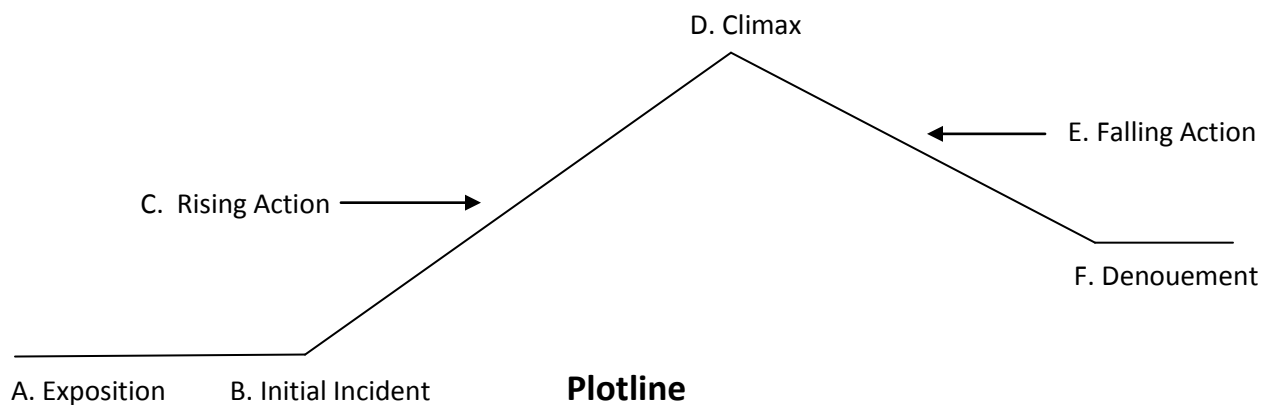# SHORT STORIES
Theory Notes

What is a 'short story'?

- Fictional prose which can be read in one sitting
- A story based on one incident or character
- Usually three to six characters
- Presents a conflict situation from which suspense arises
- May or may not have a definite conclusion or outcome

There are six elements contained in a short story:
1. Plot
2. Setting
3. Character
4. Conflict
5. Point of View
6. Theme

1. Plot

D. Climax

E. Falling Action

C. Rising Action

F. Denouement

A. Exposition   B. Initial Incident   **Plotline**

The plots of most short stories follow a similar line of development. Although an author may not follow the elements in the above order, these elements are usually found somewhere in the story.

A. **Exposition:** The author outlines background information necessary to understand the story. The exposition may act as an introduction to the story, or it may be found throughout the story, as the need arises, as explanation to help the reader. The following may be considered part of the exposition: setting, character, background information, and/or atmosphere.

B. **Initial Incident:** This is the first incident in the story which introduces the conflict or begins the suspense. Without this incident, there would be no conflict.

C. **Rising Action:** Most of the story is made up of rising action, based on the conflict introduced in the initial incident. The conflict and the rising action build up suspense.

D. **Climax:** This is the turning point in the story when the main conflict is resolved.
    a. Happy ending—protagonist solves the conflict
    b. Unhappy ending—protagonist beaten by opposing forces
    c. Indeterminate ending—conflict is not solved; no real climax or ending.

E. **Falling Action:** Things start to fall back into place.

F. **Denouement:** This is the ending or the conclusion. The author may tell you what happened to the characters following the climax. The denouement ties up loose ends of the story. A short story may or may not have a denouement.

2. Setting

The setting is the time and location in which a story takes place.

The following may contribute to a story's setting:
- place--(where is the story taking place?)
- time--(historical time, time of day, year)
- weather conditions--(Is it rainy, sunny, stormy?)
- social conditions--(What is daily life like in the story?)
- mood or atmosphere--(What feeling is created?)

3. Character

Character refers to a person in a story, OR the characteristics of a person.

Protagonist--the central (main) character in a story.

Antagonist--the person or force who opposes the main character.

Characterization: The way in which the characteristics of a character are revealed in a story. Authors use the following to reveal character:
    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
    e) how the character interacts with others

Character Types

Flat - a character who reveals only one, maybe two, personality traits in a story or novel, and the trait(s) do not change. Flat characters play a role but have no personality that is pertinent to the story, like "storekeeper," or "police officer."

> Example: In a story about a friendly teacher named Sandra Smith, Louis Drud is a janitor in her building. Louis is always tired and grumpy whenever Sandra runs across him and says hello. In this example, Louis Drud is a flat character.

Round - a well developed character who demonstrates varied and sometimes contradictory traits. Round characters are usually dynamic (change in some way over the course of a story). If you think of the characters you most love in fiction, they probably seem as real to you as people you know in real life. This is a good sign that they are round characters.

> Example: A character in a story named Elaine never cuts anybody a break. She tells her friends and coworkers that charity and compassion have no place in society. On the other hand, Elaine can never pass up feeding a stray kitten or puppy, and always tries to find a good home for lost or abandoned pets. In this example, Elaine is a round character.

Static - a character who remains primarily the same throughout a story or novel. Events in the story do not alter a static character's outlook, personality, motivation, perception, habits, etc.

> Example: Bert, a bumbling salesman, never takes the time to organize his files, properly record his sales, or follow up with customers. Finally, his boss gets fed up and fires him. Bert struggles for two months to find a new sales position. During that time, his car is repossessed for nonpayment and he maxes out his credit cards. Bert finally finds a new sales position but, before a week passes, he is called into a conference with his new boss. Bert is informed he must get organized or he will be fired. A week later, the new boss fires Bert after he fails to follow up with an important customer. In this example, Bert is a static character.

Dynamic - a major character in a work of fiction who encounters conflict and is changed by it. The change in outlook or character is permanent.

> Example: Ebenezer Scrooge, in A Christmas Carol by Dickens, was very stingy with his money. He worked his employees very hard for little pay. After his experiences with the ghosts that visited him, he changed his ways, paying his employees a more than fair wage, providing days off work and actually giving gifts. In this example, Ebenezer Scrooge is a dynamic character.

Stock - a character based on a common literary or social stereotype who is instantly recognizable to most readers. Possible examples include the "ruthless businessman", "shushing old librarian" or "dumb jock." They are not the focus nor are they developed in the story.

> Example: The main character in a story, Bernard, is hired by a computer company. His secretary is a blonde named Gidget, who is cute but forgetful and never gets a joke. In this example, Gidget is a stock character.

Foil - a character who is used to enhance another character through contrast. Cinderella's grace and beauty as opposed to her nasty, self-centered stepsisters is one clear illustration of a foil many may recall from childhood.

> Example: The main character in a story, a teenager named Sally, is a very honest person. She always tries to tell the truth and consider everyone's feelings. The teacher assigns Betty to be Sally's science lab partner. Betty enjoys gossip and likes to see people's reactions, especially if it involves hurt or embarrassment. In this example, Betty is a foil.

Although the character types are listed separately, characters may be (and often are) a combination. A foil, for example, could also be a round, flat, or even a stock character. While most protagonists in novels are dynamic (change over the course of the novel) and round, they don't have to be, especially if the novel is plot driven as opposed to character driven. It's not unheard of for a short story to feature a static protagonist. Some character types are, by definition, opposite and cannot be considered. For example, one cannot have a character that is both flat and round, or a character that is both static and dynamic.

4. Conflict

Conflict is opposition between or among characters or forces in a story that shapes or motivates the action of the plot. Conflict is essential to plot because it ties the incidents together and makes the plot move.

There are 2 types of conflict:

Internal--A struggle within one's self. A person may make a decision, overcome pain, or quiet their temper...

External--A struggle with a force other than one's self.

There are four kinds of conflict:

1. **Man vs. Man**--A physical struggle or emotional struggle with another character.

2. **Man vs. Nature**--A physical or emotional struggle against a force of nature.

3. **Man vs. Self**--A character's struggle with him or herself.

4. **Man vs. Society**--A character struggles against ideas, practices, or customs of other people.

5. Point of View

Point of View--the angle from which the story is told.

The short story writer uses one of the following methods in telling his/her story:

a. First Person narrator - The author becomes a character in the story (usually the protagonist). He knows the past and present but cannot predict the future. Uses the words "I", "me", and "we".

b. Third Person narrator - The story is told from the point of view of an outsider looking at the action. The narrator tells the story in third person (he, she, they).

> **i. Objective narrator** - tells the story without stating more than can be inferred from the story's action and dialogue. The narrator tells only what he sees and hears, and does not try to interpret the feelings of characters. The narrator never tells anything about what the characters think or feel.

> **ii. Omniscient narrator** - knows everything that happens and everything that goes on in the minds of **all** the characters. The narrator sees and knows all about the past, present, and future. May tell readers what he is thinking.

> **iii. Limited Omniscient narrator** - knowledge is limited to **one character** restricting information to what that character sees, hears, thinks, and feels. Sees and knows all about **one character only**.

6. Theme

Theme--the main message or idea behind a piece of writing.

The theme of a story:
- represents what the protagonist discovers about life
- is what the text implies about life or human nature
- is the "main idea" - everything in the text should work together to help communicate that idea

Some common themes include:
- The only person you can truly trust is yourself
- It is important to follow your instincts
- Man is inherently evil
- Man is inherently good
- Human beings are products of their society
- The innocent aren't always treated fairly
- It is important to stand up for what you believe in
- Working as a team is more powerful than working alone
- Trust your instincts
- Do what you must to survive
- Life doesn't always have happy endings

Other Terms

Foreshadowing: A technique in which the author provides clues about events that may happen later in the story.

Irony: A contradiction between what happens and what is expected to happen.

Suspense: The feeling of growing tension, excitement, and anticipation felt by the reader as the plot develops.

Symbol: An object, action, person, or place that represents an abstract idea.

Flashback: A scene that takes the narrative back in time from the current point in the story (looking back at events that have already occurred).