

21W.755, Writing and Reading Short Stories (Fall 2006)
Shariann Lewitt
Session 8: Plot

What does the character **want**? Things happen because people want **something they don't have**, and they try to get it. Conflict arises because something stands in the way of getting what they want. How people try to **get around the obstacle** and get what they want is the **plot**. You must have conflict or you don't have a story.

You can analyze any story in great depth just by looking at what the characters want, what gets in their way, and what they do to get what they want.

Real life is often NOT just or fair or reasonable – what we want from fiction usually is, OR it is a wise comment on the unfair and random nature of existence. Fiction has to be believable. Real life does not have to be. We all know of incidents in real life that are incredible, and we use that word specifically. Not credible. Fiction MUST be credible.

Stories are not about plots, and less so now than in the past. (Right now the style is weighted to character and away from plot.)

Plot is a clothes line, an organizing principle, from which the substance (character, emotional reality, the “now” moment) hang suspended. The plot supports the substance of the story; it gives the reader a framework within which to understand the events.

Plot is organization.

Events are the things that happen, the various moments of conflict that leads to the “now” moment. Events need to be organized so that the reader can understand the character's internal experience and emotional truth.

How do each of the stories **fulfill** the reader? **Satisfy** the reader?

Clever – Ha Jin (Mr. Chiu)

Classical – Hurston (Delia, Sykes)

Straightforward – Achebe (Michael Obi)

Hidden (arising completely within character) – O'Connor (grandmother, Bailey the misfit)

Foreshadowing (in each story)

- do NOT surprise the reader with new
- use what the reader knows to create plot
- e.g. the *name* Sykes – Bill Sykes from *Oliver Twist*

Delia and Sykes: Maybe, but NOT certain, Hurston found the ending first and went back and put in the snake fear in the beginning – this tells us how awful Sykes is AND lets us know what will happen. (very efficient, as a short story must be)

Giving information that the reader needs before it becomes necessary helps the reader understand what is happening and what is going to happen. It's fine if the reader forgets and is jolted into a reminder—that's part of what makes Ha Jin's story so satisfying. We

forget about Mr. Chiu's illness, we are distracted (almost by sleight of hand) and so when what appeared to simply be a detail early on becomes pivotal, we are taken in. We feel like we should have seen it coming, but we don't.

Foreshadowing is in the details that you chose. You are preparing the reader for what will come. Even when you want surprise, you don't want so much surprise that the ending appears unreasonable (incredible!)

It is just and right and fair – this is satisfying.

2 volunteers to post their story/plot summary/character sketches to workshop. Discuss workshop.

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor

- Longer and not pointedly ABOUT plot, but...
- How does plot (story) flow from character?
- When do you know what is going to happen?
- the banality of evil

Achebe and O'Connor

Ask students to outline plot structures.