
UNIT 4 APPROPRIATE ENDING

Structure

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4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this Unit is to inform the learner about the nature and **kinds** of literary endings. By the end of this Unit you should become aware: —

of the meaning of 'ending' **in** the contexts of art and life; in both, an appropriate ending lends significance to their structure; even when **something** is begun, its value is **determined by** how it is going to end;

that there is no such thing as the standard ending; therefore, the numberless ways in which stories can end should be studied;

of the various kinds of endings, which are all basically determined by the nature of the material: the detective story, the formula story, and the mood and atmosphere story.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the concluding Unit on the structure of material. The preceding three units dealt with genesis of themes, the opening, and building a climax. This Unit on 'appropriate ending' discusses different **kinds** of denouement or resolutions depending upon the nature of material and the writer's **particular** perception of people and things. We speak of the meaning of our lives in terms of their **ends**. In life, endings without **an** end bespeak futility, lack of purpose and moral anarchy. It is the end which makes the structure of life whole, lending it both meaning and **purpose**.

4.2 LITERARY ENDINGS

Our experience of life as **well** as of literature is in the context **of** time. Hence the need for **beginnings**, middles and ends—points around which this experience is **organised**. **Ours** is story-shaped world, and the story can be called a metaphor for reality. Stories, like lives, have an ending and an end. In both, endings and ends confer a sense of **finality** of accomplishment. However, by ending his stories, the writer does not package life into a neat aesthetic **whole**, but discovers its rich possibilities in varying contexts. Not a termination, an ending in a story is, in fact, in the nature of a revelation about **people and** things. 'Is that so? I never imagined it this way'—are common reactions to endings in stories. The revelation is itself a moral act in that it leads to knowledge about the eccentricities of our **behaviour**, about the deceptions of the world **surrounding** us, about dimensions hidden **from** our surface-view of things. As **Aristotle** argued, the proper function of the ending of

a tragedy was to purge the unhealthy emotions of the audience (a moral act), and if it did not do so the tragedy was not well-formed.

Considering that in constructing their plots, writers determine their beginnings in the light of the endings, it would not be wrong to say, to vary T.S. Eliot's memorable assertion, that 'in my ending is my beginning'. Endings determine the form of the story, the direction it would take in order to lend an experience coherence and intelligibility. Form is what makes a story easily understandable. Form 'concludes' it even as the experience always remains unlimited.

This is why endings are not closures, for closures involve shutting off of experience, sealing it as it were. On the other hand, endings are only turning points in the flow of experience. Closures come when the subject is exhausted, endings when the subject reveals its inexhaustibility. In Kafka's *The Trial* the hero is 'too tired to survey all the conclusions arising from the story...'. In quite a few other stories, too, the ending is open, leading to endless possibilities.

Unlike closures, endings provide a resolution of experience, both in artistic and thematic terms. Endings are invitations to further exploration even when they do not seem to say so. This is their deceptive power and their amazing hold on the reader's imagination.

4.3 KINDS OF ENDINGS

There are as many kinds of endings as there are short stories and novels, and the possibilities are rich and suggestive. Short stories are noted for their compactness, restricted compass and concentrated effects. Consequently their endings will be determined by both the nature of the material (an event, a moment, a brief illumination, to mention a few instances), and the manner in which it is treated. Being a complex form of writing, embracing many narrative types, it would be wrong to make generalisations about endings in stories, but a few familiar examples may be given to show their scope and limitation. Our reading experience itself would give us an idea of the types of endings in stories. There are action stories, atmosphere stories, formula stories and many other intermediate types of stories—each with an appropriate ending. Many of the stories in R.K. Narayan's *Lawley Road*, may have no perceptible endings and yet we find them dependent upon some kind of a conclusion. In what follows what we would like to do is to spend more time with those types of endings that are easily accessible without, however, forgetting that narrative innovation does not stop anywhere and that all endings do not have to be stereotyped.

4.3.1 Unique or single effect endings: stories of incident

Also called surprise endings, these are to be found in stories that end rather unexpectedly even though not abruptly. In such a story, the reading experience is built in the following way: while our expectations fluctuate with the unfolding of the plot, a situation that no one would have expected in the normal course does occur, and surprises us. Such an ending is unique inasmuch as it is not foreseen in the plot, even though it stays within the range of probability: it is single because once the ending occurs we begin to wonder whether it was not a slight gesture, a single hint, a sudden disclosure, that might have caused our surprise.

In this connection, we could examine at some length O'Henry's well-known story, 'The Gift of the Magi'. This story is like a riddle in which our expectations are built up in a certain direction. We watch both husband and wife parting with their most precious possessions in order to give fitting gifts to each other. But at the moment of giving, they discover that the gifts have no value since they would be of little use to either. Our initial reaction is one of being tricked. But only later do we realise the pathos of the situation. By reversing our expectations, we acquire more insight into the working of the human mind and the futility of its sentimental concerns.

Maupassant's story, 'The Diamond Necklace', provides another evidence of a surprise ending accompanied by a sudden reversal of our expectations. As in the O'Henry story, we are brought face to face with a human situation. The fact that the

4.3.3 Endings in mood and atmosphere stories

In the stories of mood and atmosphere, the aim is not to jolt the reader into a sudden recognition of the falsity of his expectations. It is to create an atmosphere in which a state of mind is presented or a complex situation created. Such stories may occasionally have unexpected endings, but that is not their real aim. In this connection two stories deserve special attention: 'The Monkey's Paw' by W.W. Jacobs, and Poe's 'The Black Cat'. The horror in both stories is created by the atmosphere, and the endings only complete the mood created in the scenic descriptions. In the Jacobs story, the ending corresponds to the fulfilment of the prophecy related to the monkey's paw. Towards the end, the news of the son's death is brought to the parent in a blaze of moonlight; but such an eventuality has already been anticipated by the varying contexts in which the strange object, the monkey's paw, is being presented. What is built up in the story is not so much the reader's expectation as his fear that gets confirmed in the last scene. The story creates a mood which in turn quickens the reader's fear. The ending is appropriate in that it comes just at the moment when the main characters are still uncertain about the evil effects of the monkey's paw—the ending confirms the evil effect.

In Poe's story the atmosphere is haunted by the mutilated eyes of both, the black cat the narrator has hanged out of fear, and the white cat who appears later in the story. The mutilated eye ominously suggests the story's ending because it provokes the horror in the story and seals the fate of the cats. The recurrence of the missing eye repeats the original horror as in a dream. Thus the ending is not really an ending—but a 'repeat'; and in one sense it is always present in the plot itself. Such an ending does not become dramatic (as surprise endings do) but gives rise to a train of psychological reactions in the reader. It invites us back into the character's mind to study its subtle workings.

If the above two endings are rather extreme examples of their kind, Chekhov's endings suggest a subtle manipulation of the reader's response to the atmosphere of the story. As in his plays (the ending of *Uncle Vanya* is a good case) the endings grow out of the plot but spill out unbidden as the pistol shot does in the play. 'Uncle Vanya' is yet another instance of how the author creates a mood of boredom and frustration and how gradually, almost imperceptibly, something new and strange takes place. Chekhov's endings have a quiet solemnity about them in keeping with their subtle and under-the-surface movement.

On the other hand, Gorky's stories end with the assured openness of a moral tale. Consider the story 'A Man Is Born'. We all know that the pregnant woman travelling along the river bank with the narrator goes into labour and the narrator helps in the delivery of the child. The ending is related as much to the moral as to the fact of the birth—the moral concerns the famine in the area and the possible trouble of feeding the new-born.

In 'Twenty-six Men and a Girl' or 'Tales of Italy', the moral emerges clearly out of the interaction of theme and character. In a story such as D.H. Lawrence's 'Sun', the ending is the result of a cumulative sense of feeling of identity between the human being and the world around. Virginia Woolf's stories in *The Haunted House* concentrate their endings in the momentary impressions created on the narrator's mind. In such stories endings and impressions are one and the same, and cannot be independently grasped. Faulkner's 'Old Man', though an extended impression, also climaxes a mood, expanded earlier in the descriptions, of his drift on the water.

Usually endings in mood or atmosphere stories tend to be situational. Obviously no story can be complete without establishing a relationship between a character and the world in which he functions. Albert Camus's stories end precisely when the relationship between character and atmosphere gets fully established, either through an identification of the two or through their alienation. Often these stories are projected against a bleak landscape ('The Guest' is typical), and the ending becomes symbolic. In 'The Guest' the schoolmaster's predicament places his character against the bleak setting and brings out the duality of his response to his guest. In an ordinary sense nothing exciting happens. And yet the hostile surroundings become

Formula story: A formula story is written to a given pattern. Romances, detective fiction, science fiction and other popular forms of fiction are all formula stories.

Reversal of fortune: See **climax**, Block 2, Unit 3.

Scenic description: This refers to a writer's attempt to achieve a scenic effect through vivid, **colourful** description.

Situation: see Block 1, Unit 1.

Soap opera: A radio or serial drama, performed usually on a **daytime** commercial programme and chiefly characterised by stock domestic situations and melodramatic or sentimental treatment.

4.7 ADDITIONAL READINGS FOR BLOCK 2

- 1 Beach, J.W., *Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique*, Ludhiana: Lyall Book Depot, 1965.
- 2 Cawetti, John, G., *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (Formula Series On Art and Popular Culture), Chicago and London: The University of **Chicago Press** (©) 1976.
- 3 *Creative Writers Handbook: What to Write, How to Write it, Where to **Sell** it*, rev. ed. Isabel **Ziegle** (Everyday Handbook Series) Harcourt Row, no date.
- 4 **Doore**, Diana and Debra Johnson. *Sultana and Miriam's Two Hundred (and) Fifty Creative Writing Ideas*, R & E Publishers, 1985.
- 5 **Gardner**, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craji for Young Writers*, New York: **Alfred Knopf**, Vintage **Books** (©) 1983.
- 6 **Gruber**, Barbara. *Writing Ideas Ready to Use* (Instant Idea Books), **Schaffe** Publications (ISBN 0-86734-050-9, **FS-8304**), 1983.
- 7 Lubbock, Percy. *The Cmji of Fiction*, Scribner, 1921.
- 8 Marks, Percy. *The Craji of Writing*, Harcourt Brace, 1932.
- 9 Sloane, William. *The **Craft** of **Writing***, New York and London: WW Norton and Co., 1983.
- 10 Walker, **Lyn**. *Visions and Revisions—A Guide for Creative Writing* (ISBN 0-917962-72-9) TH Peek, 1981.