

Introduction to Fiction

The Telling of the Tale

The memory begins with a scene like this: the circle contains about thirty boys and girls, all in their preteen years and dressed identically in khaki shorts and t-shirts, who sit on upended sections of logs around a leaping fire. The sun has just dropped beneath the rim of a nearby mountain, and a hint of damp chill steals into the August woods. It is the last night of camp, and they have gathered to sing songs and receive awards. Now one of the counselors, a college student who could pass for an older brother of any of the campers, puts away his guitar and nods to his colleague, a young woman who steps into the ring of firelight and begins to speak. "Many, many years ago," she begins, her solemn voice describing three characters—a brave warrior, a maiden with a beautiful, silvery laugh, a wolf cub raised as a pet—"on a night not too different from this. . . ." The surrounding woods seem to grow darker as the campers lean forward toward the rise and fall of her voice and the blaze of the flames. Caught in the spell of her words, they have momentarily left television, video games, and MP3 players behind, enacting one of the human race's oldest rituals as they respond to the simple magic of the storyteller's art.

Before we can begin to examine the elements of literary fiction we must bear in mind that literature in its written form is historically a recent innovation; indeed, its two most common modern forms, the short story and the novel, have been in existence for little more than two centuries. Yet long before the invention of writing, for thousands of years ancient peoples developed complex oral traditions of literature; these

primitive stories, dealing with the creation of the cosmos and the origins of gods and goddesses, formed a body of **myths**, supernatural narratives widely believed to be true by the people of a given culture, and **legends**, popular stories about characters and events that may contain trace elements of historical truth. Even in modern societies elements of this primitive folklore survive in regional or ethnic tales passed on through the generations, most often taking the written form of **folk tales** collected by literary scholars; **fairy tales**, like Charles Perrault's "Beauty and the Beast" or Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid"; **beast fables**, stories with animal characters such as those of Aesop (c. 550 BC) or Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908); or **parables**, short realistic tales like those found in the Gospels. Many of these, especially the fables and parables, are to some degree **didactic**, with the narrative events illustrating a **moral** that is either stated or implied.

Even in modern societies other ancient forms of oral literature still enjoy a good state of health. These include **anecdotes**, accounts of single incidents usually involving a well-known person, and **riddles** and **jokes** of all types, which often seem to spring into circulation overnight and often unwittingly mirror the basic situations and coarse humor of venerable **fabliaux**—short, realistic tales from the Middle Ages that often turn on a bawdy situation. Recently, much attention has been given to **urban legends**, so named by folklorist Jan Brunvand, which are short narratives involving grotesque incidents that are widely accepted as true. The title of one of Dr. Brunvand's collections, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, refers to a ghost tale that many Americans have heard in one of its many versions.

When myths and legends are assembled around the exploits of a great hero, the result is the **folk epic**, a long narrative in elevated style that is generally considered a starting point for any culture's literary history. Like most types of oral folk literature, epics were originally composed in verse for the sake of memorization, but they otherwise contain the same elements as modern literary forms like the short story and novel. For example, the individual episodes of Homer's *Odyssey*—such as Odysseus outwitting the Cyclops or his adventures with the sorceress Circe—can stand alone as exciting tales and also can fit into the larger structure of the epic, like chapters in a novel. Later authors, living in societies that had invented writing, consciously imitated the style of folk epics in composing literary epics; the *Aeneid* by Virgil (70–19 BC) and *The Divine Comedy* by Dante (1265–1321) are two famous examples. In the Middle Ages **romances**, written in both verse and prose, gained great popularity among all social classes. These tales of chivalry involving a knightly hero and a series of exciting, if improbable, adventures

were ridiculed by Cervantes (1547–1616) in *Don Quixote*, a realistic account of an impoverished Spanish gentleman driven mad by reading too many romances. The eventual form that Cervantes gave Don Quixote's adventures was perhaps influenced by picaresque novels like the anonymous *Lazarillo of Tormes* (c. 1450), which involved a young orphan (or *pícaro*, Spanish for “rascal”) in a series of loosely connected adventures. These picaresque tales are rightly considered the ancestors of modern realistic fiction. Many novels, from Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, borrow their structure from the picaresque novel, and the modern short story is indebted to its often stark level of realism.

The Short Story

There is no agreement on the precise origins of the modern short story. One important influence in its development was the Italian *novella* of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. The most famous collection of these realistic prose narratives is *The Decameron* by Boccaccio (1313–1375). *The Decameron*, in which the individual stories are narrated by young men and women who have taken to the country to escape a plague, is an example of a *frame tale*, in which the stories are “framed” by a larger narrative. The famous Arabian collection *A Thousand and One Nights* is one of the earliest examples of this genre (brilliantly resurrected here by Tim Gautreaux in “Died and Gone to Vegas” and likewise the structure of films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Magnolia*). In translation these tales were popular in other countries and widely imitated. In writing his plays, Shakespeare frequently borrowed from Italian writers; his tragedy *Othello* takes its plot from a sensational novella by Giraldi Cinthio. We still use the term *novella* for short stories that are long enough (usually over 15,000 words) to be published separately in book form. Count Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is a classic Russian example, and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is one of the best known novellas in American literature.

The first half of the nineteenth century is the great period of the growth of the short story as a distinct literary genre, or type, and its rise takes place in many countries at roughly the same time. Many reasons for this rapid development could be put forth, but perhaps the most important was the literary market established by newspapers and magazines aimed at middle-class audiences. The United States, with its increasingly high rate of literacy and expanding middle class, led the way in this period; Washington Irving's tales like “Rip Van Winkle” and

"The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" were among the first American writings to attain international popularity. Edgar Allan Poe, the first great theorist of the short story and one of its notable practitioners in this period, supported himself primarily (although not very prosperously) as a magazine editor and contributor, and thus had a large personal stake in promoting short fiction. Poe's influential review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842 first stated the theory that a short story ought to be a unified artistic creation, as carefully shaped as a sonnet.

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sequence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction.

This idea of the *single effect* is perhaps Poe's most important contribution to the development of the short story as a serious literary genre.

Most of Hawthorne's and Poe's stories are perhaps more properly termed tales, if by that term we mean narratives that contain elements which are exotic or supernatural and which depart from the level of ordinary experience. Poe himself established many of the conventions of the horror, science fiction, and detective tales still being written and read today. Formula fiction, which rigidly follow the clichés and conventions of a particular genre, is sometimes half-affectionately called **pulp fiction**, a reminder of the low-grade paper once used in inexpensive magazines. Still, the tale remains a lively tradition among serious artists as well. Among the contemporary stories collected in this volume, selections by Borges, Jackson, Faulkner, Oates, and others show their debt to the tradition of the tale.

The short story continued to develop in the nineteenth century, and its evolution was part of the larger literary movement of **realism**, which profoundly influenced the arts in the middle years of the nineteenth century with its "slice of life" approach to subject matter that, in early centuries, would have been deemed inappropriate for serious treatment. It has been rightly noted that realism simply represents the effect

of democracy on literary history. Celebrating its appearance as early as 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson noted, "The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time." Naturalism, an outgrowth of realism that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, also proved influential because it joined realistic treatments of everyday life with understandings of human behavior drawn from the new sciences of psychology and sociology. Both realism and naturalism remain vital currents in contemporary short fiction, as stories here by Raymond Carver, Alice Walker, and Bobbie Ann Mason will attest.

The twentieth century saw the short story rise to its highest level of popularity and just as rapidly decline in its influence as a literary form. During the first half of the century, when many magazines like *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post* paid large sums for short stories by important authors, the genre flourished. F. Scott Fitzgerald, a frequent contributor to these magazines, kept a meticulous ledger in which he noted that, in one six-month period in 1922-1923, he earned over \$15,000 from magazine sales alone. A decade later, in the depths of the depression, Fitzgerald complained that stories that earlier would have sold for prices in excess of \$4000 now commanded only \$2500. If these amounts do not seem exorbitant, remember that we are talking about times when a new automobile sold for under \$1000 and a gallon of gasoline cost a dime! Today, when virtually every college in the country employs one or more writers-in-residence whose primary income comes not from publishing but from teaching, we tend perhaps to underestimate the impact that economic realities have had on the history of literature.

In the second half of the century, many of the established magazines that regularly ran serious fiction ceased publication. Search a typical magazine rack and you will find only one weekly magazine, *The New Yorker*, and a handful of monthlies containing short stories. Reading tastes have changed, and increased competition from television and other forms of entertainment have made the writing of short stories an expensive pastime. Still, the pages of so-called little magazines and literary quarterlies continue to provide outlets for publication, and new writers seem undeterred by the prospect of being paid with little more than what one disgruntled writer has called "two free copies of what I've already got." Almost every writer of short fiction prominent today first appeared in small-circulation periodicals of this type, and many have continued to publish in magazines that can offer, instead of money, prestige and a discriminating readership numbering

in the hundreds. Indeed, the little magazines traditionally have been hospitable to many kinds of **experimental fiction** that editors of commercial magazines would never have considered. Also, recent decades have seen a rise in so-called “**short-short**” stories or “**flash fiction**.” If the quantity of contemporary short fiction being published has shrunk from what it was in prior decades, the quality, one might argue, has remained the same or even improved. When we look at lists of recent winners of the Pulitzer or Nobel prizes, we discover many writers who have counted the short story as their first home.

Reading and Analyzing Short Fiction

We read for many reasons. In our daily lives most of our reading is strictly utilitarian—it is part of our jobs or education—or informational, as we scan the headlines of a daily newspaper for current events, business trends, or sports scores. We read short stories and other types of fiction for differing reasons. Sometimes our motive is simply to be entertained and to pass the time. Reading matter of this type is usually termed **escapist literature** and includes such popular categories as romance and detective novels, science fiction tales, westerns, and gothic novels. Or we might consciously choose to read “inspirational” fiction that is obviously didactic and contains messages or moral lessons that apply to our own lives. Literary reading, however, occupies a position between the two extremes. Serious literature should certainly entertain us, but on a deeper level than, say, a half-hour episode of a television comedy show does. Similarly, it may also contain an ethical theme with which we can identify, even if it does not try to “preach” its moral message to the reader. A short story that we can treat as a serious work of art will not yield all of its subtlety at first glance; in order to understand and appreciate its author’s achievement fully we may have to examine its components—its plot, characterization, point of view, theme, setting, and style and symbolism—noting how each part contributes to the story’s overall effect. With that purpose in mind, let us read a very brief example by a modern American master of the genre, John Cheever’s “Reunion” (p. 213).

Plot

In his discussion of tragedy in the *Poetics*, Aristotle (384–322 BC) gives first importance to plot as an element of a play, and most readers would agree that it holds a similar position in a work of fiction. Indeed,

if we tell a friend about a short story we have enjoyed we will probably give a **synopsis** or brief summary of its incidents. In the case of a very brief story like "Reunion," this synopsis is only a few sentences long:

In "Reunion" the narrator, a teenaged boy traveling by train, meets his estranged father during a stop for lunch in New York City. Over the course of an hour and a half, the father's alcoholism and potentially abusive personality are revealed. The story ends with the narrator boarding his train, indicating that this was the last time he saw his father, possibly by choice.

Plot may be defined as a story's sequence of incidents, arranged in dramatic order. One is tempted to insert the word "chronological," but doing so would exclude many stories that depart from this strict ordering of events. Although its use is more characteristic in longer works like novels, many stories employ the **flashback** to narrate incidents in the past. William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" begins with the funeral of the title character and then goes back in time to relate events that occurred as many as fifty years earlier. Margaret Atwood's "Happy Endings" dispenses with a single plot line entirely, offering numerous possibilities for the fates of her characters. Conversely, writers sometimes use **foreshadowing** to provide hints of future actions in the story; an effective use of foreshadowing prevents a story's outcome from seeming haphazard or contrived. Of course, the manner in which stories handle time is largely illusory. During scenes with dialogue and action, time is slowed down by descriptive and explanatory phrases. At other times, stories cover gaps in chronology or leap over uneventful periods with transitional phrases and passages; the opening sentence of the second paragraph of "Reunion" ("We went out of the station and up a side street to a restaurant.") compresses into a second or two an action that in reality would have taken at least several minutes. Even though "Reunion" does not take serious liberties with chronological time as we experience it, the ninety minutes of action in the story is compressed into about ten minutes of the reader's time. A plot like this, in which the action is more or less continuous within a single day, is called a **unified plot**; one that stretches over weeks or even longer periods and thus consists of isolated scenes connected by a thin tissue of transitional devices is called an **episodic plot**.

When we speak of the **dramatic structure** of a story, we refer to the exact way in which our emotional involvement in its plot is increased

and relaxed. As Janet Burroway observes of the short story in *Writing Fiction*, “Only trouble is interesting.” If we are not quickly engaged by the situation of a story and caught up in its plot, then we pronounce the cruellest of all critical verdicts on it by closing the book. The first part of this dramatic structure is the **exposition**, which provides the reader with essential information—who, what, when, where—he or she needs to know before continuing. Although writers of sophisticated fiction may try to disguise the fact, they often begin their stories with a version of the “Once upon a time” opening common to fairy tales. A variation on this type of beginning, called the *in medias res* (“in the middle of things”) opening after the conventions of the old epic poems, may actually open with a “blind” bit of action before supplying its context. The exposition of “Reunion” is fairly straightforward; in the first paragraph we learn who (Charlie and his father), what (a lunchtime meeting between trains), when (noon to 1:30 PM), and where (in and near Grand Central Station in Manhattan). Cheever might have begun the story with a slightly more “dramatic” sentence (“At twelve o’clock sharp I saw him coming through the crowd.”), but he would have to have provided the essential contextual information in short order to avoid unnecessarily confusing the reader.

Exposition in a story usually describes a stable situation, even if it is not an entirely happy one. Charlie tells us that his parents’ divorce is three years old and that he has not seen his father in that time. If he had not taken the step of writing the letter arranging the “reunion,” that state of affairs might have gone on indefinitely. The appearance of “trouble” constitutes the second part of a plot, the **complication**, which is the appearance of some circumstance or event that shakes up the stable situation and begins the **rising action** of the story. Complication in a story may be either external and internal, or a combination of the two. A stroke of fortune such as illness or accident that affects a character is a typical example of an external complication, a problem that the character cannot ignore. An internal complication, in contrast, may not be immediately apparent, for it may result from a character’s deep-seated uncertainties, dissatisfactions, and fears. The external complication in “Reunion” is the father’s series of confrontations with waiters; the internal complication is Charlie’s growing sense of pity and revulsion. Typically, the complication of a plot is heightened by **conflict** between two characters who have different personalities and goals. Charlie is overjoyed to see his father at the beginning of the story but, despite his knowledge that he will grow up to “be something like him,” he is more

than eager to escape his company at the end, even if he is unconsciously trying to run away from his own “future and . . . doom.”

The body of a story is called the rising action and usually contains a number of scenes, containing action and dialogue, which build to **moments of crisis**, points in the story where a resolution of the complication momentarily seems at hand but quickly disappears. Aristotle used the term *peripety* for these moments of reversal, as the hopes of the characters rise and fall. Thus, in “Reunion” all that needs to be resolved, at least on the surface, is for the characters to order lunch, eat, and return in time for the departing train. The father’s increasingly obnoxious behavior, however, keeps postponing this resolution until the reunion has turned from a happy occasion to something very different. Unlike most stories, “Reunion” has a rising action as rigidly structured as a joke, with its four similar restaurant scenes that gradually escalate in absurdity as the father’s senseless rage increases.

The central moment of crisis in a plot is the **climax**, or moment of greatest tension, which inaugurates the **falling action** of the story, in which the built-up tension is finally released. Some stories, particularly those involving a heavy use of suspense, have a steep “dramatic curve,” and the writer uses all of his or her skills to impel the reader toward the final confrontation. Among writers included in this anthology, Edgar Allan Poe is the master of this kind of plot construction, as thousands of readers who have observed the struggles of the protagonist of “The Pit and the Pendulum” to escape the steadily descending blade will attest. Often one encounters the **trick ending** (also called the **O. Henry ending** after the pen name of William Sidney Porter, a popular writer of the late nineteenth century). A climax such as this depends on a quick reversal of the situation from an unexpected source; its success is always relative to the degree to which the reader is surprised when it occurs. More typically, modern short stories instead rely on climactic devices that are somewhat subtler than unexpected plot twists. Many modern writers have followed James Joyce’s lead in building not to a climactic event but to a moment of spiritual insight or revelation, what Joyce termed an **epiphany**. Epiphanies can take many forms, from an overheard chance remark that seems significant in the context of the story to a character’s unpitied gaze at himself in a mirror. In the hands of a melodramatic writer insistent on sentimental happy endings “Reunion” might have concluded with Charlie delivering a “tough love” sermon to his father, who would then fall to his knees and beg his son’s forgiveness, having seen the error of his ways. Cheever’s more realistic

method of climax is, in this case, to avoid the confrontation altogether as Charlie escapes to his train.

The final part of a plot is the *dénouement*, or resolution. The French term literally refers to the untying of a knot, and we might compare the emotional release of a story's ending to a piece of cloth that has been twisted tighter and tighter and is then untwisted as the action winds down. The *dénouement* returns the characters to another stable situation. Just as fairy tales traditionally end with "And they lived happily ever after," many stories conclude with an indication of what the future holds for the characters. In the case of "Reunion," we return to the estrangement between Charlie and his father that existed at the beginning of the story, although this time all indications are that it will be a permanent one. A story's *dénouement* may be termed either closed or open. A **closed** *dénouement* ties up everything neatly and explains all unanswered questions the reader might have; a typical example is the "Elementary, my dear Watson" explanation of any remaining loose ends that is provided by the sleuth Sherlock Holmes in the final paragraphs of Arthur Conan Doyle's famous tales. An **open** *dénouement* leaves us with a few tantalizing questions; the last phrase of "Reunion," which consciously mirrors the story's opening sentence, does not explicitly state *why* Charlie never sees his father again. Was it strictly his own choice? Did the father die soon after their meeting? Were other factors involved? We do not know, of course, and such an ending invites us to speculate.

One final word about plots: The fledgling writer attempting to invent a totally original plot is doomed to failure, and it is no exaggeration to say that there is nothing (or at least not much) new under the sun where plots of short stories are concerned. Plots may be refurbished with new characters and settings, but they still draw on what psychologist Carl Jung called **archetypes**, universal types of characters and situations that all human beings carry in their unconscious mind. Plots deriving from these archetypes may be found in ancient mythologies, fairy tales, and even in contemporary fiction. Among a few of the most familiar are the triangle plot, a love story involving three people; the quest plot, which is unified around a group of characters on a journey; and the transformation plot, in which a weak or physically unattractive character changes radically in the course of the story. "Reunion" is an example of one of the most widely used of all archetypal plots, the initiation story. In a plot of this type, the main character, usually a child or adolescent, undergoes an experience (or rite of passage) that prepares him or her for adulthood.

In this book such stories as John Updike's "A & P" and Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" share the same archetype, although they differ in almost every other respect.

Characterization

Every story hinges on the actions undertaken by its main character, or **protagonist**, a term drawn from ancient Greek tragedy (literally "first debater") that is more useful in discussions of fiction than such misleading terms as hero or heroine. Additionally, stories may contain an opposing character, or **antagonist**, with whom the protagonist is drawn into conflict. In many modern stories there is little, in any traditional sense, that is heroic about the protagonists; it may be more accurate to use a negative term, **anti-hero**, to designate one who occupies center stage but otherwise seems incapable of fitting the traditional heroic mold. Indeed, writers of the last century have often been so reluctant to seem didactic in presenting characters that are "moral beacons" that they go to the opposite extreme in presenting protagonists whom we regard with pity or even disgust, rather than with admiration.

A character in a short story may be termed either a **flat character** or a **round character**, depending on the depth of detail the writer supplies. In "Reunion," the father is essentially a flat character, rendered with a few quick strokes of the pen and reduced to a single personality trait, his alcoholic rudeness. Flat minor characters in stories are often **stock characters**, stereotypes who may be necessary to advance the plot but otherwise are not deserving of more than the barest outlines of description. Round characters are given more than one trait, some of which may even seem contradictory, and are explored in depth as the author delves into the character's past and even into his or her unconscious mind. Characters of this type, usually a story's protagonist, begin to approach the level of complexity that we associate with real human beings.

Development and **motivation** are also important in any consideration of a story's characters. Characters can be either **static** or **dynamic** depending on the degree to which they change in the course of the story. In "Reunion," the father is a static character. His personality was fixed long before the story opens, and there seems no likelihood that he will ever alter his course. But Charlie does attain some understanding in the course of the story, even if it is at the cost of his own disillusionment with what he wants his father to be. If development in a character is usually clear in a story, then motivation—the reasons the reader is

given for a character's actions—may not be so obvious. In many cases, an author will simply tell us what is going on in a character's mind, but in others we are denied access to this level of understanding. Although we can speculate, playing the amateur psychiatrist, about Charlie's father's strange behavior, we are not given any direct insight into his own view of his actions. In some stories, writers may try to plug directly into a character's thoughts by using *interior monologue*, a direct presentation of thought that is somewhat like a soliloquy in drama, or *stream-of-consciousness*, an attempt to duplicate raw sensory data in the same disordered state that the mind receives it. As useful as these last two devices can be in explaining motivation, they sometimes place excessive demands on readers' patience, for they require sifting through a jumble of thoughts and impressions whose significance is unclear.

Description of characters also helps us to understand the author's intent. In real life we are told from an early age not to judge people by external appearance, but in fiction the opposite is more often the case: Physical description is invariably a sign of what lurks beneath the surface. Given the brevity of most short stories, these physical details may be minimal but revealing in the author's choice of particulars. Cheever has Charlie describe his father at first as only "a big, good-looking man." Remarkably, the author then uses his protagonist's sense of smell to make the character vivid: Charlie breathes in "a rich compound of whiskey, after-shave lotion, shoe polish, woolens, and the rankness of a mature male." In that burst of imagery we may momentarily overlook the most important item in the list, the evidence that Charlie's father has been drinking in the morning. Other elements may add to our understanding of its characters. Many writers take particular care in naming their characters in such a way as to draw attention to aspects of their personalities. This device (often termed *characteronym*) is sometimes obvious—as with Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown and his wife Faith—and sometimes not; in "Good Country People," Flannery O'Connor calls an unscrupulous seducer Manley Pointer, a name that a moment's thought reveals as an outrageous pun. Similarly, actions in the story such as speech patterns and mannerisms may also disclose personality traits. A character's misuse of grammar or stilted vocabulary can *show* us a great deal more about his or her background and self-image than a whole page of background information or analysis. Charlie's father's gestures and loud attempts at ordering in various foreign languages grow more embarrassing until his tongue-tied request for two "Bibson Geefeaters" (a "Beefeater Gibson" is a potent martini made from a well-known brand of gin) comes as the punch line to a grotesque joke on himself.

Point of View

When we speak of a politician's **point of view** on an issue we mean his or her attitude toward it, pro or con. In fiction, however, the term point of view is employed in a specialized sense, referring to the question of *authority* in the story. Every story has a **narrator**, a voice that provides the reader with information about and insight into characters and incidents; but in some cases the identity of this voice of authority is not immediately apparent. The narrative voice may be that of a character in the story, or it may come from outside the story. Being too literal-minded about the matter of point of view usually is a mistake, and we usually have to accept certain **narrative conventions** without questioning them too seriously if we are to enjoy reading stories. Thus, when we finish reading a detective story narrated by the sleuth himself, we do not worry ourselves speculating about when such a busy character found time to jot down the events of the story. Similarly, we accept as a convention the fact that a narrator may suddenly jump from simply recording a conversation to telling us what one of its participants is thinking. Very early in our lives we learn how stories are told, just as we have been conditioned to make a mental transition while watching a movie, when our perspective shifts in the blink of an eye from one character's frightened stare, to the flashing barrel of a gun, to a hand clutching a chest, to another character's sneer of triumph.

Almost all narrative points of view can be classified as either first-person or third-person. In **first-person narration**, the narrator is a **participant** in the action. He or she may be either a major character (which is the case with Charlie in "Reunion") or a minor character, who may be close to the event in time or distant from it. Although it is never directly stated, it seems likely that the adult Charlie is narrating an account of something that happened years before; thus, his repeated phrase about the last time he saw his father has a finality about it that goes far beyond a simple statement like "The last time I saw my father was a week ago in Grand Central Station." In general, first-person stories may seem more immediate than third-person stories, but they are limited by the simple fact that the narrator must be present at all times and must also have some knowledge of what is going on. If, for example, an attempt had been made to tell "Reunion" from the point of view of one of the restaurant waiters, the narrator might have had to resort to eavesdropping on Charlie and his father in order to report their circumstances. The ability of the narrator to tell the story accurately is also important. An **unreliable narrator**, either through naïvete, ignorance, or impaired mental processes, relates events in

such a distorted manner that the reader, who has come to recognize the narrator's unreliability, literally has to turn the character's reporting on its head to make sense. Imagine how we would read "Reunion" if it had been told from the boozy, self-deluding point of view of Charlie's father.

Third-person narration, by definition, employs a *nonparticipant* narrator, a voice of authority that never reveals its source and is capable of moving from place to place to describe action and report dialogue. In third-person stories the question of reliability is rarely an issue, but the matter of **omniscience**, the degree to which the "all-knowing" narrator can reveal the thoughts of characters, is. **Total omniscience** means that the narrator knows everything about the characters' lives—their pasts, presents, and futures—and may reveal the thoughts of anyone in the story. An **editorial point of view** goes even farther, allowing the god-like author to comment directly on the action (also called **authorial intrusion**).

Most contemporary authors avoid total omniscience in short fiction, perhaps sensing that a story's strength is dissipated if more than one perspective is used. Instead, they employ **limited omniscience**, also called **selective omniscience** or the **method of central intelligence**, thereby limiting themselves to the thoughts and perceptions of a single character. This point of view is perhaps the most flexible of all because it allows the writer to compromise between the immediacy of first-person narration and the mobility of third-person narration. A further departure from omniscience is the **dramatic point of view** (also called the **objective point of view**). Here the narrator simply reports dialogue and action with minimal interpretation and does not delve into characters' minds. As the name implies, the dramatic point of view approximates the experience of reading a play; readers are provided only with set descriptions, stage directions, and dialogue, and thus must supply motivations that are based solely on this external evidence.

Technically, other points of view are possible, although they are rarely used. Stories have been told in the second person—note the use of the imperative verbs and an implied "you" in Lorrie Moore's "How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)." A plural point of view also may be employed (William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is one example), but such points of view are difficult to sustain and may quickly prove distracting to readers. Also, there is an unwritten rule that point of view should be consistent throughout a story, although occasionally a writer may utilize multiple perspectives to illustrate how the "truth" of any incident is always relative to the way in which it is witnessed.

Theme

We have already discussed the manner in which fables and other types of didactic literature make their purpose clear by explicitly stating a moral or interpretation at the end of the story. Literary fiction, however, is usually much more subtle in revealing its **theme**, the overall meaning the reader derives from the story. Most of the early reading we did as children probably fell into two distinct categories—sheer entertainment or overt didacticism—with very little middle ground. Thus, many readers, coming to serious fiction for the first time, want either to avoid the tedious search for a “message” or to complain, “If the author was trying to say that then why didn’t she just come right out and say it!” To further complicate matters, the theoretical manner in which we analyze stories and the preconceptions we bring to bear on them may result in multiple interpretations of meaning. No single statement of theme is likely to be the “correct” one, although it is fair to say that some seem more likely than others.

What, then, is the theme of “Reunion”? A reader insistent on a moral might denounce Charlie’s father, inveighing against “demon rum” and its destructive effect on “family values.” Another reader, slightly more charitable, might recognize alcoholism as a disease and feel some amount of sympathy for the father. Yet another, perhaps entirely too self-righteous, might fault Charlie for running away from his father, interpreting the older man’s actions as a subconscious cry for help. If we investigate Cheever’s own troubled biography and note his own serious problems with both parenthood and alcoholism, we may read the story as a psychological confession, with Cheever himself simultaneously playing the roles of father and son. With so many possibilities before us, it is perhaps best to summarize a story’s theme broadly:

“Reunion,” like most initiation stories, is about growth through loss of innocence. Children have to learn, often through painful experience, that they are not responsible for their parents’ well-being, and sometimes they must distance themselves from their parents in order to survive.

Such a statement does not encompass every possible nuance of the story’s theme, but it does at least provide us with a starting point for arguing about the finer points of Cheever’s meanings.

Still, many modern authors are not always reticent about revealing their themes. A moralist like Flannery O'Connor perceives her characters' shortcomings and judges them according to her own Roman Catholic moral standards. Alice Walker has tackled social themes like female genital mutilation in her fiction. Margaret Atwood's feminism is rarely hidden in her stories and poems. Many modern stories are in fact allegorical tales, in which the literal events point to a parallel sequence of symbolic ideas. In many stories the literal setting of the story, a doctor's waiting room, for example, or a crowded city bus, is a *microcosm*, a "small world" that reflects the tensions of the larger world outside. Thus, despite their outward sophistication, many of the stories included here reveal their debt to the ancient ethical functions of fables and parables.

Setting

Novelists can lavish pages of prose on details of setting, just as they can describe characters down to such minutiae as the contents of their pockets. But short story writers, hemmed in by limitations of space, rarely have such luxury and must ordinarily limit themselves to very selective descriptions of time and place. When a writer like Edgar Allan Poe goes into great detail in his descriptions (for example, in the opening sentences of "The Fall of the House of Usher") it is likely that *atmosphere*, the emotional aura surrounding a certain setting, is more important to him than the actual physical locale.

Setting is simply the time and place of a story, and in most cases the details of description are given to the reader directly by the narrator. A story may employ multiple locations in its different scenes, and its time frame may encompass a few hours or many years. "Reunion" is a story with relatively few details of setting. Because Cheever wrote his stories almost exclusively for *The New Yorker*, it is not necessary for him to describe the interior of Grand Central Station to an audience doubtless familiar with it; excessive details here would probably be irrelevant. Similarly, he spends no more than a sentence or two describing each of the restaurants: One has "a lot of horse tack on the walls," one is "Italian," and the other two are not described at all. The time setting is also relatively unimportant here. We know that the action is taking place during the lunch hour on a weekday, probably in the summer, but as far as a more specific time is concerned, we know little or nothing. "Reunion" could be taking place today or fifty years ago or, for that matter, twenty years from now.

Some stories, however, depend on their *locale* or time setting much more heavily and thus demand fuller exposition of setting. **Historical**

fiction usually pays great attention to the altered landscapes and customs of bygone eras. A writer who carelessly lets an alarm clock go off in a story set in the early 1800s has committed an anachronism that may be only slightly more obvious than another writer's use of contemporary slang in the same setting. **Local color fiction** depends heavily on the unique characteristics of a particular area, usually a rural one that is off the beaten path. Such places have become increasingly rare in contemporary America, but the deep South and Alaska still provide locales that possess intrinsic interest. Some southern writers, like William Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor, first established their reputations as practitioners of **regionalism**, setting most of their work in a particular area or country. A recent American writer like Bobbie Ann Mason reveals in virtually every one of the stories in her first collection, *Shiloh and Other Stories*, her deep roots in her native Kentucky. A South American writer like Gabriel García Márquez continually draws us into the strange world of Colombian villages cut off from the contemporary world, places where past and present, history and folklore, natural and supernatural, seamlessly join in what has been labeled **magic realism**.

Stories contain both specific and general settings. The specific setting is the precise time(s) and place(s) where the action takes place. The general setting of a story, what is called its **enveloping action**, is its sense of the "times" and how its characters interact with events and social currents in the larger world. We have already mentioned how the specific setting of a story often is a microcosm that reflects the doings of society at large. It is impossible to read stories by Flannery O'Connor or Alice Walker and not be made aware of the social changes that have transformed the rural South in the last thirty years. Stories sometimes depend on readers' ability to bring their knowledge of history and culture to bear on the events taking place. In reading a story like Ralph Ellison's "A Party Down at the Square," younger readers may be unaware of the widespread horrors of lynchings in an America that older readers can painfully recall.

Style and Symbol

Style in fiction refers equally to the characteristics of language in a particular story and to the same characteristics in a writer's complete works. The more individual a writer's style is, the easier it is to write a parody, or satirical imitation, of it, as the well-publicized annual "Faux Faulkner" and "International Imitation Hemingway" contests attest. A detailed analysis of the style in an individual story might include attention to such

matters as diction, sentence structure, punctuation (or the lack thereof), and use of figurative language. In English we usually make a distinction between the differing qualities of words—standard versus slang usage, Latinate versus Germanic vocabulary, abstract versus concrete diction, and so on. While such matters are most meaningful only in the context of an individual story or an author's work in general, we can clearly see the difference between one character who says, "I have profited to a great degree from the educational benefits of the realm of experience," and another who says, "I graduated from the school of hard knocks." However, in analyzing style we must be sensitive to the literary fashions of periods other than our own; it is senseless to fault Poe for "flowery diction" when we compare his use of language to that of his contemporaries. The prevailing fashion in fiction today is for the unadorned starkness of writers like Bobbie Ann Mason and Raymond Carver, a type of literature that has been disparagingly called "K-Mart realism" by one critic. Still, one should not be surprised if, as we move forward in a new century, fashions shift and writers compete to outdo Faulkner at his most ornate.

The style of "Reunion" is for the most part straightforward, with few flourishes of vocabulary (if we except the foreign phrases) or sentence structure. About the only significant departure from this plain style is in the opening paragraph, where Charlie momentarily rises to a slightly elevated rhetorical plateau: "... as soon as I saw him I felt that he was my father, my flesh and blood, my future and my doom." The tone of the story, or what we can indirectly determine about the author's own feelings about its events from his choice of words, is also carefully controlled. Cheever avoids the twin pitfalls of sentimentality on the one hand and cynicism on the other by deftly walking an emotional tightrope. After the opening paragraph, at no point does Charlie tell us how he feels, instead letting his father's actions speak for themselves. There are points in "Reunion" where we may laugh, but it is an uncomfortable laugh at which we probably feel a little guilty. The possible tones available for use in any given story may run through the whole range of human emotions, from outright comedy or satirical contempt to pathos of the most wrenching sort. It is possible for an unwary reader to fail to appreciate the keen edge of Flannery O'Connor's irony or the profound skepticism of Jorge Luis Borges, but this failure should not be laid at the feet of the writers. Appreciation of a writer's tone of voice can often be difficult to master, coming only after the experience of reading a wide range of stories and comparing how irony may or may not be present in them.

Like tone of voice, symbolism in stories is often a troublesome affair for beginning readers, as is indicated by the oft-heard phrase “hidden meanings.” Are authors doing their best to conceal, rather than reveal, the significance of actions and things in their works? Usually they are not, but superficial reading of a story may barely scratch the surface of its full complexity. Symbolism may occur in any of the elements discussed above: A plot or character or setting may have some symbolic value. There is little heavy symbolism in “Reunion,” but if we think about the title, with its suggestions of emotional warmth, and the setting, a busy train station, we can see that Cheever has chosen his title carefully, and it has both ironic and symbolic overtones.

If the details of a plot seem consistently symbolic, with each detail clearly pointing the way to some obvious larger meaning, then we are reading *allegory*. An allegorical reading of Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” the first story in this collection, might focus on how the protagonist’s and his wife’s names represent untested virtue and religious fidelity, respectively, and how the dark forest mirrors the confusion of Brown’s soul. Many stories do not use symbolism in so obvious a way, however. In a given story, an author may employ a *traditional symbol*, a thing that most members of a culture instantly recognize as possessing a shared symbolic meaning. We may recognize a white gown or a red rose symbolizing, on the one hand, innocence and, on the other, romantic love without having to think very deeply about either. Familiarity with an individual author’s works may also help us to recognize a *private symbol*, a symbol that the author has made his or her own by repeated usage. To cite one example, Flannery O’Connor’s use of bursts of bright light generally herald some kind of dawning spiritual revelation in the mind of one of her characters. Another writer may use certain colors, situations, and actions repeatedly; it is hard to read much of Poe’s fiction without becoming aware of the personal horror that small, confined spaces represent for the author. Finally, we may identify an *incidental symbol* in a story. This may be a thing or action that ordinarily would have not deeper meaning but acquires one in a particular story. Paying close attention to the way an author repeats certain details or otherwise points to their significance is the key. Understanding what a symbol *means* is often less important than merely realizing that it *exists*. The exact meaning of an incidental symbol is usually open to interpretation and multiple interpretations of its implications do not necessarily contradict one another.