# Elements of Fiction: The Basics

**Characters** in fiction can be conveniently classified as major and minor, static and dynamic. A major character is an important figure at the center of the story's action or theme. The major character is sometimes called a protagonist whose **conflict** with an antagonist may spark the story's conflict. Supporting the major character are one or more secondary or minor characters whose function is partly to illuminate the major characters. Minor characters are often static or unchanging: they remain the same from the beginning of a work to the end. Dynamic characters, on the other hand, exhibit some kind of change – of attitude, purpose, behavior, as the story progresses.

**Plot**—the action element in fiction—is the arrangement of events that make up a story. Many fictional plots turn on a **conflict,** or struggle between opposing forces, that is usually resolved by the end of the story. Typical fictional plots begin with an exposition, that provides background information needed to make sense of the action, describes the setting, and introduces the major characters; these plots develop a series of complications or intensifications of the conflict that lead to a crisis or moment of great tension. The conflict may reach a climax or turning point, a moment of greatest tension that fixes the outcome; then, the action falls off as the plot's complications are sorted out and resolved. Be aware, however, that much of twentieth-century fiction does not exhibit such strict formality of design.

**Conflict**—conflict refers to the various problems a character encounters in a story. The central character will usually face one central (major) conflict and several minor conflicts (complications). Most of the time, conflicts can be categorized as one of the following:

- **Character vs. Character (protagonist vs. antagonist)**—the events typically focus on differences in values, experiences, and attitudes
- **Character vs. Society**—the main character is fighting an event, an issue, a philosophy, or a cultural reality that is unfair
- **Character vs. Nature**—the character is often alone dealing with nature in extreme circumstances.
- **Character vs. Fate/Faith/Supernatural**—the text is characterized by a person contending with an omnipresent issue or idea, or struggling with their faith or deity.
- **Character vs. Themselves**—the main character is conflicted and/or hindered by childhood memories, unpleasant experiences, or issues with stress and decision-making.

At the climax of a story, some critical decision is made or some critical action is performed by the central character, and the winner of the central conflict becomes apparent. The resolution (or solving) of the central conflict produces a new state of affairs. In most substantial stories, the central conflict is internal (man vs. himself), and it relates to the key trait that is out of balance.

**Point of view** refers to who tells the story and how it is told. The possible ways of telling a story are many, and more than one point of view can be worked into a single story. However, the various points of view that storytellers draw upon can be grouped into three basic categories:

1. **First-Person Narrator** (uses pronoun I):

In the **first person** point of view, one of the story's characters serves as a narrator and readers watch the story unfold through that character's eyes. First person point of view is easy to identify because the character or narrator speaks to readers in his or her own voice, frequently using the pronoun 'I'.

The character or narrator is often a main character who is actively involved in the story's events, but sometimes authors choose to tell the story through the eyes of a minor character who merely witnesses the unfolding story or even through the eyes of a character who didn't directly witness the events, but retells them secondhand. In any case, this point of view allows readers access only to the narrating character's limited knowledge and understanding of the story and of his or her fellow characters.

2. **Second-Person Narrator** (uses pronoun You):

The **second person** point of view is relatively rare because it makes the reader a character in the story and directly addresses the reader as 'you'. The *Choose Your Own Adventure* series of the 1980s and 1990s features the second person point of view and allows readers to make decisions that affect the story's plot and lead to various outcomes.

3. **Third-Person Narrator** (uses pronouns he, she, or they):

In the **third person** point of view, the narrator is someone outside the story, who frequently uses pronouns, like 'he,' 'she,' and 'they,' to describe the characters. The third person point of view is divided into three subcategories:

   a. The **objective third person**, in which the narrator knows or reveals nothing about the characters' internal thoughts, feelings, and motivations but sticks to the external facts of the story (as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*)

   b. The **limited third person**, in which the narrator describes the internal thoughts, feelings, and motivations of one character, usually the main character (as in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series)

   c. The **omniscient third person**, in which the narrator knows and at least partially reveals the internal thoughts, feelings, and motivations of all the characters (as in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*)

**Setting** is the physical and social context in which the action of a story occurs. The major elements of setting are the time, the place, and the social environment that frames the characters. These elements establish the world in which the characters act. Sometimes the setting is lightly sketched, presented only because the story has to take place somewhere and at some time. Often, however, the setting is more important, giving the reader the feel of the people who move through it. Setting can be used to evoke a mood or atmosphere that will prepare the reader for what is to come.

**Style** is the way a writer chooses words (diction), arranges them in sentences and longer units of discourse (syntax) and exploits their significance. Style is the verbal identity of a writer, as unmistakable as his or her face or voice. Reflecting their individuality, writers' styles convey their unique ways of seeing the world.

**Structure** basically just refers to the way that the writer arranges the plot of a story. When looking for elements of structure to analyze, look for repeated elements in action, gesture, dialogue, description, as well as shifts in direction, focus, time, place, etc.

A **Symbol** is a person, object, image, word, or event that evokes a range of additional meanings beyond and usually more abstract than its literal significance. Symbols are devices for evoking complex ideas without having to resort to painstaking explanations. **Conventional symbols** have meanings that are widely recognized by a society or culture, i.e., the Christian cross, the Star of David, a swastika, a nation's flag. A literary or **contextual symbol** can be a setting, a character, action, object, name, or anything else in a specific work that maintains its literal significance while suggesting other meanings. For example, the white whale in Melville's Moby Dick takes on multiple symbolic meanings in the work, but these meanings do not automatically carry over into other stories about whales.

**Theme** is the central idea or meaning of a story. Theme in fiction is rarely presented at all; it is abstracted from the details of character and action that compose the story. It provides a unifying point around which the plot, characters, setting, point of view, symbols, and other elements of a story are organized. Theme is the message conveyed by a text that also applies to multiple other texts. A good rule of thumb is that it cannot be described in a single word. "Justice" is not a theme. A theme could be about justice—how it is hard to come by when people dehumanize each other, for example, or even "man's inhumanity to man," which I remember learning was an all-time most important theme in high school. **A theme also should reflect on a conflict or an argument and usually both**. This is because all literature has a problem and/or conflict of some sort and its resolution is why we write books. The two plausible themes, "justice is hard to come by when people dehumanize each other," and "man's inhumanity to man," both pass this test. There's a problem implicit in a shortage of justice or in the presence of inhumanity. "Goodness overcomes" could also be a theme… it implies the difficulty in goodness' transcendence. But on the "must contain an argument" from "man's inhumanity to man" fails… what about it? Man's inhumanity to man endures? Wears many faces? Dehumanizes the inhuman?" For me a theme has to say something about the idea.

**Tone** is the author's implicit attitude toward the reader, subject, and/or the people, places, and events in a work as revealed by the elements of the author's style. Tone may be characterized as serious or ironic, sad or happy, private of public, angry or affectionate, bitter or nostalgic, or any other attitudes and feelings that human beings experience.