

Handout on Plot
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Plot

Remember the good ol' days when your favorite English class assignment was when the teacher said, "I want you to write a narrative" and you were excited about being able to make up your own story? That definition—that a narrative is a story—probably stayed with you partly because you associated the idea of a narrator with a storyteller. Too bad life doesn't stay that simple.

As your understanding of literature grew more sophisticated you became acquainted with various "elements of a story"—such as plot, character, setting, irony, and many others. You probably even learned definitions for many literary elements and devices. And you discovered that there's much more to literature than just telling a story.

Let's consider this idea of plot and narrative. What's the difference between them? Aren't they the same thing? Not really. Think of *narrative* as being a general idea and *plot* as a more specific "sequence of incidents or events of which a story is composed" (Perrine 41). Notice that this is not the same thing as the **content** of a story.

Sven P. Birkerts, in his book *Literature: The Evolving Canon*, clearly explains the distinction between *plot* and *narrative*:

E.M. Forster formulated the difference most memorably. He observed that if we write "The king died and the queen died," we have a narrative, but if we write, instead, "The king died, and the queen died of grief," then we have a plot. The second assertion has established a link of cause between the two events. And this, the making of connections, or designs, is the essence of storytelling. Narrative is simply a record of what happened. For narrative to become plot it must reveal its meaning in human terms. Events only become interesting, which is to say *relevant* to our understanding of life, when we see their effect upon people, or, in the case of fiction, upon characters (38).

So it is apparent that when we are asked to examine or analyze the plot of a story, we must do more than simply relate the events of the narrative. We could, perhaps, examine the development of the different parts of the plot, but this analysis is more or less superficial, since it doesn't amount to much more than studying the incidents of the story. In *Literature: Structure, Sound and Sense*, Laurence Perrine suggests that it is more effective to examine "the function of the plot--...the relationship of each incident to the total meaning of the story (48). In other words, we find those events interesting because we are looking at how the incidents affect the characters in the story.

Plot Structure

Most stories follow a basic pattern of development: they begin with a stable set of circumstances, then a problem arises and things get complicated for a while, then stability is re-established. This is the natural sequence of beginning, middle, and end of a story and allows us to define several elements that make up plot structure. Perrine compares these elements to a map we might use for a journey. He says that simply recounting the incidents of a story concentrates on major happenings rather than focusing on the details which give

the story significant meaning (41). However, these elements are useful in helping the reader to identify how details might relate to each other.

Exposition: The introduction to the story. The reader meets the characters and their situations. Think of it as the who, what, when, and where part of a story. In a classic murder mystery, this might be the arrival of the characters at the country estate. The maid and the butler make it clear that this cute little country place is so far away from civilization it's like being on the moon, and we are introduced to several individuals as they meet each other. We learn that they've all been invited for the weekend, and are usually given a few clues about the time in which the story has been set.

Initial Incident: The event that sets the action of the story in motion. In our murder mystery example, this would usually be a murder. This is the incident that establishes the problem to be dealt with by the characters; it de-stabilizes the initial situation.

Rising Action: A series of events which complicate the problem. They may intensify the conflict or introduce new conflicts. These events are connected in a chain of cause and effect: the initial incident causes an effect, which leads to another event. Thus an effect becomes the cause of another effect. The rising action in our example might be Sherlock Holmes interviewing all the witnesses and suspects at the country house, and perhaps the murderer strikes again. We are given the clues, along with "red herrings" to get us off the track.

Turning Point or Climax: The moment of maximum tension in the story. Ideally, the initial incident should lead the reader directly to the climax. If the initial incident establishes the problem to be solved (the conflict), then the climax should solve the problem. Thus, at this point Sherlock would say, "The murder was committed in the conservatory with the rope by Miss Scarlet." (Remember the old Cluedo game?)

Falling Action: Here the complications of the rising action are untangled. Characters who fought with each other because they were frightened of being the murderer's next victim make their apologies and take up their friendships. The situation is once again becoming stable.

Denouement or Resolution: This final part of the story shows the consequences of the events of the story. Circumstances have returned to normal, and the reader is given a sense of closure: the story is over, the situation is again in balance. The traditional Sherlock Holmes story ends with Holmes and his friend Dr. Watson discussing the case. Watson always says, "How did you know...?" and Holmes always says, "Why, it was elementary, my dear Watson" and then proceeds to explain exactly how he knew who the murderer was. All our questions are answered. It's like wrapping a Christmas package for your mother and tying it up with a bow to finish the job. The ending should either re-establish the old situation or establish a new one as the stable circumstances.

As you try to apply these terms to parts of a story, keep in mind that not every story contains **all** the elements, and that sometimes people define these elements in different ways. (See the section on Well-Made Play Structure.) If the story is more of a character study, you may not find an initial incident. A story designed to achieve maximum shock value may end with the climax.

Plot Devices

So, if just examining the way the events of the story match up with the definitions of the various part of the plot is superficial analysis, then what should the careful reader consider? Remember that Birkerts says the reader should be watching to see how the events affect people (the characters) and decide how that influences our understanding of life and/or human nature. We are looking for connections between events in the story rather than the events themselves. Authors may use several devices to help establish these connections and communicate their purpose.

Order of Events: Let's say a friend of yours decides to play a practical joke on you. S/he puts a fake snake in your locker at the end of 7th period to watch you have a heart attack an hour later. But, today you went to your locker *before* 7th period and then went to the bus directly at the end of the class. Because you went to your locker before your friend planted the joke, you missed out on the fun. But, in telling the story, it may be more effective to take the events out of order and save an action for the punchline, even if it didn't happen at that point in real time. In other words, "[in] life, actions occur one after the other, sequentially. Not all stories, however, describe events chronologically" (Beaty & Hunter 22).

The Norton Introduction to Literature uses Forster's example (which we looked at earlier) to explain how an author's choice of ordering the events of a story affects the reader:

"The king died and then the queen died" ... is not a plot, for it has not been "tampered with." "The queen died after the king died" includes the same historical events, but the order in which they are reported has been changed. The reader of the first sentence focuses on the king first; the reader of the second sentence focuses on the queen. While essentially the same thing has been said, the difference in focus and emphasis changes the effect and, in the broadest sense, the meaning as well (22).

This does not mean, however, that an author may choose any sequence of events which causes the reader to focus in a desired manner. If the events do not progress logically from one to another, the result will be confusion on the part of the reader, and the writer's purpose will not be communicated.

Additionally, the events must be chosen with care. Stories that simply show the characters jumping from one crisis to another can be exciting, but they generally don't share any insights about life for the reader to consider. Perrine tells us that "physical action by itself...is meaningless. In a good story a minimum of physical action may be used to yield a maximum of insight. Every story has *some* action, but for a worthwhile story it must be *significant* action" (41-42).

Flashback: Beaty and Hunter define *flashback* as a point when a story "breaks into its own order, reaches back into the history, and presents or dramatizes a scene that happened before the fictional present" (24). If the author wants the reader to focus on the psychological state of the character, for example, then s/he might include moments of a similar set of circumstances that happened previously (before the present story began) to show **why** the character is acting in a particular way. These moments of flashback may be interspersed at appropriate points throughout the story to allow the reader to gradually make the connection between the previous circumstances and what is happening to the character in the "fictional present."

Conflict: Perrine calls conflict “a clash of actions, ideas, desires, or wills” (42). This clash may be physical, mental, emotional, or moral, but will typically be demonstrated in three different ways:

- man vs. man
- man vs. environment (the character is in conflict with some external force, such as physical nature, society, or “fate”)
- man vs. himself

This pitting of man (or woman) against an adversary demands two types of characters:

- **Protagonist**—“the central character in the conflict, whether [s/he] be a sympathetic or an unsympathetic person” (Perrine 42). Note that the term “protagonist” is more specific than “hero.” According to Perrine, this character “is simply the central character, the one whose struggles we follow with interest, whether he or she be good or bad, sympathetic or repulsive. A ‘hero’ or ‘heroine’ may be *either* a person of heroic qualities *or* simply the main character, heroic or unheroic” (42).
- **Antagonist**—the forces arrayed against the protagonist. These may be persons, things, conventions of society, or even traits of the protagonist’s character.

I myself often tell students that you cannot have a story without conflict, because a story in which everyone agrees with each other all the time is boring. Conflict, to me, means that characters (or forces in the story) have opposing desires. Perhaps the guy desperately wants to be married to the girl, but she really wants to be a research scientist in Antarctica and can’t see how she could possibly have both the guy and a career. Because they want different things, and because they both actively pursue the goal of getting what they want, the events in the story represent the clash of the characters’ desires.

But what if you look at conflict as a variety of agreement? In *The Second City Almanac of Improvisation*, the actor Avery Schreiber discusses what he learned from Viola Spolin (who developed much of the theory of acting and improvisation): “As Viola said, ‘You can’t have conflict unless you agree to have conflict. The war is fought until one side doesn’t agree to fight anymore. A new agreement has to be made....Conflict alone is static. It can’t go anywhere” (4). What Schreiber and Spolin are suggesting is that characters (and people) make a choice to be in conflict with a person or a force or themselves. As long as the characters in a story continue to make the choices (make agreements), then we have interesting events which tell us about human nature.

Suspense: Birkerts defines suspense by saying that it “creates expectation through the holding back of information; there is a promise of revelation to come. Sometimes the promise is implicit in the situation: the two men are fighting to the death and we read on to see who will win. In other cases, the author may subtly prepare the ground for us through *foreshadowing*—that is, passing along cues and hints about what will happen” (41).

This expectation keeps the reader wondering “what will happen next?” We continue to read because we want to know the answer to the question. For suspense to be truly effective, though, the author needs to combine the reader’s curiosity “with anxiety about the fate of some sympathetic character” (Perrine 43). In other words, if we care about the character we become anxious about whether or not she will get the job, or if he will survive falling into the riptide.

Of course, not all fiction is thrilling and action-packed. Perrine addresses this when he says, “in more sophisticated forms of fiction the suspense often involves not so much the question *what* as the question *why*—not ‘What will happen next?’ but ‘How is the protagonist’s behavior to be explained in terms of human personality and character?’ (43).

Writers use two common devices for achieving suspense in a story:

- mystery—an “unusual set of circumstances for which the readers crave an explanation” (Perrine 43)
- dilemma—place the protagonist in “a position in which he or she must choose between two courses of action, both undesirable” (Perrine 43-44).

Both of these devices keep the “what will happen” question prominent in the reader’s mind, which means the reader will continue to turn the pages of the book, thus enjoying the suspense of the story.

Does this mean every story has to have suspense? Yes and no. Perrine thinks it’s often overrated. He says, “A good story, like a good dinner, should furnish its pleasure as it goes, because it is amusing or well-written or morally penetrating or because the characters are interesting to live with” (44). Obviously, if we don’t care enough about the characters to want to know what happens to them, we aren’t enjoying enough suspense to keep us interested in the story. So in that sense, yes a story must have suspense. But suspense doesn’t necessarily mean biting your fingernails as the protagonist hangs by his toes on a cliff, or some other clever bit of action.

Surprise: Surprise is often considered to be part of suspense. It can be exciting and fun or it can ruin the story for us. Surprise is “proportional to the unexpectedness of what happens; it becomes pronounced when the story departs radically from our expectation” (Perrine 45). If we expect the young man from the wrong part of town to become a criminal and waste his life in jail, then we are pleasantly surprised when he instead wins a scholarship to medical school and becomes a talented surgeon. But sometimes the surprise ending disturbs the reader instead of providing a pleasant shock.

There are two ways to judge the legitimacy and value of a surprise ending:

- 1) “by the fairness with which it is achieved;
- 2) by the purpose that it serves” (Perrine 45).

Most of you have read William Golding’s book *Lord of the Flies*. The ending of this book is frequently criticized as being *deus ex machina*. [*Deus ex machine* (“god from the machine”) is a coincidental resolution which refers to “the practice of some ancient Greek dramatists in having a god descend from heaven (...by means of a stage machine) to rescue their protagonist at the last minute from some impossible situation” (Perrine 47).] When the officers of the naval ship suddenly appear, they effectively prevent Jack and the boys from killing Ralph. The appearance of the officers is a surprise which most readers are happy to see because we tend to grow rather fond of Ralph throughout the book and we get anxious about his fate as Jack chases him across the island. But we also tend to be unhappy about the sudden intervention of the outside characters because they are outsiders. One of the “rules” of a story is that the problem has to be solved by the characters involved in the situation, and Golding violates that rule. Therefore, the ending is not achieved fairly. But the message communicated by having the adults rescue Ralph by interrupting the chase fits with Golding’s larger purpose in examining the nature of good and evil, so the surprise ending effectively serves its purpose.

You could also look at M. Night Shyamalan’s film *The Sixth Sense* with its surprise ending. When the film first was released, moviegoers were saying, “I can’t say anything about it or I’ll ruin it for you. You just have to see it for yourself.” If you consider the fairness issue, all the clues are present; the surprise is achieved fairly. The viewer simply gets caught up in the needs of the characters and doesn’t note the details, and then gets smacked at the end. You could also make a case for the purpose of the film by looking at themes such as the human need to complete the task or how we avoid looking critically at ourselves. In this respect, also, the surprise ending comes across as legitimate. But does it simply turn our expectations inside out, or does it truly serve to provide insight into human

nature? Perrine says the justification of using a surprise ending “comes when it serves to open up or to reinforce the meaning of the story. The worthwhile surprise is one that furnishes illumination, not just a reversal of expectation” (45).

Happy vs. Unhappy Ending: Many people don’t enjoy stories that have an unhappy ending. They want to see the protagonist solve his/her problems, and defeat the villain. They demand the “happy ever after” ending. Unfortunately, what Perrine calls “interpretative fiction” often ends unhappily (45). He says, “discriminating readers evaluate an ending not by whether it is happy or unhappy but by whether it is logical in terms of what precedes it and by the fullness of revelation it affords” (46). In other words, the ending must flow logically from the action of the story and the characters, and it must reveal something significant about life. It doesn’t matter whether or not your favorite character wins, as long as it’s the appropriate outcome for that situation.

Several years ago, I was very frustrated in reading a novel by one of my favorite mystery authors, Elizabeth Peters. I have avidly followed her series of stories about Amelia Peabody set mostly in Egypt in the late 1800s and early 1900s. I was excited most of the way through the book because Peters had allowed two of her “children” characters to grow up and make wonderful discoveries about themselves and their relationship with each other. But then she twisted the events so that the boy acted completely out of the character she had developed for him through a dozen books. The other character’s reaction was also quite unsatisfying. For months afterward, I found myself mentally rewriting the ending to that book to make it logically fit the early part of the story (both in that novel and in the series). I was frustrated because Peters had left so much of the story unresolved. I almost gave up on the series, but my mother (who is also an Elizabeth Peters fan) read the next book and insisted I read it, too. As my mom said, “You’ll be much happier with this story.” But it still bothers me that the author violated the rule of remaining true to the logic of your characters and situation.

So why do many people avoid stories which have a logical ending and reveal a significant message, but have an unhappy ending? Consider these two justifications for unhappy endings:

- 1) “Many situations in real life have unhappy endings; therefore, if fiction is to illuminate life, it must present defeat as well as triumph. . . . Defeat...sometimes embitters people and makes them less able to cope with life than before. Thus we need to understand and perhaps expect defeat as well as victory” (Perrine 46).
- 2) An unhappy ending allows more opportunity for readers to think about life because it’s more likely to raise significant issues. “The unhappy ending . . . may cause them to brood over the results, to go over the story in their minds, and thus by searching out its implications to get more from it” (Perrine 46).

All this means that you shouldn’t decide that a book is bad or boring simply because it has an unhappy ending. If that ending is logical to the story, then dig deep for the insights about life that the author has given you.

Artistic Unity: Artistic unity means that the author includes nothing irrelevant, nothing “that does not contribute to the total meaning, nothing that is there only for its own sake or its own excitement” (Perrine 47). Generally, it means that the situation of the story and the characters lead inevitably to the ending.

One problem with unsatisfying stories is **plot manipulation**—unjustified or unmotivated action. An author can be justified in using a coincidence as the beginning situation of a story. Coincidence can even be—when used in small doses—an effective way to complicate the plot. But if the writer uses coincidence to resolve the central problem of the

protagonist, then the reader feels cheated because his/her expectations about the fate of the character have not been fairly resolved; the author has resorted to unfairly tying up the story. [Remember, the reader will accept a surprise ending if s/he can see that the clues were there for those who were astute enough to pick up on them.] Perrine believes that “the writer who uses a ...coincidence to resolve a story is avoiding the logic of life rather than revealing it” (48). And revealing the logic of life, ultimately, is what good fiction is all about.

Plot in Dramatic Literature

The plot of a play must meet more or less the same requirements as that of a short story or novel. They all follow the pattern of the basic progression from exposition through rising action to a climax.

Plays, however, have formal divisions into acts and scenes. These divisions are “the result of the content of the individual play—where sharp breaks can be emotionally effective by creating suspense or giving readers a relief from tension—or the conventions of the period” (Beaty & Hunter 1357). This means that playwrights determine where to give the audience a break based on whether or not they want to create suspense or allow the audience a break from an intense, emotional experience. When you are reading a novel, you can determine on your own when you will stop reading for a period of time. You base this decision on whether or not you are tired, and what other activities are happening around you while you are reading. But when you are in a theatre watching a performance of a play, you don’t control that decision. You are expected to be in your seat from the first moment actors appear on stage until the house lights come up again to signal that you may leave your seat. Sometimes the playwright (and the director and actors) has created such a forceful experience for the audience that you must be given a few minutes to pull back and recover so you can continue on the “rollercoaster”. This is often a time when the playwright will structure the action so that the audience can be allowed to take that necessary break.

Sometimes the division is there because the play was written in the 1600s or 1700s when all plays were divided into five acts, and conventions of that time period dictated that the playwright would divide the action of the play that way. Sometimes these divisions were rather arbitrary, but they could also be very conscious choices. For example, Eugene Scribe, a French playwright in the first half of the 1800s, popularized a formula for dramatic plot structure known as the “well-made play” (Brockett 491). Scribe’s formula was “a combination and perfection of dramatic devices” such as careful exposition and preparation, cause-to-effect arrangement of incidents, building scenes to a climax, and use of withheld information, startling reversals, and suspense” (491). This formula was so precise it dictated structure such as Act I being the servants in the household presenting the exposition, and the climax of the play at the end of Act IV. The elements of plot followed by the well-made play structure were expanded from the three or five most commonly recognized today. These elements were: **exposition, initial incident, rising action, turning point, falling action, climax, and denouement.** Note that Scribe separated the turning point from the climax. He defined the turning point as an event which dictated a certain outcome in the story. In other words, because choice A was made in Act III, only the ending which could logically come from that choice was possible. Scribe defined falling action as simply being events which lead from the turning point to the climax. If you will return for a moment to our previous example of a murder mystery story to examine the elements of plot, think of it this way. The turning point is that moment when the detective says, “Ah ha! I know who the killer is!” but doesn’t share that information with the reader. Then he (or she) proceeds to run around collecting just a bit more information or setting up a trap for the culprit; this running around is the falling action.

The most important thing to keep in mind about plot, however, is *how* the events connect together, and how they affect the characters. It is these connections which reveal to the reader (or audience) the author's message which will enlighten us.

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