UNIT 2 ANTI-PLOT

2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this Unit is to elucidate that

● in experimental stories, the author's viewpoint is what the reader should seek;
● the anti-plot mode is connected with changes in modern sensibility brought about by the revolutionary impact of science and technology on life;
● the anti-plot seeks to create a greater awareness and understanding of human life by giving importance to subjective vision;
● fantasy quite often features in anti-plot to break up the traditional surface structure of a story in order to expose aspects of human nature and life which would otherwise remain hidden;
● plot is not essential in such a story; because
● in such stories truth can be most effectively presented through symbolism and allegory.

By the end of the Unit, you should be able to use your understanding of all these features to compose a plotless story that will express powerfully your own perception of reality.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous Unit on the 'anti-hero' discussed the factors which led to the emergence of the new protagonist, with his different roles, in the experimental story. In this new mode of writing, you will notice how anti-plot is intimately connected with anti-hero. This Unit will deal with the main distinction between the traditional plot and anti-plot, modern sensibility in anti-plot, break-up of the linear narrative, and the use of fantasy or allegory to reveal fresh insights.

2.2 PLOT AND ANTI-PLOT: THE QUESTION OF FORM

The earliest storytellers were not bothered by considerations of form. They simply spun a tale — 'Once upon a time.. .', and narrated the story in a straight line, the chronology and the plot progressing together. In the course of storytelling they would often put in their own ideas and comments and close the tale with a moral.

Form, or the shape in which a story was presented, became a serious consideration when stories began to be recorded in print.

In the traditional story, a major element is the plot which, as we all know, refers to the sequence of related incidents which make up a narrative. Plot is the easiest element in a story to understand, and beginners often tend to think that the plot is the story. For

a mature writer, however, this is not so. He or she writes a short story, not to demonstrate how b follows a, and c follows b, but because the whole story ultimately presents a deep insight into human life or character. The writer may begin — 'let's suppose that a shy, timid, but romantically imaginative young man is invited to a party, at which he receives an eager kiss in the dark from an unknown young woman, who has mistaken him for her lover.' ('The Kiss' by Chekhov).

Here the author of the story challenges the conventions of the traditional story-form by allowing his narrator-writer to make the statement that the plot of the story he is writing is imaginary. The reader is warned against implicit belief in the story as a form that relates events as they actually happen. The traditional plot having a beginning, middle and an end, with a chronological progression of events was too patterned and artificial to reflect the complex nature of modern reality. The revolutionary impact of science and technology on life, breakdown of faith in Providence and the Divine scheme of things, researches in depth psychology, and man's continuing struggle against different forms of oppression, gave rise to several new insight. Man lost his sense of a logical or causal connection between Cosmos and individual fate; he could not now discover cause and effect realtionship between events. The chaos and absurdity he encounters in life, therefore, makes the contemporary writer seek for meanings which do not necessarily rest in supernatural truths.

The traditional plot thus became an insufficient and imperfect medium to express the many-sided realities of contemporary life.

2.3 THE WRITER'S PERCEPTION OF TRUTH

A writer of a modern short story is more self-conscious. We now realize that there are many ways of telling a short story. The writer, for instance, may choose a method, and even set up his or her own rules. The plot of the story and whether it is the author, the characters or one special character who spins it becomes less important, than how it is spun. The viewpoint presented by the story is here the single most important factor, and not the moral of the tale: messages are rarely, if ever, clearly stated.

The ultimate purpose of every short story writer is to communicate an aspect of the truth of life as seen and experienced by himself—and personal truth rarely has a 'beginning. middle or an end'.

Thus authors naturally find creative outlet in stories which challenge the commonly held concept of a plot as a sequence of happenings, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Their aim is basically interpretative, and not the recounting of the factual details of our daily lives, or a narration of complicated happenings, all unravelled at the end (as in a detective or a romantic adventure story).

In the experimental story there have been attempts to interpret the psychical process in terms of stream of consciousness to explain the absurd and the impossible as existentialist realities. It is, however, not possible to devise one formula which can entirely hold good, or account for the complexity of human experience, and the unpredictability of certain happenings.

Through the interpretative story, the writer tries to give the readers a greater awareness and a greater understanding of human life, rather than to endorse their opinions and satisfy their wishes. Needless to say, the readers of such fiction will certainly be more limited in numbers than those of traditional stories, for the latter do not challenge or threaten the perceptions of the readers or critics in any way. If they are well-executed, interpretative stories appeal to mature and serious readers who seek in literature qot just thrills, but a widening of perceptions.

2.4 FANTASY IN ANTI-PLOT

Our earliest experience of short stories also brings us in touch with fantasy, where

fairy godmothers transform pumpkins into coaches ('Cinderella'), or a girl falls into a well and enters a strange world where time or language, as we know them, do not exist (Alice in Wonderland). We find that, in spite of the strangeness of these stories, we still enjoy them. But whereas a child accepts strangeness, a mature reader, as a conscious-participant, enjoys it knowing fully well that the story is disturbing a known sequence. We continue to read an incredible story because of the poetic intensity of its presentation. Whatever insight it offers is usually a cumulative effect of the completed fiction. The basic source of unity in such a story is its poetic intensity which compels the concentration of the reader. In the example given below, words and phrases in common usage have been used to build up a vivid picture of action and colour which has an immediate impact.

> Queen Corasin was very quick-witted. Faster than thought she rushed into the palace, wrapped her hands in the king's best mole-fur mantle, and grabbed the red-hot corkscrew which was lying in the fire, heating up, ready to open the great golden flagon of red-hot mead, which was being prepared for the celebration feast.

(The Kitchen Warrior by Joan Aiken)

2.5 SYMBOLISM AND ALLEGORY

Frequently, the ultimate appeal of the anti-plot stories to the reader's sense of truth, is made through symbolism or allegory. Often an arrangement of dissimilar images, names and dialogue can trigger off many memories and associations in the mind of the mature reader. The writer may begin with an ordinary, everyday situation, and may slowly or suddenly turn it into a series of improbable incidents, and a colourful medley of wild images.

Consider, for instance, Kafka's well-known story, 'The Metamorphosis' where a man finds that he has changed suddenly into a hideous insect. Do we disbelieve the story because this does not, and cannot happen in real life? The writer, by depicting an impossible chain of events, is however able to present an imaginative study of human behaviour which is undeniably truthful and absorbing. By breaking up the traditional structure of the plot he is able to transform seen reality into a felt experience.

2.6 THE ABSURD MADE PLAUSIBLE

How do we test the ultimate merit of anti-plot stories to which known standards of judgement cannot be applied? Let's ask the following questions:

i) Granting the impossibility, does the story maintain probability?
The readers grant the writer the impossibility of the theme, but does the story maintain a probability in its treatment of that fictional theme? A good example of this is again Kafka's Metamorphosis', where, after the initial impossibility (that of a man turning into an insect), the actions and reactions of the hero, and his family and his movements are all narrated, in a plausible and acceptable mode. The reader begins to understand the story symbolically.

This is possible only if the meaning of each literary symbol is established and is supported by the entire context of the story. Remember that the symbol has its meaning inside the story not outside it. This symbol may also suggest a cluster of meanings.

ii) What is the ultimate purpose of such inventions?
Am I, as a writer, using strangeness simply for thrills, surprises or fun? If so, the story is a failure as a work of art. But if I am doing it with a clear purpose, then the liberty taken with the plot stands justified. In the case of 'Metamorphosis', the aim of the writer is to show the loneliness of a lowly being and the callousness and indifference of human beings. As such, the transformation of his hero into an insect, acquires a deep

significance, and **becomes symbolic** of the loneliness and suffering of a human being, who is not like everyone else, and yet needs desperately to belong to a group. The pain, the **debasement,** and the destruction of the hero, provides to the readers a vantage point from which they may view and judge the world. The anarchy and humour within the story must highlight the anarchy, suffering and humour inherent in our world.

iii) Does the story **challenge** and educate?

Some writers, especially those brought up on a steady diet of fables and scriptures, look for an **opportunity** to pin a moral to every story that they write. They consider the world 'theme' and 'moral' to be the same. Terms such as 'moral' and 'lesson' may be applicable to fables or religious discourses but are best omitted in any discussion of fiction. Stating a **moral** crudely is often like explaining a joke: it fails inevitably. A story is not a **sermon,** and very often a **good writer** likes his readers to reflect on the possible **implications** of the story, rather than underscore a limited moral at the end—such as 'be **kind** to all animals' or 'crime does not pay'.

Activity

Given below are two themes. Choose one of these to write an outline for an anti-plot story.

Theme 1: An **eminent** doctor, who has been jailed for a minor offence, refuses to leave the jail when his sentence is over. (150 words)

Theme 2: . An invalid relative, **totally** dependent on you for whom you harboured mixed feelings of **love** and hate, dies. (150 words)

(Check **your answers** with the hints given in-2.8)

2.7 SUMMING UP

The main points **discussed** in this Unit are

- anti-plot mode is chiefly a product of modem literary sensibility which is deeply influenced by the impact of science and technology on living conditions;
- truth is **multi-faceted** and the writer adopts the anti-plot mode to express his sense of individual **reality;**
- the absurd and **the** impossible constitute existentialist realities and are rendered probable in **this** form;
- the insights into human situations and characters find their **embodiment** in the **form** of fantasy, **allegory** and symbolism.

2.8 ACTIVITY : AID TO ANSWER

Hints

Theme 1

Give your outline in 10 points stressing

i)   the character of the doctor, his position and status in society;

ii) the offence for which he was jailed;

iii) his reasons for refusing freedom.

iv) Write more about the internal mental processes of the character. (See glossary 'stream of consciousness').

Theme 2

i)   Two sisters, **Amla** and Maya, are twentyfive and thirty years of age respectively. **Amla** is beautiful and popular, while Maya is a mere shadow of her sister.

ii) **Amla is** disabled and dependent on Maya, demanding a lot of attention and **care.**

iii) **Amla** dies, and Maya feels relieved but with mixed feelings of guilt for wishing her sister dead."

iv) Prepare your answer keeping in mind the internal turmoil of Maya's mind. (See glossary 'stream of consciousness').

2.9 GLOSSARY

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

Existentialism: A philosophy according to which the universe is meaningless, and man is completely responsible for forming his own nature

Fantasy: Highly imaginative literature dealing with the adventures of incredible characters in an unreal world (like fairyland)

Stream of Consciousness: A manner of writing in which a character's thoughts and perceptions are presented in a random manner, without any regard for logical sequences.

Viewpoint: The perspective from which a story is told

It is advised that the following anthologies of short stories be read by the students. These should be easily available in any college or University library.

Franz Kafka: *Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (Penguin)

Albert Camus: *Exile and the Kingdom* (Penguin)

Isaac Bashevis Singer: A *Friend of Kafka* (Penguin)

Bernard Malamud: *The Magic Barrel* (Penguin)

John Updike: *Pigeon Feathers* (Penguin)

Gabriel Garcia Marquez: *Innocent Erendira* (Picador)