

Some 'Elements' for Understanding Short Stories

One of the goals for this course is to introduce some terms and ideas you can use to read fiction. Reading fiction (and other kinds of literature) will be a focus for *ENG 102 – Writing Through Literature*. For this course, several of our readings are fictional (instead of non-fictional personal essays), including excerpts from two longer works on the New York World's Fair, David Gelernter's *1939: The Lost World of the Fair* and E. L. Doctorow's novel, *World's Fair*. Since we have already been exploring the 'personal essay,' which often includes personal stories with the author as the main character, you already have been thinking about elements of storytelling.

This handout will set down some terms and ideas, which we can try out together with 3 upcoming stories: R.K. Narayan's "Forty-Five a Month" and Lalita Gandbhir's "Free and Equal" (both on work) and E.L. Doctorow's *The World's Fair* (a chapter from a novel about the 1939-40 New York World's Fair in our last week of class).

Of course, there isn't time to cover all these terms or ideas in our stories, but getting familiar with some of these terms or elements can help you get ready for ENG 102.

I. Some Literary Terms ("Elements")

Realism – A powerful and successful literary movement (starting in the late 1800s) that featured stories and storytelling that seem realistic, whether by basing stories on real historical events and/or using realistic people, places and events.

setting – The time and place in which a story takes place. Of course, part of the skill of being a good writer—whether as a journalist, fiction writer or essayist—is to be able to give the reader a sense of place by selecting details using through visual or sound details.

plot – The sequence of events in a story. You will find that many modern short stories do not have many events. Sometimes a single incident is used as the plot for a short story.

characters – We often get a sense of real people or characters from reading realistic fiction. While you might not always get a sense how a person looks exactly, instead you might get a real sense of their personality, their inner thoughts, the way they speak, what they want in life, etc.

- A trend: *Recent fiction (after 1900) has been more interested in exploring character rather than plot.*

Think of your favorite Hollywood film—it ~~probably~~ features plot as an important element! (Often mainstream cinema use setting too. After all, through sets, special effects and cinematography—a strong visual style, movies can take us to places that never have existed and make them seem real to us.)

However, if you are familiar with 'independent film,' you probably could say that it is primarily interested in character (not plot or setting) for its main focus.

In a similar way, popular fiction has long relied on plot. Literary fiction, however, relies on character instead.

Two types of characters:

Rounded characters feel 'three-dimensional'. They feel 'real' to us. They are not just 'types' or 'flat' characters. Successful fiction usually gives us at least one 'rounded' character.

protagonist -- the main character in a story. By definition, a protagonist usually must face a struggle or conflict and make a decision (or come to a realization) by the end of the story.

narration – The way the story is told:

Some stories use the **third-person narration**. That is, the author's voice tells us the events: *He said. She said. He did this. She did that.* For example, this technique is used in the story "Blackberries" by Leslie Norris, and our two stories on work, R. K. Narayan's "Forty-Five a Month" and Lalita Gandbhir's "Free and Equal."

In contrast, a **first-person narrator** tells the story in his or her own words. *I did this. I saw this. Then I did that.*

As we will see, David Gelernter's fictional diary in 1939: The Lost World of the Fair and the young narrator in E. L. Doctorow's World's Fair use this second narrative technique.

point of view

Interestingly, both types of narrators may not know everything about what they see or hear or describe. By skillfully controlling and manipulating **point of view**—like a director's conscious use of a camera—an author can reveal even more of a character's personality. For instance, the young boy in "Blackberries" doesn't know everything about the adult world in the story (and the tensions between his parents about money in a depressed coal-mining town). In the diary sections of 1939: The Lost World of the Fair, Hattie Glassman's perceptions of the 1939 World's Fair are influenced by her relationship with Mark Handler, her eventual fiancé. In World's Fair, the narrator also is another young boy who struggles to make sense of the fair and the historical world of the 1930s.

theme – The main idea or focus of a short story

This term is tougher to understand. The temptation when you read fiction will be to create a 'moral' or lesson. Don't do this for college-level writing. You will write better papers and get more out of your reading if you don't try to reduce what you read into easy 'lessons.' In fact,

successful short stories do not preach to us. They do not contain easy 'morals.' (In high school, you may have gone hunting for 'symbols' in short stories. Don't do this either.) However, you can usually think of a theme (or 'thematic concern') for the stories that we will read for class. For example, Lalita Gandbhir's "Free and Equal" explores the immigrant experience and whether someone can be really free if they do not believe they are equal. R. K. Narayan's "Forty-Five a Month" is about the balance between work and family and how office work can be just as damaging as the work in an iPad factory. Of course, these are just a few suggestions. One great thing about short stories is they contain many themes or ideas, not just one easy 'moral' or 'message.' (Try not to use the word 'message' in your writing for college-level English classes.)

*****Keep the above terms in mind for this class as we read fiction. (You can use these terms in your ENG 102 classes, as well.)**

For our discussion, we will add a few 'bigger ideas' about what successful literary fiction can give us.

1) Realistic Description

- These stories give us *choice physical details* that 'evoke' a character's personality. Recent short stories don't try to record everything. They select from the world. Less is usually more. You will not usually get a full, 'photographic' description of a character in a literary short story.

2) Realistic Psychology

- These authors sometimes present us with the character's *inner thoughts*, which also develops a sense of a real person, even their 'psychology,' their wants, fears, motivations and complexities as people. In the spirit of 'less is more,' sometimes the reader must think about and supply the psychology behind what a character says or does. (The decisions of R. K. Narayan's Venkat Rao in "Forty-Five a Month" all invite us to see his feelings. The author Narayan does not tell us, but we can easily supply the psychology behind this character as Rao chooses his job over his family.)

3) Realistic Dialogue

- These stories often show us dialogue that sounds 'real'—in other words, dialogue that captures the rhythms and habits of real people speaking at a particular place and time. For example, Chekhov was known as a master of dialogue that evoked how real people talked. Besides a pioneering short story writer, he was a playwright whose work is still performed today. Capturing real conversation is something that good short story writers have learned well.

4) Original Language

- Good short story writers use language choices that explore *tone*, which can help develop a sense of character or setting, or both. The ‘illusion’ of the contemporary short story is that it is ‘real’ and ‘immediate,’ so ‘literary’ language (such as flowery descriptions, metaphors and similes) just doesn’t fit. However, a good short story writer will often use *ordinary language in an original way*. If you can point out phrases and descriptions that sound original and ‘true,’ you are on your way to understanding recent short fiction.

5) Reading an Ending

- The ending in a short story is probably the most important part for understanding its meaning. Often short stories don’t rely on plot. There may be a full incident or two, but not a long narrative. But there is still usually a complete ‘story.’ In some of these stories, the writers present us with endings that show characters who have realized something (this is called an “epiphany” or realization) or otherwise experience a change. Often, short stories don’t end simply. They can be ‘ambiguous’ or show the tension in characters’ lives. (Gandbhir’s story “Free and Equal” can be read this way.) In recent short fiction, the reader is often asked to participate and help ‘complete’ the ending of what a story really means.