

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Lecture - 32
Elements of Fiction - 1

Hi, welcome to our ongoing discussion on Fiction. If you can quickly recall, in the last class we introduced fiction and defined fiction. We said how the birth of fiction is concomitant with the birth of or the rise of the middle class or the rise of industrialization and of course, renewed importance attached to science and all those factors.

So, in this class we are going to discuss important components of fiction, in other words, what are those features that constitute fiction. We have understood fiction as a broad genre of literature and how it is different from poetry. And of course, the rise of the novel and we also discussed how compared to poetry and drama, novel or fiction is of recent origin towards the end of the 17th century or the beginning of the 18th century.

In this class, we are going to discuss components or elements of fiction and how to write fiction. In fact, this class helps us not just in realizing those elements that constitute fiction, of course, the fundamental purpose is to discuss them. If some of you are aspiring to be writers or if you nurture ambitions of writing a novel, conscious awareness of these elements is definitely going to help you in extraordinary ways.

So, in other words, though the explicit purpose of this class is to make you aware of different elements of fiction when you say fiction we have already discussed, it is a novel, a short story, a fable, anecdote all of them come under a fiction.

So, an active awareness of the elements that constitute fiction is definitely desirable for any student of literature and this class goes a step ahead. It also helps you in realizing your dream of becoming an aspiring writer once when you go through these elements of fiction.

Let us begin our discussion of elements of fiction in a detailed manner.

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Of course, if you can again quickly recall we discussed how fiction has two meanings to it. One is the meaning as a distinct genre of literature, how it constitutes a certain sensibility and on the other hand, fiction also means something that is concocted.

So, we discussed how fiction is a kind of a lie. Nevertheless, where you reach through the lie is towards truth, the ultimate destination of fiction. Though it sounds a bit paradoxical, how it is true we discussed in the last class.

So, here you have some brilliant lines dealing with that. Look at what Albert Camus, a very well-known existentialist says, "Fiction is a lie through which we tell the truth." That is true because the purpose of fiction though of course, is we create, we concoct a whole world around it, when you decipher through that concocted world or when you go through that concocted world where it leads you towards understanding human nature.

It leads you towards understanding the nature of truth and therefore, Albert Camus calls it fiction is a lie through which we tell the truth. And of course, see how a similar sentiment is expressed a little differently by Ralph Waldo Emerson of course, you can quickly recall what we discussed on Emerson during our class on American poetry. So, he says, "Fiction reveals the truth that reality obscures."


It is true that reality tries to obscure the truth in very many ways because there are a lot of distractions here. There are a lot of impediments for us to realize the truth. Whereas, in the

world of fiction because of the beautiful way it is structured and because of the very object purpose with which it's being designed, finding truth there in fiction becomes comparatively easier that is why Ralph Waldo Emerson says it.

And look at how Stephen King, a contemporary novelist expresses a similar sentiment, "Fiction is the truth inside the lie." So, if you can compare fiction to fruit, it is a metaphor of course, you are familiar with metaphor. If fiction is a fruit then the pulp is the lie and then the kernel or the seed in that is truth. So, that is how you can visualize fiction.

And Margaret Atwood a very well-known writer, a renowned feminist writer as well defines fiction writing and she compares fiction to science. Because the purpose of science and fiction have similar objectives that is they start with the question of what if and how does it all work. Because if at the core of science is an inquisitive mind, at the core of writing fiction is also a similar curious mind; it wants to explore things that is why she compares writing fiction to exploring science.

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THE VIXEN AND THE LIONESS

A vixen, mother of five cubs sneered at a lioness because she never bore more than one cub. 'Only one,' she replied, 'but a lion.'"

-- from Aesop's Fables

Let us quickly go through different elements of fiction. Now before we come to different elements of fiction, here is a very short short story. It is probably one of the shortest short stories that you may have come across.

Please read it and let us see if you can consciously come to terms with the different elements that are present in the short story. Of course, remember when we say fiction, simultaneously

we are discussing novels, short stories, novellas or short novels, fables, and anecdotes, and all of them. The structural principle is the same for a novel and a short story. Of course, if there is any change between them definitely there is a change.

The change is only in scale and magnitude, otherwise, the governing principle concerning short stories is the same as that of a novel. So, look at this beautiful short story taken from Aesop's fable "The Vixen and the Lioness". A vixen, mother of five cubs sneered at a lioness because she never bore more than one cub. "Only one," the lioness replied, "but a lion."

Now, look at this short story,; and as I said the principles are similar. So, what do you look at it the moment it opens you have a vixen Mrs. fox you can call it. So, it can be a character, and then you have a lioness. So, therefore, this story revolves around the two characters the vixen and the lioness and there is a dialogue, there is a story in this. and there is also a small plot and there is a climax, a turning point, and all of them.

So, keep this short story in mind, and then when we discuss various elements of fiction let us see if you can spot those various elements of fiction. Even this short story has characters. Well, of course, there is a setting that is not explicit, there are various elements of fiction we are discussing in a very short while, but look the setting is slightly missing. However, it is implied here or it goes. Characters play a very important role, therefore, the setting becomes slightly not very relevant.

Nevertheless, it presents a plot. There is an element of style and of course, there is a moral towards the end of it all those things are there even in this one of the shortest short stories that you have come across, please remember this.

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Here comes different elements of fiction. Now beginning with the plot of course, not that it has to begin with the plot; that is the reason why we have presented in a circular way because in a circle every point is a beginning and every point is an ending. In other words, there is no proper beginning, there is no proper ending, and every point is a beginning and ending that is the reason why you can read them in any order.

So, the plot is one element, we are going to have a detailed discussion on all of in the subsequent slides, but for our cursory understanding, the plot is a story plus the causal factor of the story is what happens to whom and when. And then the plot comes when you add the factor why does it happen, there is a cause to that, there is an effect to that, if there is an effect that must have been caused by something else, so that causal factor is there.

So, therefore, the plot is a combination of what happens, to whom, why, and when in general. That is a plot; then you have characters. Characters play a very important role. If you can recall characters are equivalent to people in the real world like you and me, they are in the world of fiction. Characters are people, animals, anything that the fiction makes use of in order to push its story, in order to push its plot, that is the character.

Then there is conflict, usually every fiction will have a conflict. It needs to have conflict. In other words, in the absence of conflict what happens is, it becomes dull, dry, and boring, therefore, it needs to have an element of conflict. And that acts as a kind of a dynamo that

acts as an imperative for the plot to push and move in different directions; conflict pushes the plot story in different directions.

And then there is the setting. It is the background, the context in which this entire story unfolds, the plot unfolds. And there is theme; theme is not the summary. Theme is like intrinsic value. What is the value when you read an entire novel or when you read a short story there is an implied meaning maybe the writer may have constructed a whole narrative in order to convey that meaning.

Sometimes it happens consciously and sometimes when you create a universe; obviously, the universe ascribes to itself a certain meaning, it is possible for us to detect certain meanings. Therefore, there is the implicit motive, implicit value system present there, and things like that. And then you have a point of view that becomes very important.

Point of view, is in fact, the narrative strategy; that is the one who is narrating this entire tale. Because ultimately when a tale is presented, when a story unfolds, somebody should narrate it. Either one of the characters in the novel or somebody from outside the world describing as if the person can see what is happening inside this fictional world and then he or she can start unfolding the narrative.

So, from whose perspective the entire thing is happening that is the point of view. Then there is tone; what is the overall tone and then what is the style. Because style and tone relate to the overall structure of this fiction, what is the implied tone here, is it one of attached, is it one of detached, is one of anger, is it one of sarcasm, what is it becomes evident when you spot the tone.

And style is the signature style of the writer because each writer has his or her unique signature style. So, that is revealed through the choice of language, through the use of metaphors, through the use of known locales, and all that. So, that is concerning style. So, these are broadly speaking different elements of fiction. Now you may ask are they fixed? Not really because when you search for elements of fiction it may vary somewhere between 5 and 10, it may vary.

Some people may prescribe 5 elements, some people may even mention 6 elements, 7 elements, and 8 elements. But generally speaking plot, character, setting, theme, and point of view are very very important and conflict, tone, and style sometimes, conflict is also there,

but sometimes that is part of the plot. In other words, these are the various elements that you find depending on whether you want to club one with the other or not that is how you want to look at it.

Now, that you are familiar with various elements of fiction. Now quickly recall the previous slide and see whether you can spot how many of these elements you can spot of these elements or at least some of these elements in that short story. Do you think there is a plot? Obviously, anything that has a story will have a plot therefore, you can find story and plot implicit there, yeah some people also consider the story as separate from the plot which is another element of fiction, but here we are treating it together.

Of course, when we come to discuss the plot we are going to discuss the subtle differences that exist between the two. Of course, the story has a plot and of course, there are characters we identified the characters, the lioness, and the vixen; there is a conflict. In fact, the conflict is caused by the taunt that the vixen uses sneering that she does so, there is a conflict and there is a theme. And what is the theme, and the setting is slightly implied maybe you can consider it as a forest because now the vixen and lioness live in the forest.

So, there is an implied setting there and what is the theme there? The theme becomes evident when that it is not the quality that matters, but the quantity. At the end of the day, though it is not very explicit when the lioness firmly says that though she has only one cub, it is the lion cub, it is not the fox cub, it is the lion cub. So, probably what is implied here is quality over quantity.

And the point of view, of course, it is been narrated from as a third person narrative we are going to discuss that in a short while and of course, the tone is very simple, style is also quite elegant. So, these are various elements of fiction you find even in that small fable though it is let us say as small as three lines or just two lines, you still find most of these elements inherently present there. You may not have realized it see when you read that you may have simply taken let us say 30- 35 seconds to read that particular sentence.

Nevertheless, without your actually realizing your subconscious mind would have spotted various elements there. So, what you already know indirectly, we are going to know consciously, we are trying to make you a little more aware of these elements of fiction. So, that when you construct a narrative because remember narrative is not something that you see in a novel or in a short story.

When you go late and your boss is angry with you, of course, that is when you start weaving a short narrative around why you are late. That is why we said when you lie and in order to justify that lie, you go on lining up lies after lies what you are doing is you are creating fiction that is why fiction also has the meaning of a lie. Or in a courtroom when a lawyer is arguing, when he or she builds a narrative around his or her case even there all these things are there. But they operate in a different context. Nevertheless, elements of fiction are what you find there.

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Muddy Road

Two monks, Tanzan and Ekido, were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling. Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection.

"Come on, girl," said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud.

Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he no longer could restrain himself. "We monks don't go near females," he told Tanzan, "especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?"

"I left the girl there," said Tanzan. "Are you still carrying her?"



Now let us go ahead and pick up one more very short story. It is called "Muddy Road."

It is an old Japanese short story and you may also have come across this short story. Generally, it's attributed to the 18th century, but we do not know maybe it is a later conversion from the oral tale into a written form.

But in its written form we can trace it some way towards the end of the 18th century or 19th century again that is not very important, what is important is the short story. Now take a look at it again, a very short short story though not as short as the vixen and the lioness, nevertheless a very short story. Just take a look at it, read it and see if you can now spot the various elements of fiction that you have understood here do you think you can see this here.

"Two monks Tanzan and Ekido were once travelling together down a muddy road a heavy rain was still falling. So, you can consider that as some kind of a setting coming around a

bend they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash unable to cross the intersection. Come on girl said Tanzan at once lifting her in his arms he carried her over the mud.

Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple then he no longer could restrain himself. We monks do not go near females he told Tanzan, especially not young and lovely ones, it is dangerous, why did you do that? I left the girl there and said Tanzan are you still carrying her I left the girl back there are you still carrying her.”

This is the short story.

See if you can spot the various elements, well if you want to solve it a little more leisurely then you can pause this video for a while and then see what are the characters, what is the plot, and the setting.

And since it is a little more chiseled short story you will be able to find all that, what is the style, what is the moral, what is the theme of it, what is the tone, what is the conflict, you will be able to trace all that. So, you can pause it and then chalk out all the details and then check your answer with what we are going to show it here. So, that is an option we have.

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Muddy Road

Plot: When two monks, Tanzan and Ekido were travelling, they came across a young girl unable to cross a bend in the muddy road; Tanzan lifts her up and helps her cross the bend; as a result, Ekido is unhappy as he feels it is against the vows they have taken; when he confronts Tanzan later, Tanzan explains that Ekido is still carrying her in the mind, while he has left her at the turn long ago.

Characters: Tanzan, Ekido and the young girl

Setting: Journeying down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling; a bend

Conflict: Ekido's disapproval; heavy silence

Point of View: Third Person Narrative; narrates

Style: Simple story and diction

Tone: Casual, sharp, unassuming and informal

Theme: Detachment; Mental burden



Now let us discuss the various elements of “The Muddy Road”. What is the plot of this short story? The plot is simple there are two monks Tanzan and Ekido, they are travelling down a muddy road and then they come across a young girl who is unable to cross a bend And then

Tanzan lifts her up and helps her in crossing the intersection, as a result, Ekido is very unhappy, he feels that it is against the vow that they have taken.

Because as monks they are not supposed to go closer to women or something like that. So, therefore, he confronts Tanzan later and Tanzan explains Ekido that he left the girl long ago whereas, Ekido is still carrying her in his mind which is as simple as the story and the plot. Now, who are the characters here; obviously, you have two characters and there is one character who does not have much of a role a young girl who is a kind of a mute character here.

Tanzan and Ekido are the two characters you have identified that right and now what is the setting here? They are journeying down a muddy road and there is heavy rainfall and there is a bend that is the background. The setting is, in other words, the background to the story when it happens where it happens all these things form the setting.

What is the conflict here? The conflict is that Ekido feels Tanzan violated the code of the so-called monkhood. Therefore, he is not very happy though the conflict is not dramatic, the heaviness is felt during the remaining part of the journey. Because they have not exchanged anything; that is what becomes evident, that is the conflict.

Now, what is the point of view? Well, the point of view is who narrates it there is a third person as if somebody is watching all that is happening here in this particular scene he or she is watching a narrator, a third-person narrator. And they can also go through what is happening in these minds therefore, they are presenting it to you, somebody who can see the entire thing.

So, here the narration does not happen through either Ekido or Tanzan, but somebody who is watching, it presents it as if somebody is watching it from above presents it, this kind of narration is called a third-person narration. What is the style you can see in terms style refers to the use of language use of diction it is a very simple story but narrates a very profound truth very great truth. And therefore, the diction is also very simple I do not think there is any word that you are not familiar with here.

Therefore you can call it a very simple diction right and then what is the tone? The tone is very casual because it is not elevated and sharp when the tone refers to the tone of the

characters here. And therefore, you can consider the tone as very sharp even when Ekido remarks that it is quite sharp and when Tanzan responds to him it is quite a sharp tone.

And unassuming and informal it is a very informal setting, informal tone, and what is the theme here? The theme is the mental barrier, the burden. Tanzan may have carried the physical burden of touching the girl and then helping her carry it whereas, Ekido is still carrying the mental burden of that even for quite some time. And moreover, it talks about the great philosophy of detachment? Detachment is the ability to develop a kind of mental distance between what you do and then thinking about it.

Acting because the action was required and then leaving the result above that is what our Bhagwat Geeta also says. Believe in your action, but leave its faith to me leave its results to me. So, Tanzan found the girl in trouble therefore, he helped her and then he forgot her there and is walking. Whereas, Ekido who thinks he is following the religion the so-called principles of monkhood is not actually following.

Because the primary principle of monkhood is the ability to develop that kind of detachment whereas, he may not have physically touched the girl, he is still carrying the girl in his mind. So, the story is beautiful, and remarkable, and its short structure reveals all these philosophical truths. So, these are the various elements if you learn to do this then automatically or intuitively you have understood the various elements of fiction.

So, these are some things that we have to keep in mind which is the reason why I began this lecture with some short stories. So, that you intuitively can grasp what is otherwise a matter of theoretical debate or discussion. Nevertheless, since it is a formal course on the literature we cannot avoid discussing the theory therefore, in the next class we are going to take up these various elements of fiction in a little more detailed manner.

And see when we come to plot, what the different elements of the plot are, if there is any structure to know the plot. When it comes to discussing characters are they just all characters, are they of one type or are they several types of characters, is there any variation in the characters as such.

And when it comes to setting what exactly is a setting all these things we are going to discuss in the next class. But remember the short story, remember these elements and it becomes easier for us to continue our discussion there alright, see you in the next class.