

UNIT 3 OPEN-ENDED NARRATIVE

Structure

- 3.0 Aims and Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Narrative, story, and plot
- 3.3 The notion of 'ending': the 'open-ended' story
- 3.4 Two forms of open-ended narrative
 - 3.4.1 Situational
 - 3.4.2 Character-based
- 3.5 Summing up
- 3.6 Activities: aids to answers

3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit will explain to you the distinction between 'narrative', 'story', and 'plot', and give you an idea of what an open ending is. You will also learn, after reading some stories of the masters like Chekhov, Bellow and Phanishwer Nath 'Renu' that the major forms of such stories may either be predominantly situational or character-based.

After reading this Unit, you should be able to

- recognize the terms narrative, story, and plot, with some clear notion of their similarity and differences;
- recognize what constitutes the beginning, middle, and end in a story/narrative;
- recognize what is meant by an 'open-ended' narrative;
- find examples on your own of open-ended narratives;
- justify or explain to yourself the rationale behind open-ended narratives; and, more importantly,
- decide, when you plan or write a story, as to what are the types of situations where an open ending would be particularly apt.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous two Units on 'anti-hero' and 'anti-plot', we attempted to familiarize you with the new modes of story writing in the modern age. This Unit discusses yet another important feature of the experimental story — the 'open-ended narrative'.

The short story was perfected as an art form in the nineteenth century by Anton Chekhov in Russia, and in the first half of the twentieth century by a host of writers all over the world, including here in India by Munshi Premchand.

But when a form reaches perfection or near perfection, a creative or experimental writer is not satisfied with merely turning out one more 'well-executed' story in the same mould. The creative urge forces experimenting writers to break up a story into its component parts; so they either rearrange or reverse the normal and 'expected' ordering to arrive at a new shape or arrangement that gives the reader a fresh insight into life.

Writers of open-ended stories challenge the precise expectations of a closed ending. There are no final solutions offered, no mysteries solved and yet the reader gets adequate aesthetic satisfaction. Even if the story ends where it began, something has happened along the way to change the reader's perception of things. Alternatively,

the narrator's **point of view** gives us some clues as to how events might develop further, or how the **events already** narrated are to be comprehended. Sometimes, of course, the nature **of the** protagonist or of the events may point towards a certain conclusion.

An open-ended short story for example, may begin in the middle of something else (media **res Aristotle** called it). Such beginnings and open-endings, taken together, may indicate a new **order**, whether chronological, causative or associative, within which the work is to be viewed.

3.2 NARRATIVE, STORY AND PLOT

To arrive at a satisfactory definition of what an 'open-ended narrative' is, it is first necessary to **understand** what a narrative is. A narrative, in its broadest sense, relates a sequence of events 'usually involving a conflict and a resolution of the conflict, along with such supporting elements as characters, setting and description'. The effort is to evoke the interest, and even sympathy, of the reader. Epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are good examples of what constitutes a narrative.

A **story** refers to the main sequence of events, **devoid** of such supporting elements as characters, setting and description.

Plot involves the notion of 'ordering' or of arranging into a pattern. E.M. **Forster** gives us a simple **and** effective way of distinguishing between a story and a plot: 'The King died and then the Queen died' is a story. 'The king died and then the Queen died **of** grief' is a plot. Plot thus implies a cause-and-effect relationship between the events being narrated, whereas a story merely tells what happens next.

In considering plot **and** story, we could **go back** to Aristotle's dictum that a work of art in prose must have a **beginning**, middle, and an end. There is no need, as we shall soon see, for such a **progression** to involve a prolonged series of events, as it often does in an extended **narrative**, such as a novel, or even a play.

It may be pertinent **here** to recall a legendary short story, which is said to have won a competition, that required that Aristotle's dictum of a beginning, a middle, and an end be applied **scrupulously**. The prize-winning story read

I was on the **train** from London to Edinburgh.
There was **this** man, seated across from me.
'Do you **believe** in ghosts?' he said.
'No,' I said.
He **disappeared**.

Even if it ridicules, **by** implication, the lengths to which the Aristotelian dictum could be carried, the **legend** does emphasize one major trait of the short story: its utter brevity and **economy in relating** the action.

Activity 1

Read the following **short** story and answer the questions given at the end.

Taboo

Enrique Anderson Imbert

His guardian **angel** whispered to **Fabián**, behind his shoulder:
'Careful, **Fabián**! It is decreed that you will die the minute **you pronounce** the word **doyen**.'
'Doyen?' **asks Fabián, intrigued**.
And he dies.

3.4 TWO FORMS OF OPEN-ENDED NARRATIVE

Open-ended narratives may either be chiefly situational, or character-based.

A situation in which a character finds himself may not be of his seeking but the burden of facing the situation falls squarely on him. He has to make his choice, take a decision and be responsible for his action. One particular situation may beget in people diverse responses, the quality of response depending upon the capacity of a person to decide and act in accordance with his own values and goals.

Certain narratives have no ending because of inaction on the part of the characters either due to their weak and wavering disposition or due to their philosophical Hamlet-like indecision.

3.4.1 Situational

Interestingly, the trend for open-ended narratives was set by Chekhov himself. In his story, 'The Lady with the Dog,' Chekhov has two central characters who are strangers at the beginning but soon fall deeply in love with each other. The man and the woman meet when they are on separate vacations in Yalta and grow increasingly infatuated, although there is a big difference in their age and social status. When the vacation is over, they return to their respective towns and homes; both are already married, and the man has children almost the same age as the woman with whom he has fallen in love. Much as they try, neither can treat what has transpired as a casual affair. We hear it mainly from the man's viewpoint. He has shaken off other affairs before, but this one he cannot. He goes off in search of her, finds her, and discovers that she too cannot put him out of her mind. They resume their affair, in stealth from the rest of the world, especially their families. They know the deception would have to end, but cannot figure out how. Chekhov ends the story when it is tantalizingly poised: seemingly the lovers are within an inch of arriving at a decision, but in their heart of hearts both know the end is still far, far away, and that the hardest, most complicated part (is) only just beginning. Chekhov seems to have developed the complication to a nicety—covering the beginning and the middle of the classical story—but he leaves the denouement or ending to his readers.

The American Nobel Laureate, Saul Bellow, in his short story, 'Looking for Mr. Green', describes the experience of George Grebe, a clerk who is employed by the city administration of Chicago to deliver relief cheques to old and disabled people. Placed in a neighbourhood unfamiliar to him, Grebe walks up and down the stairs of crowded, decaying apartment houses, trying to locate a Mr. Green to whom he has to deliver a cheque. Nobly he asks seems to know Mr. Green. The longer Grebe searches, the more determined he becomes about the importance of his mission: the noble, good Samaritan task of reaching money to a man who could well be in desperate need. As his intensive search proves nearly futile, Grebe himself is driven close to desperation. Finally, some twenty pages into the story, he encounters a drunk, menacing woman in a stairway—that he assumes leads to Mr. Green's actual location. Confused and exhausted, he surrenders the cheque to the woman, much against the City's clear guideline that the payee's identification should be established before the cheque is delivered. Did Grebe actually find Mr. Green? He doesn't seem to be sure, so neither are we. Bellow seems to leave that to us readers, merely presenting to us the state of mind that forced Grebe to surrender the cheque. The question as to whether or not Mr. Green was actually found suddenly seems to have lost its central relevance in the story.

3.4.2 Character-based

Krishna Baldev Vaid, the well-known Hindi short story writer, does something similar in 'My Enemy'. In this story, the narrator runs into an old-crony, with whom he has been long out of touch. Their stations in life have changed since: the narrator has become a married, respectable man who lives in orderly affluence, while the friend has stayed a bum and a derelict. Despite this distance, and the distance in time since they were friends, the man has sufficient hold on the narrator to move in with his family. A series of incidents follow and the narrator's wife, Mala, moves out of the

house with her children threatening not to return until the 'friend' has been thrown out. Five days pass after the narrator's family leaves him. And he sits there merely **contemplating** the options available to him, telling himself: 'If **Mala** were here, she'd come up with a third alternative. But she's not here and I don't know what to do.' On that note of self-realization, the story ends. The reader is no wiser as to how the tangle was resolved, but he is left free to make his guesses from what has been revealed of the narrator's personality.

Or take the story entitled 'The Drummer' by another well-known Hindi writer, '**Renu**'. In it, a drummer, by now an old man, meets a young cowherd. The boy's graceful mien revives dreams in the old man of a folk dance he used to help **perform** in his younger days. The boy would fit a key role in the dance-drama to a nicety, the **old** man tells himself, and attempts to enter into a conversation with him. The boy is partly interested, but partly flippant and evasive. As the old man talks of his earlier life, the boy drops a hint that he knows something of it already. This puzzles the old man, who goes deeper into reminiscence. The boy runs away and has a conversation with his mother, who cautions the boy to stay away from the old drummer, whom she calls a dishonest liar. There is just a hint that the old man could be the boy's father. But the hint is not developed. '**Renu**' avoids the temptation to go ahead and explain further. The poignancy of their encounter lasts, as does the mystery of what drew them to each other. Facts external to their meeting are neither stated nor **explained**.

Other experimenting writers go even further. Instead of the closed ending of the traditional story, or the open ending we just discussed, they may use a multiple ending (in which there are several possible endings), a false ending (in which what you first think of as the end is not quite it), or mock ending or parody ending.

If you wish to read more of such stories, you can pick up anthologies* of the famous Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges, and begin with 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. But be warned that **Borges** can be difficult. You will need to **familiarize** yourself with the pattern of his work through extensive reading. Another alternative would be to look for issues from recent years of The **New** York magazine at a **library** and find in them any story by Frederick Barthelme. Chances are that it will be 'open-ended'. For example, read his story 'Reset' in the issue of 1 December 1986.

Activity 2

Given **below** is the summary of a short story titled 'The Lady or the Tiger?' **Read it** and answer the following questions

- Is the ending 'open' or 'closed'? Why? (50 words)
- Is the narrative character-based or situational? (50 words)

The king of a semi-barbaric land has devised an interesting way of passing judgement on wrong-doers. A criminal is placed in an arena which has two doors leading into **it**—behind one is a beautiful lady and behind the other a hungry tiger. He is given no clue **as** to which door contains the lady and which the tiger. If he opens the door **with** the lady, he is immediately married off to her with great pomp, there and then. If the tiger emerges, he is eaten up.

The princess of the land, the King's daughter, has fallen in love with a most unsuitable young man and the king decrees that he pass this test. The princess has a handmaiden who is also in love with this same suitor. The maid is the one who is to stand behind the arena **door**. The princess knows the secret of the two doors. She signals towards one of the doors when the lover looks at her questioningly.

The story ends here. The author then asks the reader to use his knowledge of human psychology and complete the story. Would any girl want her lover to be **married** off to someone else—especially when it lies in her hands to prevent it? But then, the method of preventing it is to let him be eaten up by a hungry tiger before her very eyes! So what does the **princess** signal?

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* The best known are **Labyrinths** and **Ficciones**.

3.5 SUMMING UP

In this Unit you learnt that

- a narrative **relates** a **sequence** of events where there is usually a conflict presented and then resolved;
- a narrative usually has characters, description and a setting;
- a story refers to a **sequence** of events without **reference** to characters, description and setting;
- plot is the **arrangement** of events into a pattern so that a cause-and-effect relationship is seen;
- an open-ended story or **narrative** is just that — open-ended. The reader is left to draw his own **conclusions** from what is presented to him;
- open-ended narratives are of two kinds — situational and character-based;
- in open-ended narratives which are **situational**, there is a state of affairs which is unresolved because of events or circumstances;
- in character-based **open-ended** narratives, the lack of a clear-cut ending follows from the nature (s) of the protagonist (s)—**Hamlet**, for instance, in the **play** of the same name.

Activity 3

Read the following short **story** by Fernando Sorrentino, and answer the following questions:

- a) Does it correspond to **your** conventional expectations of a short story? (30 words)
- b) If it differs from a **conventional** short story, how is it different? (100 words)
- c) Could this story have had a more meaningful ending? (50 words)

Fernando Sorrentino

There's a Man in **the Habit** of Striking Me on the Head with an Umbrella
Tr. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni and Patricia Davidson Cran

There's a man in the habit of striking me on the head with an umbrella: It is exactly five years to the day since he began striking me on the head with his umbrella. At first I couldn't stand it; now I've grown accustomed to it.

I don't **know his name**. I know he's an ordinary man, with a plain suit, graying at the temples, and a vague face. I met him one sultry morning five years ago. I was sitting **peacefully** on a bench of **Palermo** Park, reading the newspaper in the shade of a tree. All of a sudden I felt something touch my head. It was this

same man who now, as I write, automatically and impassively keeps striking me blows with his umbrella.

That first time I turned around full of indignation (I become terribly annoyed when I'm bothered while reading the paper); he went right on, calmly hitting me. I asked him if he were mad. He seemed not to hear me. I then threatened to call a policeman. **Completely** unruffled, he went on with what he was doing. After a **few** moments of hesitation—and seeing he was not about to back down—I stood up and gave him a **terrific** punch in the face. No doubt he is a weak man; I know that despite the force generated by my rage. I do not hit all that hard. Still, breathing a tiny moan, the man fell to the ground. At once, making what seemed to be a great effort, he got up and again began hitting me over the head with the umbrella. His nose was bleeding, and I don't know why but at that moment I felt sorry for him, and my conscience troubled me for having struck him that way. Because, after all, the man was not hitting me very **hard**; he was really striking me quite soft and completely painless blows. Of **course**, such blows are terribly annoying. Everyone knows that when a fly settles on a person's forehead a person feels no pain; he feels annoyed. Well, that umbrella was a huge fly which, at regular intervals, kept settling on my **head**. Or, to be more precise, a **fly** the size of a bat.

At any rate, I could not stand that bat. Convinced that I was in the presence of a lunatic, I tried to get away. But the man followed me, in silence, without once letting up his blows. At this juncture, I began running (I may as well point out right here that there are few people as fast as I am). He set out after me, trying without luck to get in a whack or two. The man was gasping, gasping, gasping, and panting so hard I thought if I kept him running like that my tormentor might sink dead on the spot.

For that reason I slowed to a walk. I looked at him. His face displayed neither gratitude nor reproach. He just kept hitting me over the head with his umbrella. I thought of making my way to the police station and saying, 'Officer, this man is hitting me over the head with an umbrella.' It would be a case without precedent. The policeman would stare at me suspiciously, he would ask for my papers, he would begin questioning me with embarrassing questions, he would **probably** end up placing me under arrest.

I thought it better to go **home**. I got onto the number 67 bus. Not once letting up with his umbrella, the man got on behind me. I took the first seat. He stationed himself beside me, holding on to the strap with his left hand while with his right he kept swinging at me with his umbrella, implacable. The **passengers** began to exchange shy smiles. The driver was watching us in his **mirror**. Little by little, a fit of laughter, a growing convulsion, seized all the **other** riders. I was on fire with shame. **My persecutor**, completely unaffected by the uproar, went on striking me.

I got off—we got off—at the Puente Pacifico. We continued on down Santa Fe Avenue. Everyone foolishly turned around to stare at us. I felt like saying to them, 'What are you staring at, you idiots? Haven't you ever seen anyone whacking a man on the head with an umbrella before?' But it also occurred to me that they probably hadn't. Five or six kids began to follow us, shouting like a pack of wild Indians.

But I had a plan. **Arriving** home, I tried slamming the door in his face. I didn't manage it. With a firm hand—anticipating me—he grabbed the handle, there was a momentary struggle, and he entered with me.

From that time on, he has continued striking me on the head with the umbrella. As far as I know, he has never slept or had a bite to eat. All he does is hit me. He **accompanies** me in all my **acts**—**even** the most intimate ones. I remember, in the beginning, that the blows kept me from sleeping; I now believe it **would** be impossible to sleep without them.

Nevertheless, our relations **have** not always been good. Countless times, in **all** possible tones, **I have** asked **him** for an explanation. It's never been any use; in his quiet way he has gone on whacking me over the head with the umbrella. On **several** occasions, I have dealt him punches, kicks, -and—God help me!—even **umbrella** blows. He took these things meekly, as though they were all in a day's

