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# UNIT 1 PLOT/STRUCTURE

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## Structure

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## 1.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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This Unit **aims** at providing you with some important aspects of the structure of a short story—its form, its meaning, its readability, its ending, etc.

It

- offers you some useful hints on the plot of the short story, and indicates certain pitfalls which have to **be avoided**;
- discusses the regular form of the story—a **beginning**, a middle and an end;
- stresses the need for a clear design, with some room for improvisation and new direction as the story progresses, and the need to involve the reader.

It also describes the **manner** of telling a story, how to convey a 'message' **through** it, and how to end it—not **always** logically, but also not taxing the reader's credibility too much.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Unit 1 of **Block 1** of the Course on the **Short Story**, will introduce you to one of the basic elements of this popular form of creative writing **i.e.** plot or **structure**. In the other Units of **this** Block, you **will** learn about atmosphere, character and narration—some of the other essential elements.

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## 1.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF FORM

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It is a truism to say that 'all art is an order to form', a statement made **famous** in our **times** by the noted art-critic, Herbert Read. The creative artist seeks to capture **the** inchoate world in a certain form, so that it could make some sense. **Thus** there **has** to be a formal structure to the short story you wish to write—an arrangement of characters **interacting** with incidents/situations—for greater **effectiveness**. However, your **skill** lies in making it **appear** that it is no conscious arrangement, no contrivance, no 'plot' to deceive the reader, and that it could well have happened that way. You need to have a **well** thought-out design or scheme for that one too, so that your story is neither dull, nor diffuse, nor **meaningless**, and it helps to achieve

your purpose. So in the **writing** of your story, whatever the theme or purpose may be, you have to **know**

- how to make it **interesting**,
- how to say, 'It is **true**' ,
- how best to give a **meaning** to it.

These are three major **compulsions**, but they are not mutually exclusive. It is enough if you are sufficiently **aware** of the importance of each, and shape your **story** accordingly.

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## 1.3 HOW TO MAKE THE SHORT STORY INTERESTING

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It is not possible to devise a plot which would interest everybody. There are some readers who hate to think, while there are others who want **their stories** to be no more than escape **sessions**, in between the serious business of their daily life. There is also a small minority **who** would go to the other extreme and insist on their money's worth of **nutrition**, such as philosophy, morality, knowledge and what—have—you, with **each** story. So the best you can do is to attempt enticing an adult of **more-than-average** intelligence who has a zest for life as **well as** for learning. This implies that you are a serious writer, but not a philosopher or saint. **All** you can do is to try to make your **stories** acquire the status of serious literature, and yet hope that they will sell. **Discussed** below are some factors that give form to your story and **make** it interesting, **plausible** and meaningful.

### 1.3.1 Need for design

Do not forget, that your **story** must have a beginning and an end. In other words, a promise and a **satisfying** conclusion, with or without the middle of a complication—a story like your grandmother used to tell you when you were a child. The best kind of structure is that which **would** make the reader look forward to a 'finding' at the end of his **labours—the glimpse** of a god, a demon, a patch of the blue sky or whatever.

Hence the need to design **an ascending structure**, the process as well as the peak, before you set out to write a story. Otherwise, your story may turn out to be flat, round, or **labyrinthine, etc.** To quote John **Cournos**, a literary critic, 'A good short story is not a "slice of life". Call it a "roll", if you must—but, at any rate a whole roll.'

Now, do you have to design a structure to the minutest detail before writing out a story? Not really, **You should** allow for improvisations as you go along, small twists **and** turns that occur to **you** while working out your plot. Let your imagination take you in **hand** once you are **settled** on your course; it **works** better with a lead pencil than a blueprint.

**But what is important** at the designing stage is that

You should be clear **about** the **direction**. For instance, in a love-story, are you going to introduce the **conventional** triangle, followed by **misunder**standing, and end it up with an easy sentimental reconciliation? Or would you **like** to carry the couple through the **complexities** of love-and-hate cycle without the aid of a **third** party, **and** make them finally **arrive** at some understanding? Or would you rather that they move through **more** and more loving to the **grand** finale of a deception? Your options are numerous, depending on your world-view, or may be your mood at that point of **time**. But let the direction be clear right at the beginning, so that both characters **and** incidents would know which way to go and thus produce the results you have in mind.

- You should have formulated, in advance, howsoever vaguely the climax, in your story. That is, what exactly would be the nature of interaction between the **character(s)** and the **closing** incident? **Or, if** there is no incident, what would be the contours of the **situation yielding** the final reconciliation? Or the grand understanding? Or for that matter, the tragic deception?

### 1.3.2 Manner of telling

You **have** now laid down the outlines of the structure. You know the direction in **which** your plot will proceed. And you have a fairly good idea of the climax-to-be. Now you may go ahead with the telling of the story. But how are you going to ensure that the reader also goes **along** with you and does not give up in the middle? Leaving **aside** the **thought-content** which we will discuss later, the manner of telling is of **utmost** importance. It involves certain considerations of pace, tone and **colour**, which are of particular **relevance** to a short story, as distinct from a novel.

These considerations are:

- **Make** sure that there is a constant **sense of movement** in the plot. There is little scope in a short story for long pauses—reflections, observations on nature, **comments**, etc. Such pauses are necessary only as breathers, not as relaxing **interludes** which may weaken the tone of urgency in looking forward to 'what comes next'. Talking of reflections, you may sometimes have to go in for long stretches when your story is character-oriented and centres round the **workings** of the human mind. But even then, the **thinking** character should not be allowed to indulge in too much self-analysis for he needs to move fast towards some revelation that the reader is waiting for.
- **Involve** the reader to make it appear that you are talking to and not at him. In **talking** to somebody you invite, and not demand, his attention. And it follows that the other person is your equal, a potential friend, and not your intellectual **inferior** in any way even when you are writing stories for children. This does not prevent **you**, however, from giving a piece of your mind to the unlovable society or an arbitrary God—but only through your characters, of course. It will help you if you ensure at the very start that the sympathies of the **reader** are already with you.

In this context, you would do well to follow a few guidelines in unravelling the plot: (a) adopt a **direct** and conversational tone; (b) avoid verbosity; try to charm the reader with an elegant **turn** of phrase rather than an impressive parade of words; (c) **try** not to be obscure as it may give the impression that you don't care for the reader; (c) enliven your **narrative** with flashes of humour, share your jokes **with the** reader ever at the expense of the **character(s)**, as if you and your readers are: a shade wiser than these poor **character(s)**. The general idea is that the reader should be with you in the plot—as a sort of co-conspirator.

- **Try** to build up a certain **suspense** in the mind of the reader. We are not **talking** here only of mysteries and thrillers, but of modern short stories in general, including stories of literary **merit**, **which** attempt to reveal the truths about the **human** condition. The key-word is 'revelation', and it does help if, while working out the plot, you somehow suggest that 'what comes next' is not what your reader would expect in the normal course, but something vastly different. Take, for **instance**, the following passage in a love-story:

**The** stars were shining bright when I placed my arms around Anita. But I didn't like the looks of the one closest to me, the brightest and perhaps the smartest of them **all**. As if he knew he would meet both of us again—and how!

The **idea** is that you may **occasionally** throw a hint to the reader, that things are not what they seem to be, and that he would better wait and see.

#### Activity 1

What **are** some of the ways in which you can **make** a short story interesting? (50 words)

(Check your **answer** with that **given** at the end of the Unit)

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## 1.4 HOW TO MAKE THE SHORT STORY APPEAR TRUE

An interesting plot may be pure fantasy that **would** perhaps **interest** only certain types of readers. In **any** case, of such stories which belong to a special **category** are **not** the kind **we** are here **talking** about. We are concerned with those literary stories which **reveal** a **facet** of the human condition to a reader of more-than-average intelligence. **The** human condition **could** be either universal or social, if related to a given time and place. But, either way, whatever the plot purports to say and ultimately **reveals**, it must be credible. The reader should be able to accept characters as **real** men, **interacting with real** events.

### 1.4.1 Familiar yet new

You must have **lived** through a **storm** sometime or other in your life, but if your story is based on it, you could embellish it with a **fury** of such dimensions that it **will** savour of a new and exciting **experience**. Perhaps you have seen a fight between two stray bulls in a **small** town you happen to be passing through. In your story you could weave **this** fight into a pattern—show how it threw the life of the townsmen around the **street** corner into total disarray. Again, you must have seen death. You may have been **overwhelmed** with grief, or merely forgotten **all** about it after a while, depending upon whether the **deceased** was a close friend, a relative or a stranger. But couldn't **you** ask of a certain dying man in your story to suffer a spell of introspection **as** well, **and comment inwardly** on the falsity of the living world around **him—as** Tolstoy did in his *Death of Ivan Ilych*? And when you bring a pair of lovers into the **range** of his thoughts, wouldn't you help your reader to gain **new** insights into the **thing** that **passes for** love?

A note of caution: Don't apply the **colours** too thick.

### 1.4.2 Make it plausible

**But** there is **also** a limit to your portrayal of **reality**. The reality as perceived by an artist can and does break through many **barriers** of customs, beliefs and habits of thought imposed on **him**. **As** a storyteller wedded to truth, it is your duty to make your reader feel the impact of this reality. However, there is **always** a **limit** beyond which a **reader** may not be prepared to go.

#### Activity 2

To what extent is the **portrayal of 'reality'** important in a short story? (50 words)

(Check your **answer** with that given at the end of the Unit)

## 1.5 HOW TO GIVE MEANING TO A SHORT STORY

The result you **wish** to achieve **for your story** is the answer to this question. A reader **should never find** himself **compelled** to ask—What does it all mean? He wouldn't ask this question if the **meaning comes** through without any **special effort** on his part—no sooner **than** he finishes reading it. For example, you **will** be happy if he **understands** that you were not really **saying wrong** things about love, or that you were **only making fun** of a **certain class** of people.

**This** is important, for often **the** reader gets the wrong signals, due to some **weakness** in the **plot**—**not** so much in the design, **but** in its execution. The lapses could generally be attributed to

- digression,
- dilution, or
- defection.

### 1.5.1 Dangers of digression and dilution

Digression and dilution are usually **interrelated**. What happens is **that** you tend to forget **that** what you are writing is a short story and not a novel, far less a document, **howsoever informative** or readable it may seem to be. The entire sequence of **characters** and events must be **bound**, in a **short** story, to a **unity** of impression which **alone would** yield the desired **meaning**. So not only should you avoid introducing long **pauses** (as already **discussed**) but you should also avoid all extraneous matter—for **instance**, comic interludes in an essentially solemn theme or vice-versa, tender **scenes** of **mother-love** when your **purpose** is to say something about conjugal love, satirical **debunking** of a **social evil** among the hill-people when your **plot is geared to revealing** the awe and wonder of the mountains, etc. Do not **allow** the reader to miss the **central meaning** on **account** of your getting out of **focus**. **Whatever** you **are tempted** to do, you **must** remember **that** it should all fall within the ambit of the **central design**.

### 1.5.2 Danger of defection

**Defection** or changing tracks mid-way is always undesirable. You may, for instance, develop a tenderness for the **youthful**, romantic heroine of the campus, but take care that in **developing** her character, you **do** not violate the avowedly cynical purpose of your **plot**—**namely**, to show that all **youthful** love is a **myth**. You may write another story to say that **youthful** love is more **sinned** against than sinning. But that **will** be **another** story. **Decide** your commitments and priorities well in advance. Do not **forget**, mid-way in your story, what your central **thesis** is.

### 1.5.3 Message and comment

And **finally**, you should remember **that all** meaning **is not** limited to a certain **emotional response** in the mind of the reader which you may have pre-determined—amusement, **wonder**, anger, disgust, or whatever. Surely you can **write stories** that way if you **want** to. But **they will** be richer if **the** meaning carries a message **too**, an implicit **commitment** on the **facet** of the human condition that you have brought **out** in your story. In **other** words, it **will** be a better story if you could marry the **desired** emotional response to a certain intellectual understanding in the mind of the reader. Modern literature is growing **more** and more cerebral, **hopefully** as a **part** of the **evolutionary process**. Your story will, therefore, fall short of your legitimate **aspirations**, if **the end-result** of the plot is merely a chuckle or a sigh, and does not **provoke** the reader to pause for thought. **Thus** in a story **of** scene-cum-atmosphere, on a **railway platform** when a **train** is stranded, the plotting in the hands of a veteran like 'Banuphul', the famous Bengali writer, **can** be such that the meaning is welded **into** a message—viz., **commonalty** of distress helps to melt the vanities of the **individual self**. **But alas**, only that far and no **further**.

**But** in order to carry the **intellectual** message **effectively** to the modern reader, you **have to take** care of the following **requirements**:

- **The message should be implicit** in the **story**. The authorial voice should be

muted, for **nothing** repels a **reader** more than the didactic tone, the impression that you are **seeking** to place yourself on a platform.

- Whatever you **have** to say should better be derived from a **complexity of ideas** yielding some **food** for thought, **e.g.—could there be such** jealousy between a mother and her **daughter**? Couldn't one be noble without being absurd? How could two **sentient beings** cause such pain to each other, in spite of the best of intentions? Does the class-character of a man have to dominate over his individual **psyche**? etc. etc. And it goes without saying that subtlety goes with complexity. You cannot be profound every time, but you can surely avoid the beaten track, **the so-called** moral imperatives, the black-and-white syndrome. You can certainly and **make** genuine efforts to go **behind** appearances. Thus you would be making an **intellectual** overture to the reader, charming him with its subtlety, and provoking him to **thought**.

## 1.6 THE CLIMAX

It will be wrong to **say** that **the** coping-stone of an **edifice** is expressive of its grandeur, as is no **other** component. Nevertheless, it is of vital importance, and that is why **you** were **advised** earlier that you should formulate, howsoever vaguely, the climax embodying **the** result, right at the designing stage. That is, you **should** have thought out the **manner** in which you propose to bring about the 'revelation'.

It **will** be necessary **here** to remove a few misconceptions that you **may** be having regarding what a climax ought to be:

- **Not necessarily logical**

A climax need not **necessarily** be the logical **culmination** of a process of ascent. It could even be illogical, or what is now known popularly as an 'anti-climax'. But the **anti-climax** is **not** a **negation** of climax in the artistic sense; it seeks only to **administer** surprise by another name. An understatement, or a whimper **instead** of the bang that the **reader** was expecting, can be no less devastating in competent hands.

- **Not a resolution of the conflict**

A **climax** does not **have** to be a resolution of the conflict or complication in the plot. It may as well raise **the** issues to a state of confrontation in which they have to be squarely faced and **resolved** by the **protagonist(s)**. The intensity of awareness that is thus brought about **would** be a satisfying result.

- **The element of surprise not essential**

A climax does not **always** have to come upon the reader with a suddenness, with a twist or sting **in the tail**, though that has been the traditional mode. The revelation 'may as well be the **summing-up**, the deft touches that would complete the profile of a character, or the **meaning** of a situation that you have been **building up** assiduously. **All these** options, and more, are open to you. What **matters** is that **it** should be **satisfying** as the high point in the reader's enjoyment, or rather his vicarious '**experience**' of your story.

### Activity 3

Refer **back to** Section 1.4.1. Now, write a carefully structured story about the bull-fight. **Imagine that** it took place in **the** central **market** of your **own** home town. How **would** you **structure** your story in such a way that the fight **becomes** symbolic of another fight between two **influential** leaders (**political** or religious) of the town? (200 words)

(Check your **answer** with the **hints** given at the end of the Unit)

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## 1.9 GLOSSARY

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You will find in the glossary a short **list** of the literary terms **used** in this Unit.

**Climax:** a term used in drama, but also applicable to fiction, to denote the end of a **rising action**, in the middle of the plot, or just before the end, **followed** by 'denouement' or the **unravelling**.

**Tone:** assuming a work of literature to be a mode of speech, **tone** may be said to be the expression of the writer's attitude towards the characters and the subject matter of his story.

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## 1.7 SUMMING UP

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This Unit has covered the following points

- A story, regardless of theme, must have a structure or a plot.
- It must be well-designed, and told in such a way that the reader is truly engaged, not bored.
- **Within** the limits of reality, your story must present even familiar things in a new way.
- You must keep to the point. Do not change your priorities mid-way, and remember that.
- Every well-structured story must have a climax—a point of maximum emotional **intensity** or revelation.

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## 1.8 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

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### Activity 1

You can make your story interesting:

- a) by **giving** it a **sense** of movement;
- b) by involving the reader;
- c) by building up suspense.

### Activity 2

The portrayal of 'reality' in a short story is important because:

- a) a short story must show some facet of the human condition;
- b) it must deal with familiar things, but in a novel way;
- c) it must bring the truth to the notice of the reader.

### Activity 3

#### Hints

- i) What are the adjectives that are common to both pairs—**bull-headed, stubborn, strong, relentless, unreasoning**, etc.
- ii) What parallel situations **did** you **create**—the innocent getting **harmed merely** because of proximity—be it to the bulls or leaders; similarity of the **predictable (or unpredictable) conclusions**; and, perhaps a **moral**?