

ANATOMY OF A SHORT STORY

WLOV – 9.7.2016

Short Story - Definitions

- **Short story**, brief fictional prose narrative that is shorter than a novel and that usually deals with only a few characters.¹
 - A single effect conveyed in only one or a few significant episodes or scenes.
 - Economy of **setting**
 - Concise **narrative**
 - The omission of a complex **plot**;
 - **Character** disclosed in action and dramatic encounter but is seldom fully developed.
 - ¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, On-line

Short Story - Setting

- **Setting**—in literature, the location and time frame in which the action of a narrative takes place.

The makeup and behavior of fictional characters often depend on their environment quite as much as on their personal characteristics.

Short Story - Narrative

➤ Definition:

- Narrative: a spoken or written account of connected events; a story:
- Synonyms: account, chronicle, history, description, record
- A **narrative** can be a work of poetry or prose, or even song, theater, or dance.

Short Story - Plot

- **Plot**, in fiction, the structure of interrelated actions, consciously selected and arranged by the author.

E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927):

- A story is a “narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence,”
- A plot organizes the events according to a “sense of causality.”

A Little history, please

Short Story – Plot: A Little History

- Primary importance to plot (mythos) as the “soul” of a tragedy
- Mechanical function
- Term degraded to an outline thought to exist apart from any particular work The publication of books of “basic plots” brought plot to its lowest esteem.
- 20th century – redefinition of plot.
 - i.e., plot is the author’s control of the reader’s emotional responses to the story.

Short Story - Character

- Definition: The people who inhabit your stories
- Compelling Characters are internally consistent yet capable of surprise.
- Fully realized characters have:
 - A driving need, Desire, Ambition or Goal
 - A secret
 - A Contradiction
 - Vulnerability

Short Story – Elements:

- Story Arc
- Characters
- Descriptive Language
- Switch Conventions
- Last Word

Short Story – Elements:

➤ **Story Arc**

- The backbone of any storyline—a way to express the rise and fall of emotions, frequency of events, and their impact on the protagonist and reader.
- **Exercise:** Draw a chart of the emotional rise and fall of your narrative.. Taken as a whole, each peak should be a bit higher than the previous one. The closer you get to the end of the story the shorter the distance between peaks, until finally you get to a sharply pointed mountain higher than all the rest—a mountain whose far side plunges almost to the level of the start. After that the line levelled off briefly and stopped. Emphasis on briefly.
- Try charting your latest story. And, if you have the nerve, get a fellow-writer to chart the same story and compare peaks

Short Story – Elements:

- Characters – you need only 1-3
 - You may reveal a great deal about the main characters but virtually nothing physical about the other characters. For these, confine details to personality traits, motives. But only the essentials.
- **Lesson:** Reserve detailed description for the main actors. Even then, a rigorous self-editing may eliminate the mundane ID info—eye color, hair color. In most stories such detail merely drags down the pace of the plot.

Short Story – Elements:

➤ **Descriptive Language**

- In good short stories you will find no awkward over-writing.
- Where lesser writers use prepositional phrases, great writers choose exact, vibrant adjectives.

➤ **Lesson:**

- Avoid metaphor if it doesn't come naturally.
- Don't force imagery. If your phrase sounds like, "Lachrymose March sloshed into a soggy April," delete it. Quick!
- If your phrase sounds like Stephen King's "a sleet-thickened wind slapped at the house", smile and continue.

Short Story – Elements:

➤ Switch Conventions

- Begin with narrative and conversation followed by narrative within a conversation. It can be tricky to keep all the quote marks in order for a long quoted tale. Especially if there are additional quotes within quotes. That can be a quagmire for typos.
- Break from the quoted conversation. Use an omniscient third-party narrator tells us the family's history. When the events reach the present, we rejoin the conversation. But be careful doing this with short stories that are 3,000 words or less.
- **Lesson:** Don't be afraid to switch narrative conventions in order to be clear. Draw a line before and after this third-party narration. The reader knows just where he is.

Short Story – Elements:

➤ Last Word

- Forget Word Count. CWN's contest limits authors to 3000 words. King's "Cookie Jar" has 8367!

➤ Lesson:

- Write your story to say what you want to say. Let it simmer in your brain for a while. Return to the manuscript and proof, edit, crop vigorously, read aloud. Only when it sounds right, check the word count in the bottom left corner of the monitor.
- Longer than 3000 words? So be it. When you reach absolute zero "fluff", regardless of the total, type ###. Find a competition or magazine that accepts your story length. Can you imagine "Cookie Jar" with 5367 words chopped out? Read it and decide for yourself, but I can't!