

paper: MISSING WOMAN—some desiccated as jerky and much the same color, some moldy from lying beneath roof leaks, and all of them used hard, covered with tarry handprints, the marks of boot heels, some bright blue with the remnants of paint used on the shutters years ago, one wrapped in newspaper nipple to knee.

When you live a long way out you make your own fun.

## Reading and Reacting

1. Which of the stories in this chapter do you see as most conventional? Which seems *least* conventional? Why?
2. Does every story seem complete? What, if anything, seems to be missing from each story that might be present in a longer story?
3. If you were going to add material to “Snow,” what would you add? Why?
4. How would “Accident” be different if the writer had used *I* instead of *you* to express the narrator’s point of view?
5. In “Incarnations of Burned Children,” the writer calls his characters “the Daddy,” “the Mommy,” and “the child” instead of naming them. Why do you think he does this?
6. Some stories in this chapter—such as “Prue” and “Buffalo Soldiers”—include dialogue; others include none (or very little). How would these stories—for example, “Girl”—be different if dialogue (or more dialogue) were added? What kind of dialogue would be useful?

**7. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Writing for *Studies in Short Fiction*, William C. Hamlin describes the essential characteristics of the short-short.

Perhaps in no kind of fiction other than the short-short can Poe’s “rules” for the “tale” be so fully adapted and realized. He wrote about organic unity and singleness of effect and the totality of that effect. In the short-short there is simply no room for sub-plotting, for Jamesian penetration, for slowly developing tensions, for any kind of byplay. The writer is trying to go from A to B in the shortest time consistent with purpose and reason. If he or she is successful, then the reader is richer by a minor masterpiece.

Do you think all the stories in this sampler meet Hamlin’s criteria for success? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER 6



## PLOT

Alfred Hitchcock’s 1951 film *Strangers on a Train*, based on a suspense novel by Patricia Highsmith, offers an intriguing premise: two men, strangers, each can murder someone the other wishes dead, because they have no apparent connection to their victims, both can escape suspicion. Many people would describe this ingenious scheme as the film’s “plot,” but in fact it is simply the gimmick around which the complex plot revolves. Certainly a clever twist can be an important ingredient of a story’s plot, but plot is more than “what happens”: it is how what happens is revealed, the way in which a story’s events are arranged. Plot is shaped



Scene from Alfred Hitchcock’s 1951 film *Strangers on a Train*.

Source: ©Warner Bros./The Kobal Collection

by causal connections—historical, social, and personal—by the interaction between characters, and by the juxtaposition of events. In *Strangers on a Train*, the plot that unfolds is complex: one character directs the events and determines their order while the other character is drawn into the action against his will. The same elements that enrich the plot of the film—unexpected events, conflict, suspense, flashbacks, foreshadowing—can also enrich the plot of a work of short fiction.



## Conflict

Readers' interest and involvement are heightened by a story's **conflict**, the struggle between opposing forces that emerges as the action develops. This conflict is a clash between the **protagonist**, a story's principal character, and an **antagonist**, someone or something presented in opposition to the protagonist. Sometimes the antagonist is a villain; more often, it is a character who represents a conflicting point of view or advocates a course of action different from the one the protagonist follows. Sometimes the antagonist is not a character at all but a situation (for instance, war or poverty) or an event (for example, a natural disaster, such as a flood or a storm) that challenges the protagonist. In other stories, the protagonist may struggle against a supernatural force, or the conflict may occur within a character's mind. It may, for example, be a struggle between two moral choices, such as whether to stay at home and care for an aging parent or to leave and make a new life.

## Stages of Plot

A work's plot explores one or more conflicts, moving from *exposition* through a series of *complications* to a *climax* and, finally, to a *resolution*.

During a story's **exposition**, the writer presents the basic information readers need to understand the events that follow. Typically, the exposition sets the story in motion: it establishes the scene, introduces the major characters, and perhaps suggests the major events or conflicts to come.

Sometimes a single sentence can present a story's exposition clearly and economically, giving readers information vital to their understanding of the plot that will unfold. For example, the opening sentence of Amy Tan's "Two Kinds" (p. 457)—"My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America"—reveals an important trait of a central character. Similarly, the opening sentence of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (p. 304)—"The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green"—introduces the picture-perfect setting that is essential to the story's irony. At other times, as in John Updike's "A&P" (p. 131), a more fully developed exposition section establishes the story's setting, introduces the main characters, and suggests possible conflicts. Finally, in some experimental stories, a distinct exposition component may be absent, as it is in and Amanda Holzer's "Love and Other Catastrophes: A Mix Tape" (p. 89).

As the plot progresses, the story's conflict unfolds through a series of complications that eventually lead readers to the story's climax. As it develops, the story may include several crises. A **crisis** is a peak in the story's action, a moment of considerable tension or importance. The **climax** is the point of greatest tension or importance, the scene that presents a story's decisive action or event.

The final stage of plot, the **resolution**, or **denouement** (French for "untying of the knot"), draws the action to a close and accounts for all remaining loose ends.

Sometimes this resolution is achieved with the help of a **deus ex machina** (Latin for "a god from a machine"), an intervention of some force or agent previously extraneous to the story—for example, the sudden arrival of a long-lost relative or a fortuitous inheritance, the discovery of a character's true identity, or a last-minute rescue by a character not previously introduced. Usually, however, the resolution is more plausible: all the events lead logically and convincingly (though not necessarily predictably) to the resolution. Sometimes the ending of a story is indefinite—that is, readers are not quite sure what the protagonist will do or what will happen next. This kind of resolution, although it may leave some readers feeling cheated, has its advantages: it mirrors the complexity of life, where closure rarely occurs, and it can keep readers involved in the story as they try to understand the significance of its ending or to decide how conflicts should have been resolved.

## Order and Sequence

A writer may present a story's events in strict chronological order, presenting each event in the sequence in which it actually takes place. More often, however, especially in relatively modern fiction, writers do not present events chronologically. Instead, they present incidents out of expected order, or in no apparent order. For example, a writer may choose to begin in **medias res** (Latin for "in the midst of things"), starting with a key event and later going back in time to explain events that preceded it, as Tillie Olsen does in "I Stand Here Ironing" (p. 180). Or, a writer can decide to begin a work of fiction at the end and then move back to reconstruct events that led up to the final outcome, as William Faulkner does in "A Rose for Emily" (p. 115). Many sequences are possible as the writer manipulates events to create interest, suspense, confusion, wonder, or some other effect.

Writers who wish to depart from strict chronological order use *flashbacks* and *foreshadowing*. A **flashback** moves out of sequence to examine an event or situation that occurred before the time in which the story's action takes place. A character can remember an earlier event, or a story's narrator can re-create an earlier situation. For example, in Alberto Alvaro Ríos's "The Secret Lion" (p. 453), the adult narrator looks back at events that occurred when he was twelve years old and then moves further back in time to consider related events that occurred when he was five. In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" (p. 219), the entire story is told as a flashback. Flashbacks are valuable because they can substitute for or supplement formal exposition by presenting background readers need to understand a story's events. One disadvantage of flashbacks is that, because they interrupt the natural flow of events, they may be intrusive or distracting. Such distractions, however, can be an advantage if the writer wishes to reveal events gradually and subtly or to obscure causal links.

**Foreshadowing** is the introduction early in a story of situations, events, characters, or objects that hint at things to come. Typically, a seemingly simple



element—a chance remark, a natural occurrence, a trivial event—is eventually revealed to have great significance. For example, a dark cloud passing across the sky during a wedding can foreshadow future problems for the marriage. Foreshadowing allows a writer to hint provocatively at what is to come, so that readers only gradually become aware of a particular detail's role in a story. Thus, foreshadowing helps readers sense what will occur and grow increasingly involved as they see the likelihood (or even the inevitability) of a particular outcome.

In addition to using conventional techniques like flashbacks and foreshadowing, writers may experiment with sequence by substantially tampering with—or even dispensing with—chronological order. (An example is the scrambled chronology of “A Rose for Emily.”) In such instances, the experimental form enhances interest and encourages readers to become involved with the story as they work to untangle or reorder the events and determine their logical and causal connections.

Today, the computer has given a new fluidity to the nature of plot, with hypertext stories appearing on the Internet, where stories may be constructed to permit readers to actually participate in the creation of plot.

### ✓ CHECKLIST Writing about Plot

- What happens in the story?
- Where does the story's formal exposition section end? What do readers learn about characters in this section? What do readers learn about setting? What possible conflicts are suggested here?
- What is the story's central conflict? What other conflicts are presented? Who is the protagonist? Who (or what) serves as the antagonist?
- Identify the story's crisis or crises.
- Identify the story's climax.
- How is the story's central conflict resolved? Is this resolution plausible? Satisfying?
- Which part of the story constitutes the resolution? Do any problems remain unresolved? Does any uncertainty remain? If so, does this uncertainty strengthen or weaken the story? Would another ending be more effective?
- How are the story's events arranged? Are they presented in chronological order? What events are presented out of logical sequence? Does the story use foreshadowing? Flashbacks? Are the causal connections between events clear? Logical? If not, can you explain why?



Source: ©AP Photo/Tina Fineberg

**BEN KATCHOR** (1951– ), born in Brooklyn, New York, has published numerous comics, or “picture-stories,” in a range of publications, including the Jewish-American newspaper the *Forward* and the monthly magazine *Metropolis*. Much of his work focuses on the Jewish-American immigrant experience and the humor surrounding cultural assimilation. His graphic novels include *Cheap Novelties: The Pleasures of Urban Decay* (1991), *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer: Stories* (1996), *The Jew of New York* (1998), and *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer: The Beauty Supply District* (2000). A fifth graphic novel, *The Dairy Restaurant*, is forthcoming. Winner of a Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, Katchor currently teaches visual narrative at the Parsons School of Design in New York City.

**Cultural Context** Before air-conditioning window units became widespread in the 1950s, residents of urban apartment houses often kept their windows open to get some relief from the sweltering city heat. Open windows provided opportunities for apartment dwellers to socialize with neighbors and observe neighborhood goings-on, as depicted in this graphic story. Between 1948 and 1953, sales in the United States of air-conditioning window units spiked from 74,000 to 1,045,000. As a result, more and more apartment dwellers began shutting their windows, bringing the era of “window gossip” to a close.

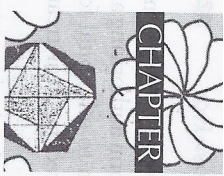
## Goner Pillow Company (2006)

This graphic story starts on the next page. →

### Reading and Reacting

1. What actually happens during the course of “The Goner Pillow Company” (p. 224)? How much time do you think goes by from first panel to last?
  2. In what sense does the first panel of the story provide exposition? Does the story include any foreshadowing? Does it include any flashbacks?
  3. In panels 7–9, the narrator poses a series of questions. How do the illustrations answer these questions? How does panel 10 answer the questions?
  4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** How are the members of the Goner family different in terms of their attitude toward “the home entertainment industry”? Which family member's attitude is most like your own?
  5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Ben Katchor's illustrations have been praised for their depiction of an almost timeless urban landscape that seems at once both long gone and immediately present. Paul Buhle, a lecturer in American civilization at Brown University, notes how Katchor is particularly adept at “reconstructing the ancientness of a certain civilization and its odd but also eerily familiar habitants” and at capturing “a disappearing urban ambience.” Katchor describes his inspiration for “Goner Pillow Company” by explaining, “I first saw a window pillow being used in the front room of my grandmother's apartment on Knickerbocker Avenue in Brooklyn, circa 1956.”
- How do the words and images in this story work together to recreate a “disappearing urban ambience”?





## CHAPTER 7

## CHARACTER

A **character** is a fictional representation of a person—usually (but not necessarily) a psychologically realistic depiction. Writers may develop characters through their actions, through their reactions to situations or to other characters, through their physical appearance, through their speech and gestures and expressions, and even through their names.

Generally speaking, characters' personality traits, as well as their appearances and their feelings and beliefs, are communicated to readers in two ways. First, readers can be *told* about characters. Third-person narrators can provide information about what characters are doing, saying, and thinking; what experiences they have had; what they look like; how they are dressed; and so on. Sometimes narrators also offer analysis of and judgments about a character's behavior or motivation. Similarly, first-person narrators can tell us about themselves or about other characters. Thus, Sammy in John Updike's "A&P" (p. 131) tells readers what he thinks about his job and about the girls who come into the supermarket where he works. He also tells us what various characters look like and describes their actions, attitudes, speech, and gestures. (For more information about first-person narrators, see Chapter 9, "Point of View.")

Alternatively, aspects of a character's personality and beliefs may be revealed through his or her actions, dialogue, or thoughts. For instance, Sammy's vivid fantasies and his disapproval of his customers' lives suggest to readers that he is something of a nonconformist; however, Sammy himself does not actually tell us this.

### Round and Flat Characters

In his influential 1927 work *Aspects of the Novel*, English novelist E. M. Forster classifies characters as either **round** (well developed, closely involved in and responsive to the action) or **flat** (barely developed or stereotypical). To a great extent, these categories are still useful. In an effective story, the major characters are usually complex and fully developed; if they are not, readers will not care what happens to them. Sometimes readers are encouraged to become involved with the characters, even to identify with them, and this empathy is possible only when we know something about the characters—their strengths and weaknesses, their likes and dislikes. In some cases, of course, a story can be effective even when its central characters are not well developed. Sometimes, in fact, a story's effectiveness is enhanced by an *absence* of character development, as in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (p. 304).

Readers often expect characters to behave as "real people" in their situation might behave. Real people are not perfect, and realistic characters cannot be perfect either. The flaws that are revealed as round characters are developed—greed, gullibility, naïveté, shyness, a quick temper, or a lack of insight or judgment or tolerance or even intelligence—make them believable. In modern fiction, the protagonist is seldom if ever the noble "hero"; more often, he or she is at least partly a victim, someone to whom unpleasant things happen and someone who is sometimes ill equipped to cope with events.

Unlike major characters, minor characters are frequently not well developed. Often they are flat, perhaps acting as *foils* for the protagonist. A *foil* is a supporting character whose role in the story is to highlight a major character by presenting a contrast with him or her. For instance, in "A&P," Stokese, another young checkout clerk, is a foil for Sammy. Because he is a little older than Sammy and seems to have none of Sammy's imagination, restlessness, or nonconformity, Stokese suggests what Sammy might become if he were to continue to work at the A&P. Some flat characters are **stock characters**, easily identifiable types who behave so predictably that readers can readily recognize them. The kindly old priest, the tough young bully, the ruthless business executive, and the reckless adventurer are all stock characters. Some flat characters can even be **caricatures**, characterized by a single dominant trait, such as miserliness, or even by one physical trait, such as nearsightedness.

### Dynamic and Static Characters

Characters may also be classified as either *dynamic* or *static*. A **dynamic character** grows and changes in the course of a story, developing as he or she reacts to events and to other characters. In "A&P," for instance, Sammy's decision to speak out in defense of the girls—as well as the events that lead him to do so—changes him. His view of the world has changed at the end of the story, and as a result his position in the world may change too. A **static character** may face the same challenge a dynamic character might face but will remain essentially unchanged: a static character who was selfish and arrogant will remain selfish and arrogant, regardless of the nature of the story's conflict. In the fairy tale "Cinderella," for example, the title character is as sweet and good-natured at the end of the story—despite her mistreatment by her family—as she is at the beginning. Her situation may have changed, but her character has not.

Whereas round characters tend to be dynamic, flat characters tend to be static. But even a very complex, well-developed major character may be static; sometimes, in fact, the point of a story may hinge on a character's inability to change. A familiar example is the title character in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (p. 115), who lives a wasted, empty life, at least in part because she is unwilling or unable to accept that the world around her and the people in it have changed.

A story's minor characters are often static; their growth is not usually relevant to the story's development. Moreover, we usually do not learn enough about a minor character's traits, thoughts, actions, or motivation to determine whether the character changes significantly.



## Motivation

Because round characters are complex, they are not always easy to understand. They may act unpredictably, just as real people do. They wrestle with decisions, resist or succumb to temptation, make mistakes, ask questions, search for answers, hope and dream, rejoice and despair. What is important is not whether we approve of a character's actions but whether those actions are *plausible*—whether the actions make sense in light of what we know about the character. We need to understand a character's **motivation**—the reasons behind his or her behavior—or we will not believe or accept that behavior. For instance, given Sammy's age, his dissatisfaction with his job, and his desire to impress the young woman he calls Queenie, the decision he makes at the end of the story is perfectly plausible. Without having established his motivation, Updike could not have expected readers to accept Sammy's actions.

Of course, even when readers get to know a character, they still are not able to predict how a complex, round character will behave in a given situation; only a flat character is predictable. The tension that develops as readers wait to see

### ✓ CHECKLIST Writing about Character

- Who is the story's main character? Who are the other major characters?
- Who are the minor characters? What roles do they play in the story?
- How would the story be different without them?
- What do the major characters look like? Is their physical appearance important?
- What are the major characters' most notable? personality traits?
- What are the major characters' likes and dislikes? Their strengths and weaknesses?
- What are the main character's most strongly held feelings and beliefs?
- What are we told about the major characters' backgrounds and prior experiences? What can we infer?
- Are the characters round or flat?
- Are the characters dynamic or static?
- Does the story include any stock characters? Does any character serve as a foil?
- Do the characters act in a way that is consistent with how readers expect them to act?
- With which characters are readers likely to be most sympathetic? Least sympathetic?

how a character will act or react, and thus how a story's conflict will be resolved, is what holds readers' interest and keeps them involved as a story's action unfolds.



Source: ©Sean Gallup/Getty Images

**ART SPIEGELMAN** (1948– ), born in Stockholm, Sweden, was raised in Queens, New York. He is arguably one of the most influential comic artists of the underground movement, which began (thanks in large part to R. Crumb) in the 1960s. In collaboration with his wife, Spiegelman founded the comics magazine *RAW* in 1980, and his comics have been featured in such publications as the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and the *Village Voice*. His two-part masterpiece, the Pulitzer Prize–winning *Maus* (1986) and *Maus II* (1991), are based on his parents' struggle for survival during the Holocaust. Collections of his work include *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), one of the *New York Times Book Review*'s 100 Notable Books of 2004.

**Cultural Context** The young narrator of “Eye Ball” suffers from amblyopia, or “lazy eye,” the most common cause of impaired vision in children. When one eye develops slowly or improperly, the stronger eye overcompensates, creating the kind of distorted vision depicted in this story. Amblyopia often develops in children before age seven, and early treatment (in the form of an eye patch or other device to help the brain learn to use the weaker eye) is crucial to correct the problem.

### Eye Ball (2006)

—This graphic story starts on the next page.—

## Reading and Reacting

1. According to the narrator of “Eye Ball” (p. 258), what are the major traits cartoonists must possess? How are these traits in conflict with the characteristics of a typical “boy in 1950s America”?
2. This graphic story is limited to two settings, the ballfield and the library. Are these two settings sufficient to illustrate the narrator's major problem, or would other settings be helpful?
3. The last panel alludes to Franz Kafka's “The Metamorphosis,” a novella in which an alienated office worker turns overnight into a large bug. What do you think the narrator means by his final comment?

**4. JOURNAL ENTRY** The action in this graphic story is largely propelled forward by narrative. Write a sentence or two of dialogue for each panel that lacks it.

**5. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In a 2006 interview with the *Nation*, Art Spiegelman states:

Cartoons have a kind of acidic potency for clarifying a situation because they're reductive. It also seems to me that cartoons are defamatory by nature. . . . If anything, I think the cartoons have gotten too damn polite in America over the last decades. The cartoons have to be gag cartoons instead of emblematicizations and essentializations of situations, which is what they used to be. When one manages to do that, it usually gets someone upset.

Do you think “Eye Ball” is “too damn polite,” or do you think it is “defamatory by nature”? Explain your answer.