

Short Story Elements

1. Characterization:

Short stories use few characters. One character is clearly central to the story with all major events having some importance to this character (*Protagonist*). Any secondary characters or anyone who opposes the main character would fall under the category of *Antagonist*.

For a story to seem real to the reader, its characters must seem real. A great deal can be told about a character if the reader studies

- A) his/her physical appearance
- B) what he/she says, thinks, feels, and dreams
- C) what he/she does or does not do
- D) what others say about him/her and how others react to him/her

Characters are convincing if they are consistent, motivated, and life-like (resemble real people).

2. 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.

- A) Place
 - Geographical location
 - Where is the action of the story taking place?
- B) Time
 - Historical period, time of day, year, etc.
 - When is the story taking place?
- C) Mood or atmosphere
 - What feeling is created at the beginning of the story?
 - Is it bright and cheerful or dark and frightening?

3. Conflicts:

The conflict is essential to the 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.

A) There are two *types* of conflict:

1. External - a struggle with a force outside one's self.
2. Internal - a struggle within one's self; a person must make some decision, overcome pain, quiet their temper, resist an urge, etc.

B) There are five kinds of conflict:

1. Man vs. Man - The leading character struggles with his physical strength against other men.
2. Man vs. Nature - The leading character struggles against the elements of nature or animals.
3. Man vs. Society - The leading character struggles against ideas, practices, or customs of other people.
4. Man vs. Himself/Herself - The leading character struggles with himself/herself in terms of his/her own soul, ideas of right and wrong, physical limitations, choices, etc.
5. Man vs. Unknown - The leading character struggles against fate, death, magic, aliens, destiny, etc.

4. Theme:

The theme in a piece of fiction is its controlling idea or its central insight. It is the author's underlying meaning or main idea that he is trying to convey. The theme may be the author's thoughts about a topic or view of human nature. The title of the short story usually points to what the writer is saying, and he may use various literary devices to emphasize his theme.

The following is a list of common themes from literature, television, and film:

- Growing up/Maturing
- Love is blind
- Believe in yourself
- Fear of change
- Don't judge a book by its cover
- Friendship
- Greed
- Loyalty
- Power
- Good vs. Evil

5. Point of view:

Point of view is defined as the angle from which the story is told.

- A) *First-person involved* - the narrator is the main character in the story. This is a very personal type of narration that makes the reader feel involved with the character who is telling the story.
- B) *First-person observer* - the narrator may be a minor character in the story and have some role to play in the plot, or he may be observing the action from a distance, unknown to the characters in the story.
- C) *Omniscient limited* - the author tells the story in the third person (using pronouns like they, she, he, and it). 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.
- D) *Third-person omniscient* - the narrator knows all, sees all, and tells all. This type of narrator is the most reliable since he can see inside and tell the readers about every character's thoughts.

6. Plot line:

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 the plot:

- A. Exposition - The beginning of the story; the characters and setting are revealed.
- B. Rising Action - The story becomes complicated and the conflict in the story is revealed (events between the exposition and the 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 (events between the climax and the denouement).
- E. Denouement - This is the outcome or untangling of events in the story (resolution).