Short Story Theory

The short story is a work of prose fiction that can usually be read in a single sitting. It did not appear as a distinct unit until the 1800s. The short story developed first in the United States.

Characteristics of Short Stories Written in the 1800s (19th century)

- the stories emphasize plot
- the story action moves quickly
- the plot of the story emphasizes the surprise ending
- the stories feature a definite beginning, complication, climax, and resolution
- the climax of the story often comes near the end of the tale and it is often unexpected
- formal style is used

Characteristics of Short Stories Written in the 1900s (20th century)

- the emphasis of the story moves away from plot to character, theme, and setting
- the story action is slower paced
- the stories are not as structured; the stories often begin in the middle or at the end; often the conclusion is left to the reader to determine
- the stories emphasize realism in the setting, characterization, and plot
- there is much experimentation with style
- the formal style found in the 19th century gives way to a colloquial style

Terms

Antecedent Action - These are the events that have occurred before the story begins. These events are very important to the short story.

Atmosphere (Mood) - This is the tone an author gives to a story. The atmosphere refers to the changing moods a reader is put into while reading the story (cheerful, bitter, angry, despondent, etc.).

Characters - These are the people in a story who have been given certain traits by the author. Readers learn about characters:

       1. by what the character says (the dialogue)
       2. by what the character does (the action)
       3. by what the character thinks
       4. by what others say about the character
       5. by the author's direct statement about a character

Character Motivations (or Motives) - A character's motivation involves the reason why a particular character behaves the way he does.

Character Presentation - Characters are presented by the author in two ways:

1. Direct presentation of character - the author tells the reader about the character
2. Indirect presentation of character - the author shows the reader what the character is like and the reader is left to make judgments

Characters must be consistent in behaviour; they must have clear motivations for their actions; they must also be plausible.

Character Types

Flat (Type) Characters - These characters are built around a single quality or idea and they are presented to the reader in outline form without much detail. Flat characters can be adequately described in a single phrase or sentence.

Round Characters - These characters are as complex as real people. Their motivations are complicated and the more important the characters are, the more the reader knows about them. Round characters can be adequately described in a longer composition.

Static Characters - These are characters who remain essentially the same from the beginning to the end of a story.

Dynamic (Developing) Characters - These are characters who undergo a change from the beginning to the end of a story. The change made must be plausible.

Plausible Characters - These are believable characters for the reader. Characters cannot behave one way on one occasion and in a different manner on another occasion unless there are reasons for characters to do so.

Stock (Stereotyped) Characters - These are character types that occur repeatedly in literature (e.g. the loyal servant, the evil gangster, the humble hero).

Deus Ex Machina - This is a term used to describe the entry of a coincidence or implausible event that comes just in time to solve a problem in a story. The Latin term literally means "god out of a machine" and originally referred to a god in Greek and Roman drama that was introduced to resolve a complication in the plot. The machina is the device that lowered the god (usually a basket) from the heavens.

Dilemma - This refers to two choices which a character faces, both of which are undesirable.

Escape Literature - This type of literature is written purely for entertainment.

Interpretive Literature - This type of literature is written to provide entertainment but it also serves

to deepen a reader's awareness of life. Interpretive literature usually has a theme.

Flashback - When a writer uses the flashback technique, the plot of the story often begins in the present and then moves back to an earlier point in time. The past provides important information that the reader needs to know. Often, the story returns to the present and continues from there.

Foreshadowing - This refers to clues in the story which warn the reader about the ending. In skilfully written stories, these clues are not obvious upon first reading.

In Medias Res - This is a Latin term referring to a story which contains no introduction. Instead, the reader is plunged directly into the action and then the background information is usually provided through explanations, flashbacks, or allusions in dialogue. The term literally means "in the middle of the action."

Initial Incident - This refers to the first event in a story upon which the rest of the story depends.

Irony - This is a device used by writers to show something different from what the reader expects. There are three types of irony:

1. verbal irony - This is a statement in which the opposite of what is said is actually meant. Sarcasm is a type of verbal irony which appears to praise someone while actually insulting that person.
2. situational irony - This is the most common type of irony. A situation appears to be developing to its natural conclusion and then the situation takes an opposite turn.
3. dramatic irony - This type of irony is similar to situational irony except the speaker is unaware that he is being ironic. The reader understands the irony but the narrator does not. The speaker's irony is thus not intentional.

Plot Elements

Plot - This is the plan or main action of a story. The plot of most short stories begins with some type of motivation and then the author presents two opposing forces in conflict.

Protagonist - This is the central or main character in a story. The action of the story revolves around this character. The protagonist is not necessarily a hero or "good guy."

Antagonist - This is the opposing force to the main character. The antagonist is not necessarily a "bad guy."
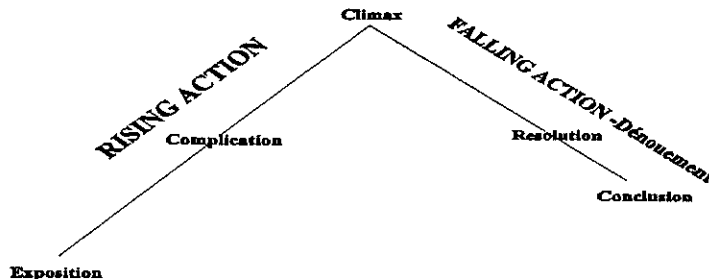
Plot Manipulation - This involves an unmotivated action in order for the author to manipulate or control the story. The writer may overuse coincidence to make the situation work out or he may incorporate a deus ex machina ending to save the protagonist from a disaster. The outcome is manipulated by the writer.

Conflict - The conflict develops into a complication which builds and reaches a climax, the peak of the conflict. The climax of the story is then resolved and the conclusion reached in a traditional short story. There are three types of conflict: man versus man (physical conflict), man versus nature (elemental conflict), and man versus himself (mental conflict).

As the plot progresses, it arouses expectations in the reader. An anxious uncertainty about what is going to occur is called suspense and if what happens goes against the reader's expectations, it is called surprise.

In a traditional short story, the plot of the story usually follows a plot diagram. The reader should be able to insert specifics from the story that fit each of the labels found on the diagram.

Note: The French word "dénouement" means unknotting.

```
                              Climax
                 RISING ACTION     FALLING ACTION - Dénouement
            Complication                    Resolution
                                                      Conclusion
       Exposition
```

Point of View - There are three types of point of view - the mental point of view, the physical point of view, and the emotional point of view.

A. The mental point of view involves the idea of who is telling the story to the reader. An author chooses a point of view from which to tell his story.

There are two types of mental point of view:

    1.   first person (participant) point of view. First person personal pronouns (I, me my, mine, we, us) are used to tell the story.

           The first person point of view can be subdivided into two categories:

a.   the narrator as a major character in the story. In this case, the story is told by the narrator and the story is mainly about that character.

A special type of first person narrator is called the innocent eye narrator. The character telling the story is a child or a mentally challenged individual. The narrator is thus naive and an ironic effect is produced between what the innocent narrator says and what the sophisticated reader understands.

b.   the narrator as a minor character. In this case, the narrator tells a story that focuses upon someone else in the story. The narrator is a less important character in the story than the protagonist.

Label the first person point of view as follows:

- first person (participant) point of view with the narrator as a major character
- first person (participant) point of view with the narrator as a major innocent eye character
- first person (participant) point of view with the narrator as a minor character

2.   third person (non-participant) point of view. Third person personal pronouns (he, him, she, her, they, them, etc.) are used to tell the story.

The third person point of view can be subdivided into three categories:

a.   omniscient narrator - can enter the minds of all the characters

b.   selective (limited) omniscient narrator - the author limits his omniscience to the minds of one or two characters

c.   objective narrator - the author does not enter the minds of any characters. Instead, he records what can be seen and heard like a camera or a fly on the wall watching and listening.

Label the third person point of view as follows:

- third person (non-participant) point of view with an omniscient narrator
- third person (non-participant) point of view with a selective/limited omniscient narrator
- third person (non-participant) point of view with an objective narrator

B. The physical point of view places the narrator in some specific place from which the story is told. The reader is able to visualize that position as the persona tells the story.

C. The emotional point of view involves the tone of the story. The author wishes to create various moods in the minds of his readers–humour, horror, satire, suspense, etc. The mood may change as the story progresses.

Satire - This is a form of writing in which the author criticizes something such as religion, politics, or education. The author does not ridicule directly, but rather describes a completely different situation and makes direct references to events that the reader knows (e.g. the novel *Gulliver's Travels*).

Setting - This involves the time and place in which a story occurs.

Stream of Consciousness Narration - This is a narrative method in modern fiction in which the author attempts to duplicate the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in a character's mind. The technique puts on paper what is going on in the mind of a particular character (e.g. some of the writings of William Faulkner).

Style - This involves how a writer says whatever he says. Style reflects the writer's personality showing through. The style of a work may be analysed in terms of its word choice (diction), its sentence structure (syntax), the types of figurative language used, and the patterns of its sounds and rhythms. At its most simplistic level, style can traditionally be classified as being: high (grand), middle (mean), or low (plain).

Symbolism (Symbol) - This is something that stands for another thing. It is a person, object, action, or word that takes on a meaning far beyond its normal meaning (e.g. a white dove carrying an olive branch symbolizes peace).

Theme - This refers to the controlling idea or central insight of a writing. It is a generalization about life that is implied by the story. Not all stories have theme (escape literature). Theme is derived by deciding what the central purpose of a story is and what the protagonist has learned about life. The theme is expressed in a single sentence and it is written as a generalization which does not contain specific material from the story's plot.

An easy way to determine a story's theme is to list the subjects of a story first as single words (e.g. love, jealousy, dishonestly, war, etc.). Then write out what the author is saying about these subjects in a single sentence and a theme is revealed (e.g. Some people are caused problems by love.).

Types of Short Stories - Traditionally, short stories can be classified in four ways. In order to determine the type of short story, examine whether plot, character, setting, or theme has been emphasized. Choose the dominant type and label the short story (e.g. character short story).

Unity - This is the effect that is achieved when an author uses his material in the best arrangement and order. The various stages of the story are linked together in a cause and effect relationship.

Verisimilitude - This involves the appearance of being real or true. If a story has verisimilitude, it is true-to-life.