



Turning a Story into a Plot

Literature is the creation of order out of chaos—the creation of meaning and structure out of reality, which is otherwise meaningless and without structure. We've already studied ways to impose order on chaos: When we evoke a person, a scene, or a situation, we select the details that best get across what we want the reader to see and understand. When we write dialogue, we suggest real speech without actually reproducing it, thus imposing purpose on speech. But perhaps the most obvious way that writing imposes order on chaos is through the creation of stories and plots.

Introduction to Plot

Given the prevalence of stories in all human cultures and in our own personal lives, it's easy to think that stories occur naturally in the world and that all a writer has to do is pluck them down from the sky. But the reality is more complicated than that.

If literature is the creation of order out of chaos, it follows that all fiction has a structure. Even for narrative works that don't have plots, all fiction can be broken down into a few fundamental components:

- A situation or context,
- At least one character,
- A conflict of some sort, and
- A resolution to that conflict (closure).

All these elements are inextricably linked in every work of fiction, and if you're missing one of them, your narrative won't work.

The initial situation needs to be dramatically productive, that is, it needs to be a situation that will produce a conflict, and the character needs to have some sort of relationship to that situation. The conflict can be external to the character, or it can be an internal conflict within the character, and the resolution must resolve that conflict in some believable and satisfying way, though not necessarily happily or pleasantly.

All good fiction must also possess a quality called “profluence,” which is the feeling of forward momentum (that you're getting somewhere). Whether it's a highly plotted complicated story or a modernist, plotless masterpiece, such as *Mrs. Dalloway*, a book or story needs to give the reader a reason to keep turning pages.

Profluence doesn't necessarily mean that a story has a plot per se; there are other reasons besides plot to keep reading. Sometimes, you read to gain a deeper understanding of the central character, as is the case in Anton Chekhov's plotless story “The Kiss.” Or you might read simply to inhabit a strange and richly detailed world or to enjoy an author's writing style.

What is *Plot*?

John Gardner, (*The Art of Fiction*) called plotting “the hardest job a writer has.” E. M. Forster wrote that a story “can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely, it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next.”

Take a situation like Sarah and Brad, a couple whose marriage was on the rocks. We could take that same situation and tell it from any number of different points of view—Sarah's, Brad's, a mutual friend's, even from a godlike, omniscient point of view. We could also play with the order of events, telling the story in a strictly chronological fashion or starting from the moment when one tells the other they're unhappy, then showing their previous relationship in flashbacks.

Done well, each version of Sarah and Brad's story could be satisfying and meaningful, yet each would be completely different from all the others. Plotting is an incredibly powerful tool, but like any powerful tool, it needs careful handling. If you don't take enough control over it, your plot will seem loose and formless, with no forward momentum -a series of events that has no particular importance or obvious meaning. But if you use narrative too forcefully, you could end up with something melodramatic, contrived, and unbelievable.

How do we create stories out of formless events and present an order that's satisfying and lifelike? Forster clarified this problem by making a distinction between stories and plots. In *Aspects of the Novel*, he defines a story as simply a series of events linked by their chronology, but he defines a plot as a series of events linked by cause and effect. Story is what? – Plot is Why?

Story-Plot Continuum

We might think of the same distinction between stories and plots as opposite ends of a continuum, with the most basic, chronological story at one end of the continuum and the most subtle plot at the other.

The fact that children insist on hearing the same story told in exactly the same way reinforces the idea that with a good story, it's not just how it turns out that counts but how you get there.

The simplest and often the most addictive stories are the ones that simply answer the question “And then?” These are the stories we like best as children, the ones that we beg our parents to finish for us because we can't stand not knowing how they turn out. As we get older, the desire to learn the answer to “And then?” never really leaves us. Much of the pleasure we derive from even a mediocre Hollywood blockbuster comes from watching the story unfold one plot point at a time—even if the story is predictable.

The Literary Middle

Near the middle of the continuum between story and plot are such blockbuster series as the Harry Potter books or the epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*Game of Thrones* on HBO). The overarching story of each of these series of novels moves relentlessly forward chronologically, yet each is more complicated than a simple chronology.

Much of the narrative momentum of Harry Potter involves Harry figuring out what happened between his parents and the villain Voldemort before he was born. We get this information in

flashbacks, stories from other characters, mysterious documents, and magic visions, all in a mixed up chronology of the backstory. Each of these non-chronological additions moves the Harry Potter books away from Forster's simple chronological "tapeworm" -what will happen to Harry next? and toward his idea of a plot -why is Harry so important?

The construction of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is even more complicated. The fictional world of Westeros has a long, convoluted history that precedes the events of the first book, and the story is told from the point of view of many characters, sometimes returning to earlier events told from a different point of view. The books have tremendous forward momentum, but still, much of the pleasure in reading them comes from elements other than the plot. We want to know the answer to "And then?" but there is much to savor that doesn't relate to that question.

The Literary End of the Continuum

At the literary end of the story-plot continuum is Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim*. This book has one of the most complex plots in modern literature, yet the basic events of the story are fairly simple.

If *Lord Jim* is told chronologically, it's a simple tale about a young man who makes a bad mistake and tries to redeem himself. But told by Conrad, through various narrators, with the story starting in the middle and looping backward and forward, *Lord Jim* becomes an intimate and intense psychological study of a character who is destroyed by his idealistic conception of honor rather than redeemed by it.

Despite the complexity of Conrad's plot, *Lord Jim* may be the most realistic of all the narratives mentioned here. Chronological narratives seem lifelike because we experience our own lives in chronological order. Conrad's method doesn't mimic the way Jim's life happens, but it does mimic, in a very lifelike way, the manner in which most of us learn about other people in our lives. The result is a much more intense and intimate experience of the character because it forces readers to assemble the chronology of Jim's life, leading to greater understanding and compassion.

It isn't true that simple storytelling is inferior, and complex, non-chronological, modernist plotting is superior. But it is true that the two approaches reach different regions of a reader's heart and brain and serve different functions for the writer.

Storylines of the examples

Harry Potter, a boy who learns on his eleventh birthday that he is the orphaned son of two powerful wizards and possesses unique magical powers of his own. He is summoned from his life as an unwanted child to become a student at Hogwarts, an English boarding school for wizards. There, he meets several friends who become his closest allies and help him discover the truth about his parents' mysterious deaths.

A Song of Ice and Fire takes place in a fictional world, primarily upon a continent called Westeros. but also on a large landmass to the east, known as Essos. Most of the characters are human but as the series progresses other races are introduced, such as the cold and menacing. Others from the far North and fire-breathing dragons from the East, both races thought to be extinct. There are three principal storylines in the series: the chronicling of a dynastic civil war for control of Westeros between several competing families; the rising threat of the Others who dwell beyond an immense wall of ice that forms Westeros' northern border; and

the journey of Daenerys Targaryen, the exiled daughter of a king who was murdered in another civil war fifteen years previously and now seeks to return to Westeros and claim her rightful throne. As the series progresses, all three storylines become increasingly interwoven and dependent on each other. The series is told in the limited third-person through the eyes of a number of POV characters. By the end of the fourth volume, there have been twenty-five such characters, although these include eight who only appear once apiece.

Lord Jim. Jim, a romantic young Englishman, seeks his fortune as a sailor in the seas of South and Southeast Asia in the late 19th century. Even before his career at sea has properly gotten started, he becomes the first mate of a rusting old freighter carrying Muslim pilgrims across the Indian Ocean to Mecca. When the freighter, called the Patna, collides with some unseen object in the water and threatens to sink, the rest of the crew prepares to abandon ship, leaving the pilgrims to die. At the last minute, Jim betrays his own sense of honor by jumping into the lifeboat along with the other crew members.

After Jim and the rest of the crew are rescued and arrive in port, they learn that the Patna didn't sink. The rest of the crew disappears, but Jim turns himself in to accept responsibility for what happened. At a tribunal of sea captains, he is stripped of his seaman's license, and his career and reputation are ruined.

After the trial, Jim drifts from job to job across Southeast Asia until he decides to accept a dangerous job far upriver on a remote island, where he helps a village defeat an oppressive warlord and win its freedom. By the end of the story, it looks as though Jim has found peace and redemption at last when, in a final series of incidents, his past returns to destroy him.

Suggested Reading

E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*.

John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*.

J. R. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*.

*Much of the material presented here is based on a lecture from The Great Courses on "Writing Great Fiction" and [Wikipedia](#).