The Elements of Fiction

Plot, Setting, Character, Conflict, Symbol, and **Point of View** are the main elements which fiction writers use to develop a story and its **Theme.**

Because literature is an art and not a science, it is impossible to specifically quantify any of these elements within any story or to guarantee that each will be present in any given story. **Setting** might be the most important element in one and almost nonexistent in another.

Just as a Crime Scene Investigator cannot approach a crime scene looking for a specific clue (e. g., shell casings), you as a reader cannot approach a story deciding to look for a specific element, such as **Symbol**. To assume could blind you to important elements. Both the CSI team and you must examine the entire "area" carefully to determine what is present and how it is important.

With that understanding, let's examine the elements.

PLOT
Literature teachers sometimes give the impression that plot is not important, that anyone interested in plot is an immature reader.

Of course plot is important. It was what got us interested in reading in the first place. It was the carrot on the string that pulled us through a story as we wanted to see what would happen next.

That said, let me emphasize that plot is rarely the most important element of a good story. As much as I've always loved surprise endings, if the only thing a film or a story has is a great twist ending, it doesn't have anything on a second look.

And it's worth noting that recent fiction and film have deemphasized plot, frequently stressing character or conflict for example. In film, for example, think David Lynch or *Pulp Fiction*.

SETTING
Stories actually have two types of setting: **Physical** and **Chronological.**

The **physical setting** is of course where the story takes place. The "where" can be very general—a small farming community, for example—or very specific—a two story white frame house at 739 Hill Street in Scott City, Missouri.

Likewise, the **chronological setting**, the "when," can be equally general or specific.

The author's choices are important. Shirley Jackson gives virtually no clues as to where or when her story "The Lottery" is set. Examination suggests that she wants the story to be universal, not limited by time or place. The first two stories you will read each establish a fairly specific physical setting; consider what each setting brings to each story.

CHARACTER
What type of individuals are the main characters? Brave, cowardly, bored, obnoxious? If you tell me that the protagonist (main character) is brave, you should be able to tell where in the story you got that perception.

In literature, as in real life, we can evaluate character three ways: what the individual says, what the individual does, and what others say about him or her.

CONFLICT
Two types of conflict are possible: **External** and **Internal.**

External conflict could be man against nature (people in a small lifeboat on a rough ocean) or man against man.

While **internal conflict** might not seem as exciting as external, remember that real life has far more internal than external conflict.

Film and fiction emphasize external conflict not simply because "it's more interesting" but also because it's easier to write. In a film script, you merely have to write "A five minute car chase follows" and you've filled five minutes. How long would it take to write five minutes worth of dialogue?

SYMBOL
Don't get bent out of shape about symbols. Simply put, a symbol is something which means something else. Frequently it's a tangible physical thing which symbolizes something intangible. The Seven/Eleven stores understood that a few years ago when they were selling roses with a sign saying, "A Rose Means 'I Love You.'"

The basic point of a story or a poem rarely depends solely on understanding a symbol. However important or interesting they might be, symbols are usually "frosting," things which add interest or depth.

It's normal for you to be skeptical about symbols. If I tell you that the tree in a certain story symbolizes the Garden of Eden, you may ask "Is that really there or did you make it up?" or "How do you know what the author meant?"

Literature teachers may indeed "over-interpret" at times, find symbols that really aren't there. But if you don't occasionally chase white rabbits that aren't there, you'll rarely find the ones that are there.

In the film *2001*, a computer named HAL is controlling a flight to Jupiter. When the human crew decides to abort the mission, HAL—programmed to guarantee the success of the mission —"logically" begins to kill off the humans. Science fiction's oldest theme: man develops a technology which he not only cannot control, it controls him.

Consider HAL's name. Add one letter to each of the letters in his name. Change the H to I, the A to B, and the L to M. When you realize how close HAL is to IBM, the first response is disbelief. But clearly the closeness of the names is either an absolute accident or an intentional choice. As much as we are startled by the latter, we probably agree that the odds against the former—it being an accident—are astronomical.

Somebody thought that up. Or maybe a computer.

POINT OF VIEW

Point of View is the "narrative point of view," how the story is told—more specifically, who tells it.

There are two distinctly different types of point of view and each of those two types has two variations.

In the **First Person point of view**, the story is told by a character within the story, a character using the first person pronoun, I.

If the narrator is the main character, the point of view is **first person protagonist**. Mark Twain lets Huck Finn narrate his own story in this point of view.

If the narrator is a secondary character, the point of view is **first person observer**. Arthur Conan Doyle lets Sherlock Holmes' friend Dr. Watson tell the Sherlock Holmes story. Doyle frequently gets credit for telling detective stories this way, but Edgar Allan Poe perfected the technique half a century earlier.

In the **Third Person point of view,** the story is **not** told by a character but by an "invisible author," using the third person pronoun (he, she, or it) to tell the story. Instead of Huck Finn speaking directly to us, "My name's Huckleberry Finn" and telling us "I killed a pig and spread the blood around so people would think I'd been killed", the third person narrator would say: He killed a pig and spread the blood…..

If the third person narrator gives us the thoughts of characters (He wondered where he'd lost his baseball glove), then he is a **third person omniscient** (all knowing) **narrator.**

If the third person narrator only gives us information which could be recorded by a camera and microphone (no thoughts), then he is a **third person dramatic narrator.**

In summary, then, here are the types of point of view:

First Person Narrator
- **Protagonist**
- **Observer**

Third Person Narrator
- **Omniscient**

Dramatic

Different points of view can emphasize different things. A first person protagonist narrator would give us access to the thoughts of the main character. If the author doesn't want us to have that access, he could use the first person observer, for example, or the third person dramatic.

THEME

Theme isn't so much an element of fiction as much as the result of the entire story. The theme is the main idea the writer of the poem or story wants the reader to understand and remember.

You may have used the word "Moral" in discussing theme; but it's not a good synonym because "moral" implies a positive meaning or idea. And not all themes are positive.

One word—love, for example—may be a **topic;** but it **cannot be a theme.**

A theme is **a statement about a topic.**

For example: "The theme of the story is that love is the most important thing in the world." That's a cliché, of course, but it is a theme.

Not all stories or poems (or films) have an overriding "universal" theme.