

ELEMENTS OF THE SHORT STORY

What distinguishes a short story from a novella, a novel, or an essay? According to Edgar Allan Poe, if a work of fiction *cannot* be read in one sitting, then it no longer can be called a short story. In addition, a short story usually focuses on one incident, contains a single unified plot and setting, features a limited number of characters, and takes place over a short period of time. Thus, an authentically constructed short story — the result of conscious craftsmanship — tends to have a distinct beginning, middle, and end.

A good short story synthesizes conflict, plot, setting, theme, and characterization. Each of these elements is important in itself. Combined, they unite to form a vibrant whole that entertains and edifies at the same time.

Listed below are terms that are frequently used when the short-story genre is discussed. It is important to remember, though, that these literary characteristics and devices comprise the necessary components of many other literary genres and can serve to enhance the reading experience offered by novels, plays, some forms of nonfiction, as well as short stories.

- ▶ **CONFLICT** — the struggle between two opposing forces. Conflict may arise externally — between two (or more) characters, between a character and society, or between a character (or characters) and the natural world — or internally, within a character as he or she attempts to make a decision, carries out an action, or comes to grips with a personal, moral, or emotional conflict.

- ▶ **PLOT** — the movement within a story. A plot starts with an *exposition* that provides the background and explains the opening action. It moves on to the *rising action*, as plot details begin to emerge. As the story progresses it reaches the *turning point*, or *climax* — the point at which the die is cast irretrievably and the outcome is irrevocably determined. Finally, the *dénouement*, or *falling action*, occurs as some form of *resolution* to the conflict is attained.
- ▶ **SETTING** — the physical and/or historical time and place in which a story occurs. The setting may also describe the daily lifestyles of the characters, as well as highlight the emotional, religious, social, and moral climate of the time.
- ▶ **THEME** — the central or dominating concept in a literary work. It may be explicitly stated or indirectly implied. The theme must be connected to every action in the story. Themes most frequently deal with life's significant issues.
- ▶ **CHARACTERIZATION** — the personality development of the characters in the story. Character can be revealed directly or indirectly:
 - ▶ **DIRECTLY** by means of the author's explanation or description of the characters' actions.
 - ▶ **INDIRECTLY** through the characters' actions, behavior, thoughts, speech, or reactions to other characters in the story.

Not every short story will contain each of these features. Modern short stories, especially, may be short on plot but long on conflict, theme, and characterization.

In addition to the important literary elements listed above, many short stories rely on literary devices such as symbolism, satire, irony, stream of consciousness, and figures of speech to reveal theme or character. Literary devices include:

- ▶ **SYMBOLISM** — the reference to a person, object, or place that possesses its own intrinsic significance and yet at the same time represents something bigger and more universal. Thus a crown may represent not only a head-covering, but also a kingdom or the right to rule. A symbol often represents abstract human emotion such as hope, faith, or fear, or a condition of life such as age, youth, or death.
- ▶ **SATIRE** — a blend of criticism and humorous dry wit with the intent to improve society or individuals.
- ▶ **IRONY** — the literal meaning of a thought or statement is opposite to what is actually intended. Types of irony include:

- ▶ **VERBAL IRONY** — the character says one thing and means another.
- ▶ **SITUATIONAL IRONY** — the turn of events is exactly the opposite of what is expected.
- ▶ **DRAMATIC IRONY** — the reader knows more about the actual situation than the character does, as occurs in many dramas.

- ▶ **STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS** — allows the literary characters being depicted to express an uninterrupted stream of thoughts. Thus, the reader is treated to an inside view of the evolving mental processes of the characters. This shifting sequence of thoughts and feelings highlights conflicts, issues, and emotions in a realistic fashion. In many ways this technique invites the reader to step into the minds of the characters through doors that have been left wide open!

- ▶ **FIGURES OF SPEECH** — useful literary devices such as simile, metaphor, personification, synecdoche, paradox, and oxymoron promote appreciation of rich, vivid linguistic imagery. Figures of speech include:
 - ▶ **SIMILE** — an expression of similarity between two items, achieved by using the words *like* or *as*.
 - ▶ **METAPHOR** — an analogy that hints at a comparison rather than openly stating it.
 - ▶ **PERSONIFICATION** — human characteristics such as emotions and personalities that are ascribed to animals and inanimate objects.
 - ▶ **SYNECHDOCHE** — in which the part stands for the whole — as in the use of the word *hand* to represent *worker* — or the whole for the part — as in the use of the word *cannon* to represent *artillery*.
 - ▶ **PARADOX** — a statement that effectively transmits an important thesis using an unexpected blend of contradictory concepts for emphasis or to draw attention to a specific situation.
 - ▶ **OXY MORON** — a brief paradox, usually expressed in one or two words, combining apparently contradictory terms, as in *bittersweet*.