

UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE

To help understand literature, it's a good idea to know how it is constructed, how all the parts of the story work together. With this information, it becomes easy to understand, analyze, write about, and enjoy literature.

PLOT

The plot of a story is the story itself, the sequence of events that happen to make the story.

The **CONFLICT** is the key to the plot structure. The conflict is the struggle between two forces: the protagonist and the antagonist. The protagonist is the side in the struggle that you, the reader, would like to see win. The antagonist usually starts the struggle and is the side you, the reader, would like to see lose.

The protagonists and the antagonists are the main **CHARACTERS** of a story. The characters may be humans, animals, ideas, nations, monsters, and robots. So you may have humans vs. humans, a human vs. society, a human vs. nature, and on and on.

The conflict of a story makes the five parts of the plot:

1. **Exposition:** introduces the characters and conflict and provides a setting
2. **Rising Action:** elaborates on the conflict with either the protagonist or the antagonist winning
3. **Climax:** the point of highest tension in a story. Usually a turning point occurs in which something happens to cause the protagonist or the antagonist to win
4. **Falling Action:** the part of the story where the action slows down and it's obvious who the winner is even though the conflict may still be going on
5. **Resolution:** the conclusion of the story in which the conflict ends, or maybe it doesn't or maybe, ironically, it ends quite differently than you expected

There is always one major conflict in a story, but often there are minor conflicts caused by the major conflict.

THEME

The theme of the story is the reason why the author tells the story. It's the point the author wants to make about life in the real world. For example, the author may tell the story to point out that in life it takes courage to do something or that family loyalty is important. It's the reader's job to figure out the theme.

SETTING

Setting is the place or places that the story takes place. Often the setting has a lot to do with what happens in the story and why it happens. The setting may also create a **MOOD**, or the way the story makes the reader feel. The time in which the story takes place is also part of setting and may make a difference in how the plot unfolds and how the characters act and what they believe.

CHARACTERS

The characters of a story are the people, animals, machines, and societies who act and speak in the story. Each is very much a human being with his or her appearance, personalities, morals, beliefs, ways of associating with people and the world . . . Naturally the conflict and place and time within the story makes some difference about the kind of person the character is.

POINT OF VIEW

Point of view is the place the author is when the narrator tells the story.

1. **First Person Point of View:** The author plays a role in the story and tells the story as he/she experiences and understands what's happening.
2. **Third Person Point of View:** the author stands outside what's happening and reports what takes place.
3. **Omniscient Point of View:** the author not only tells the action of the plot, but also tells what's happening in the minds of the characters.
4. **Limited Omniscient Point of View:** the author tells the action and what takes place in the mind of one character.
5. **Objective Point of View:** the author just reports what takes place

SOME TECHNIQUES THAT AUTHORS USE TO TELL THEIR TALES

These techniques are used to help tell the story:

1. **Foreshadowing:** hints or clues in a story that suggest what will happen later in the story.
2. **Irony:** things are not always what they seem to be; the reader may expect one thing to happen but something quite different may occur; a surprise ending
3. **Imagery:** a combination of words used to affect one of the reader's five senses – smell, touch, hearing, taste, sight
4. **Figures of Speech:** make comparisons so description is clear
 - a. **Metaphor:** a suggested, implied, comparison. (The rose in her cheeks faded with the years.)
 - b. **Simile:** a direct comparison (Alice danced like a willow in the wind.)
 - c. **Personification:** an animal or object is described as a human (The wind sang through the alders.)
5. **Symbolism:** using an object, a person, a place, or an action to represent something else. (A wedding ring is round = never ending togetherness; the stars on the American flag = the states)