
UNIT 3 DIALOGUES

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3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit stresses certain facts about the use of dialogue in detective stories;

- dialogue and character go hand in hand: dialogue gives life to character;
- there is no room for **long** dialogues in detective stories;
- dialogue should be used to:
 - a) portray character,
 - b) **reveal** motive, and
 - c) develop the action;
- language used **in** dialogue **should** be conversational and terse;
- dialogue must be highly suggestive;
what a character says is as important as how he says it, when he says it and the circumstances in which he says it;
- in modern detective stories there is a lot of violence—so brutal, terse and cynical dialogue reflects **the** situation and contributes to the atmosphere;
- dialogue has one principal end: the development of the plot;
if handled carelessly, dialogue can **give away** the clue to the reader;
- no contradictory statements and no mistakes in facts should be made if the dialogue is to fulfil its objectives.

At the end of this Unit you should be able to structure dialogues in your detective story that are able to portray character, develop the plot and reveal motives—without giving away any clues unintentionally.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Units we have talked about the importance of suspense, atmosphere, and characters in detective stories, especially the criminal and the detective on whom the reader's interest is generally focused. Suspense is of the essence in detective fiction. The characters figuring in it, especially the **criminal** and the detective, help create suspense and provide motivation.)

We are now going to talk about dialogue in the detective story. There is hardly any need to point out that dialogue and character go together in all **fiction**. Dialogue is one of the most important means of making a character **come** alive. What we said about the rather limited scope for character portrayal in short stories as against **that** in novels, applies more or less to dialogue also. And, just as we have noticed that despite the limited scope for any full development of character in the short story, the delineation of character is still quite important, we may say about dialogue too that talk is important—it reveals character, often more significantly than action does.

3.2 NO ROOM FOR LONG DIALOGUES IN DETECTIVE STORIES

It is obvious that there is no room in short fiction for long dialogues. They have to be brief, terse and relevant. This is particularly true of the detective story because the writer tries to create the maximum effect using the fewest words possible and also because short, quick exchanges are likely to heighten the tension or suspense.

3.2.1 Dialogue portrays character, reveals motive and develops the action

Dialogue is an important means of portraying character, and helps in revealing motives and even in developing the action of the story. Writers of stories know that appropriate dialogue can be far more useful in realising the above objectives than lengthy descriptions. The detective story is generally concerned with one central incident and dialogue must, in one way or another, help clarify it and enlarge its meaning and significance. This means that there is no room for irrelevant or lengthy dialogues in the detective story. They only slow down its pace unnecessarily.

3.2.2 Dialogue should be conversational and terse

As far as possible, dialogue must be in the conversational language of everyday use. The conversation itself should be incisive and terse to serve the basic purpose of depicting character. If you read the stories of O'Henry you will notice how skillfully dialogue is employed for the illustration of character. No other literary tool can serve this purpose better, provided it is properly handled. Dialogue, in addition to the portrayal of character, also serves the purpose of conveying information, keeping the action moving and taking it naturally towards the climax. You can see that these functions of the dialogue are of particular importance to the detective story. Detective stories deal with crimes committed in the world, and to that extent they are real and belong to everyday life. Dialogues in the detective story, therefore, must be natural and unobtrusive.

3.2.3 Dialogue can move the story forward

It is obvious that of the two modes of developing the story, dialogue and narration of event, the latter is more important. And yet, it is possible to make effective use of dialogue to **WOW** the story forward. This is especially true of a story in which snatches of conversation, a casual remark made by one of the characters, a careless or unwise statement made by the suspect can be of crucial importance to the solving of the mystery.

3.2.4 The substance of dialogue and its mode of delivery

It is also possible that what a character says is not so important as how he says it, or when he says it or what the circumstances are in which it is said, the last of which is what gives apparently insignificant remarks a great deal of meaning. All the great writers of detective fiction have made extensive use of this device, especially in the case of armchair detectives who do not go out to the scene of action, but solve problems by using their powers of reasoning. In the stories of Agatha Christie, for example, the vital clue is often provided by a piece of dialogue to which few would pay serious attention.

Activity: 1

(a) What can dialogue do in a detective short story? (50 words)

(b) Read the following passage and show what it reveals as regards the criminal's character. (50 words)

'You killed a woman' I said. 'Jessie Florian.
'That was a mistake'.

as the solution of the crime is concerned. This is because he has found out, from the dialogue, what the detective is still, apparently, trying to discover. A few **hints**, therefore, would be useful.

3.6 SOME LIMITS ON HANDLING DIALOGUE

While it is necessary to provide some clues in the dialogue, this should be done with great care: there should be no contradictory statements, unless they are really needed as part of the plot; there should be no attempt at concealing vital facts, although facts which are not fully relevant may be brought into the conversation **so** that suspicion can fall on a number of people; and there **should** be no mistakes of fact unless, again, these are deliberately introduced for the purposes of the plot.

3.7 SUMMING UP

Dialogue and character go together, since dialogue makes the **character** come alive. Despite its having limited scope in a (detective) short story, dialogue reveals character, often more significantly than action.

- Dialogues cannot be long but should be **brief**, terse and relevant in a short story and, particularly, in a detective story which aims at creating the **maximum** effect with the fewest words possible. Short, quick exchanges between characters are likely to heighten the tension or suspense in **the** story.
- Dialogues are an important means of portraying character and help in revealing motives and in developing action.
- **Dialogues** should be conversational and terse, conveying information and keeping the action moving.
- **Though** narration is more important than dialogue as a mode of developing a story, dialogue **can** be effectively used to make the story **move** forward. In a detective story a casual remark or snatches of **conversation** may prove significant to the solving of the mystery.
- The substance of **dialogue** is as important as the manner of delivering it. A vital clue may be provided by a piece of dialogue.
- In modern detective short stories, abounding in more violence than the earlier ones, the dialogue is often scorching, full of sarcasms and grim humour.
- Dialogue is a means to an end which is the development of plot **employed** for unfolding the story and limiting the tension and even for explaining how the mystery is solved.
- Dialogues have to be carefully handled and should not contain **contradictory** or false statements, unless needed as a part of the plot.

Activity 3

Read the following:

A man with his family—his wife and a daughter—goes to a park and spends the whole morning playing with his child. **Feeling** thirsty he sends his daughter to a shop close by displaying a board on which is inscribed, 'Cold Drinks are sold **here**'. His daughter returns with two bottles of warm lime juice. His wife takes one and drinks it. But without opening the other one, he goes to the shop to return it and claim the refund of the money paid for it. The shop-keeper refuses to return the money and an altercation follows in which man is forced to acknowledge defeat.

Write a dialogue that would have taken place between them in about 100 words.

3.8 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1*Hints for (a and b)*

Re-read section 3.2.1. The criminal is aggressive but perhaps unaware of his own strength.

Activity 2*Hints*

Section 3.3 gives you an idea of what the tone of the dialogue can be. The aggressive mistress would perhaps be brutal, terse and cynical. The victim does not need to defend herself as the third person (her friend/husband/etc.) would do so.

Activity 3*Hints*

Your dialogues should portray character, reveal the motive and develop the story further. Remember you are not expected to complete the entire story through the dialogue. You can leave it as an unfinished bit. For example, the man can retreat saying, 'You have not seen the last of me. I shall return—well-prepared.'