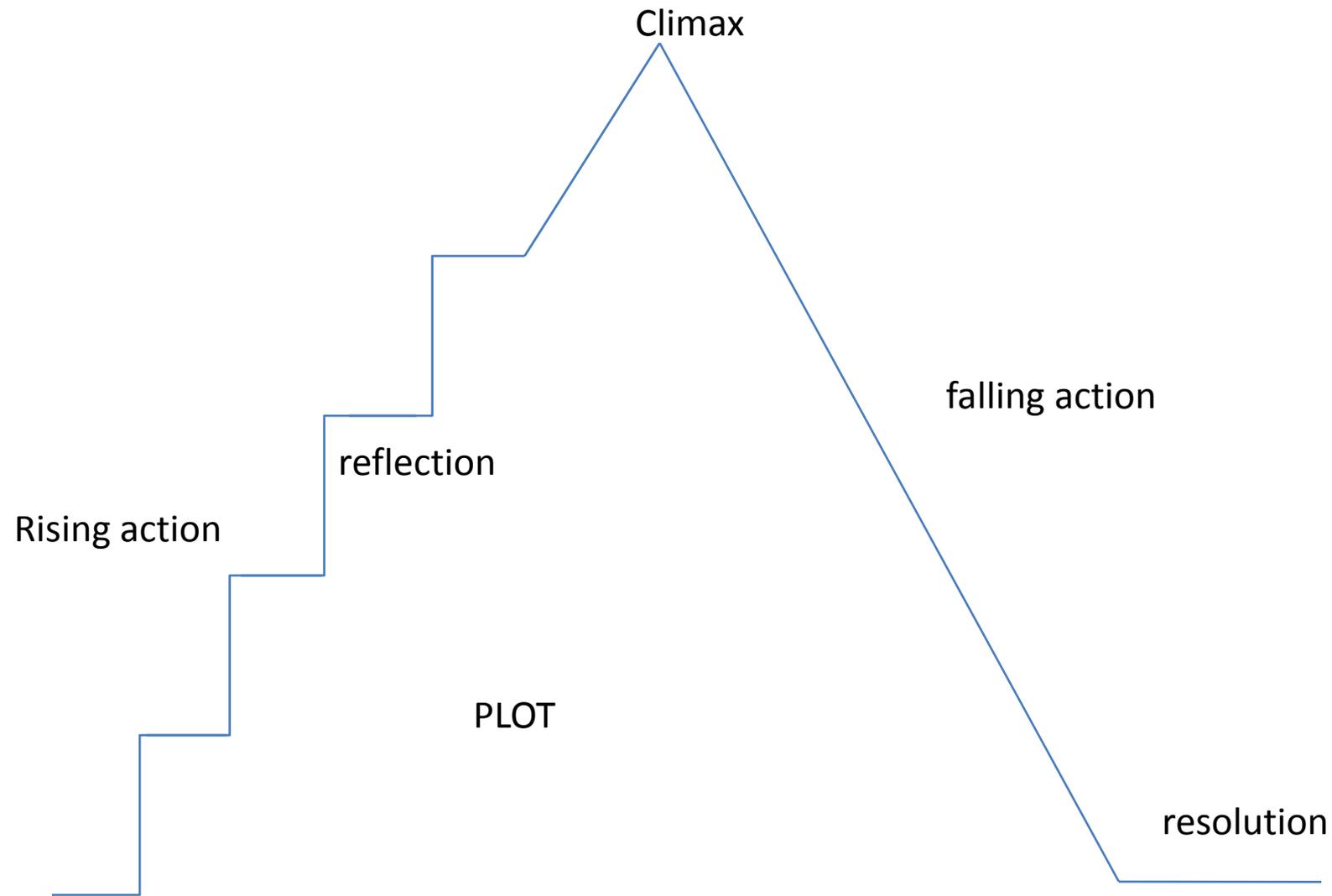
- Scenes and actions which are not realistic in our ordinary sense of the word may be considered “normal” in stories as long as they follow the author’s own stated or implied ground rules.
- You may always judge a work by the standard of whether it is consistent with the premise, or the *donnee* , created by the author.

Elements of Fiction II: Character

- Characters bring stories to life
- A character may be defined as a reasonable facsimile of a human being, with all the good and bad traits of being human, created by an author for a story.
- Fictional characters are faced with problems and conflicts; they struggle with these, and grow (or deteriorate) as a consequence of the struggle. In this respect, characters indeed resemble most people.
- The conflicts that a character endures and the outcome of the his or her struggle is the primary way the author communicates his or her message about the human condition. This is the way we, as readers, connect to the author's belief about life.

Elements of Fiction II: Plot

- The plot is “what happens” in a work of fiction; it can be described as a “road-map” or “blue-print” for the story.
- It involves a main character (protagonist) in conflict with another character (or force, such as nature, or perhaps society) called the antagonist.
- The conflict develops in a series of rising action, that culminates in a climax, when the conflict is resolved in some way.
- The action is tied up, and often explained, in the falling action.
- The end of the plot, and often the work, is called the resolution.



Elements of Fiction II: Structure

- Structure refers to the way a story is assembled.
- Some stories are told in straightforward, sequential order. In this kind of structure, the plot and the structure are pretty much the same thing.
- Other stories are pieced together through out-of-sequence and widely separated episodes, speeches, secondhand reports, memories, accidental discoveries, dreams, etc.
- In such stories the plot is the same as the structure, and must be looked at as separate.

Elements of Fiction II: Theme

- The theme of a work of fiction is the “big idea” of the work.
- When you ask “what is this story about?” you might get a response that involves a description of the plot.
- When you ask “but what is it *really* about?” you might get a word like “loyalty,” or a phrase like, “love always triumphs over hatred.”
- All the elements of fiction serve to communicate the author’s theme.
- Longer works, and even more complex short works, often have multiple themes. Some are considered more essential, and are called “major themes” while others are called “minor themes.”
- A major theme in Maupassant’s “The Necklace” is that people may be destroyed or saved by unlucky and unforeseeable events.
- The process of determining and describing themes in stories is never complete; there is always another theme that we can discuss, another issue that may be explored.

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- Narration creates a logical sequence in fiction.
- A narrative may include all the events leading up to and following an event, and may move in a continuous line from word to word, scene to scene, action to action and speech to speech. It unfolds chronologically, and must be read chronologically.

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- Style is the author's skill in bringing language to life.
- The medium of fiction and all literature is language, and the manipulation of this medium is the author's style.
- A mark of good style is the use of active verbs and nouns that are specific and concrete.

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- Point of view guides what we see and understand in fiction
- Point of view is the voice of the story, the speaker who does the narrating.
- It is the story's focus from which things are not only seen, but judged.
- The story may be told in the **authorial voice** ... by the author as author.
- More often the author creates a **persona** to tell the story...and it is important not to confuse the personality of this invented voice with the author him or herself.
- Frequently the persona is a character in story and tells the story in the first person, using the pronoun "I."

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- The **third person point of view** involves the use of third person pronouns (he, she, it, they). This point of view may be **limited** with emphasis on one particular character.
- The third person POV may be **omniscient**, aware of and describing all characters and situations.
- The third person may also be **dramatic** or **objective**, confined only to reporting of actions or speeches, with no commentary and no revelation of the thoughts of any characters unless the character reveal their thoughts dramatically.

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- By controlling the point of view an author helps us make reasonable inferences about the story's actions.
- Authors use point of view to raise some of the same questions in fiction that perplex us in life.
- What fictional narrators tell us is often colored by their own experiences, attitudes, prejudices, and limitations. It must be carefully examined; it often tells us more about the narrator than about what the narrator is reporting. This is like real life.
- Physical point of view is another limitation of a narrator involved in the action. How could such a 1st person narrator know what is going on in another room, another city, or another country at that moment?

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- Description creates the world of fiction
- Can be both physical and psychological
- **Mood** and **atmosphere** are important aspects of descriptive writing, and to the degree that descriptions are evocative, they may reach the level of **metaphor** and **symbolism**.

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- Dialogue creates interactions among fictional characters.
- This is the conversation between fictional characters
- It is a means of showing rather than reporting. If characters feel pain or declare love, their own words may be taken as the expression of what is in their minds.
- The language used by characters in dialogue reveal much about their intelligence, education level, or emotional states.
- Dialect reveal the region from which the character comes.

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- **Tone** or **irony** guide our perceptions of fictional works.
- Tone is the way in which the author conveys attitudes toward readers and the work's subjects
- Irony, a major component of tone, refers to language and situations that seem to reverse normal expectations.
- This is done often through word choice (**verbal irony**) or circumstances that reverse expectations (**situational irony**).
- In **dramatic irony** characters have only a nonexistent, partial, incorrect, or misguided understanding of what is happening to them, while the readers and other characters understand the situation more fully.

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- **Symbolism** and **allegory** relate fiction to the larger world
- In literature even apparently everyday objects may acquire symbolic value and represent meanings larger than themselves.
- Some symbols are widely recognized and considered **cultural** or **universal**. Others are **contextual** and linked to the specific work.
- When a complete story, in addition to maintaining its own narrative integrity, can be applied point by point to a parallel set of situations, it is an **allegory**.

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- Commentary provides us with an author's thoughts.
- Writers often include commentary, analysis, or interpretation in the expectation that readers need insight into the characters and their actions.
- In earlier times, authors often did this in the authorial voice. Modern fiction more often contains commentary from characters themselves; of course, you must always view this commentary with an eye on the character's limitations and bias; the purpose may be to further that character's development rather than to objectively explain the action.

Elements of Fiction III: The Writer's Tools

- Although we often analyze and discuss these elements of fiction separately, always remember that the work of literature employs them simultaneously in a coherent, organic whole.
- Literary analysis is like dissection... we have to remember to see the work as a living entity rather than as abstract parts.