

A Definition of *Story*

by
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Years ago, when the earth was still rife with dinosaurs and the mammals were just beginning to explore the common environs, I pondered the question of *story*—certainly I already knew the typical definition: that a dramatic story concerned a protagonist in conflict with some sort of antagonist (whether human or nonhuman), and that that conflict must be resolved by the end of the story to satisfy all involved; the niftier the resolution the better the story. It served me well in those times because, let's face it, this definition fits the dramatic structure of pretty much all commercial fiction.

But I wanted a subtler definition, one that included literary fiction as well as commercial fiction. In my heart of hearts, I knew that a great deal of so-called literary fiction lacked the underlying structure that less ambitious fiction possessed, and that the absence of that structure weakened it. I wrote my share of character portraits, or characters in emotional crises, or characters confronted with the problems of life that shared none of the immediacy of less ornate works about haunted houses and mutant infiltrations of American society. And yet there were literary works that possessed the same sense of immediacy; what was the difference?

The difference lay in a modified definition of story, a definition that I developed to satisfy my need for a more flexible underlying structure. And flexibility is the key to producing varied literary works in a variety of genres. I believe this structure *can* be applied to all effective fiction in every imaginable genre and from every work from history. I also believe that all great works of literature possess necessarily similar literary traits that conform to the following philosophy:

A story is a chronicling of events about a defined character experiencing a problem/dilemma in his or her environment and engaged in the process of finding some resolution.

This is not so far evolved from my primordial understanding of story, and yet it makes all the difference when applied to literary fiction.

In most examples of commercial fiction we are trained as readers to expect a precise mathematical formula that reads something like the following: $X + Y = Z$. X being the protagonist, Y being the conflict, and Z being the resolution. But in the above definition we have some additional variables that need to be considered before the dramatic structure can be called complete.

A story is a *chronicling of events*—

‘Chronicling of events’ refers to a series of things that happen to the character or characters in a story that follow a logical progression and which prompts the character or characters along the path of the story toward the story’s resolution. The keyword here is *logical*—but not in mathematical terms, in the sense that the events, given the character’s personality, history and position in the environment in which he finds himself, follow a reasonable line of cause and effect.

—about a *defined character*—

And how is a character defined? A character is defined by his or her personal history and environment. This proviso demands that the writer closely attend the imaginary history of his characters in order to create a feasible psychological reference for the actions that will take place as the story progresses. And that psychology must react in accordance with the restrictions and requirements of the physical and social environment in which it finds itself. The appropriateness of a character’s reactions to the demands of his or her environment is the writer’s greatest challenge. When we, as readers, say that a character ‘comes to life’ we are reacting to the realistic portrayal of an imaginary personality—so cohesive is the matter of cause-and-effect as it relates to a character’s actions that we accept the truth of that character’s perceived reality. The character makes sense to us because the relationship between the character’s psychology and the circumstances of his or her environment are entirely appropriate. Which leads us to the following:

—experiencing a *problem or dilemma* in his or her *environment*—

The terms ‘problem’ and ‘dilemma’ may not be used interchangeably. A problem may be something confronting the protagonist that is altogether indifferent to the protagonist’s self-interest. A disease, or an automobile accident, or a sudden house fire may be a problem for the protagonist, and yet still presents an intrusion into the protagonist’s life that must be addressed. A dilemma, on the other hand, suggests opposing motives of self-interest for the protagonist. Choosing between two lovers, for instance, or facing the difficulties of administering control over a self-destructive child. Though they provide qualitatively different influences on the protagonist, they both must be addressed and resolved.

The term ‘environment’ is vitally important, because it means much more than ‘location’ or ‘setting’. ‘Environment’ is defined by the physical, cultural and social surroundings of the protagonist and influences every thought and decision that the protagonist has and makes. A protagonist’s thought process cannot exceed the influences of his personal history and immediate environment, no matter how vast that history or intricate the environment.

—and *engaged in the process* of finding some *solution*.

In the hardcore world of writing by the numbers this means that some logical conclusion must be reached after the protagonist has applied some problem-solving skills to the conflict that he or she is experiencing.

But in my personal definition (and by the evidence I have seen as a reader) the process need not be so definitive to be satisfying.

In the subtle qualifier 'engaged in the process' the writer will find ninety percent of the dramatic story, because it is the protagonist's experience suffering the effects of his or her problem or dilemma that the human heart is explored and human motivation is examined. This, in effect, is what William Faulkner referred to when he mentioned "the human heart in conflict with itself" in his acceptance speech for the Noble Prize.

And what about the term 'resolution'? What exactly does that mean?

The resolution refers to the state that the characters find themselves at an end-point in the time of the story which illustrates what has happened after the protagonist has confronted the problem/dilemma, assessed its meaning, and has acted upon it—and this does not necessarily require a happy or unhappy ending, only an ending that is appropriate given the protagonist's circumstances and his or her ability to affect a meaningful change in them. The end-point of the story is that moment in the time of the story when the events that have transpired find their most powerful moment of reflection. This is different from James Joyce's concept of 'epiphany', where the realization of the meaning of events is occasioned; in the above definition the end-point can occur even before the 'epiphany', since the characters in a story don't necessarily have to perceive the impact of the events surrounding their lives. Or the end-point can occur after the epiphany, when the relics of a character's experiences must be repaired, denied or further demolished.

The story, then, is an organic whole, providing a unity of character, environment, and cause-and-effect of circumstance that can only be satisfying if all of the aspects of the definition are adequately acquitted.

The point of the above definition is simply that a story is an organic structure much like the human body: each part of the structure depends on the rest of the component parts to make a whole entity. And so the events in a story depend on the characters' personal histories, predilections and specific social environments in order to provide adequate motivation for the actions, thoughts and reactions of those characters. The truth that we find in the lives of fictional characters is tested by our perceptions of how we, ourselves, function in the truth of our own lives. Our lives make sense to us because of who we perceive we are, how we've grown up, how we react to given events in our lives, and how we feel when confronted by similar circumstances. We needn't rely on mathematical principles to find a coherent structure in a fictional story—the most effective stories are those that present an organic structure wherein the specifics of one aspect of the story depend on every other aspect of the story.

A perfect example of the above definition can be found in William Faulkner's well-known short story, "A Rose for Emily". Though dated by Faulkner's turn of the century deep-south perspective, this story is as near to perfectly executed as any I have ever read. The story concerns the death of the main character, Emily Grierson, who has grown up in the restrictive household of her father, a retired colonel, who had maintained a conspicuous Southern decorum that prohibited his daughter from entertaining gentleman visitors. After his death, Emily falls in love with a man named Homer Barron who apparently is willing to marry her, but then disappears from her life amid the suspicions of the townspeople

that she has been sadly jilted. Only after her death do the townspeople—represented by a magnificently unobtrusive first-person narrator—discover that she actually poisoned her suitor before he could leave her and had kept his remains in her bed where she nightly joined him in sleep.

The reason why this murder was not detected years earlier was because of the unflinching respect that Miss Emily demanded in her relationship with the town, accorded by her family name and social history, and the respect the townspeople accorded her in her antiquated social milieu. The intense smell of the rotting corpse was attributed to poor hygiene, and countered by the townspeople by covert applications of lime after the attending judge refused to confront Miss Emily directly about the matter. The character of Miss Emily is carefully crafted, as well as her motivation for her actions. Her early years were spent in the company of a father with a severe discipline for her appetites—appetites that were only set free upon his death. Her inability to confront reality is illustrated by her reluctance to even admit that her father has died—she delays the burial for days because of her refusal to believe the reality of her situation, and her father's remains must be quickly buried because of it. And when this fragile psychology is once again tested by the man with whom she has fallen in love, she has only one way (in her mind) of retaining that love when he threatens to leave her—and so she murders him, and covers up the murder by relying on her gentry. And because the town retains a grudging respect for that estimation of social class, they abide by her demands.

The problem/dilemma aspect of the story comes in many forms: Emily has a problem first because her father refuses to let her entertain gentleman friends, and second because the man with whom she finally falls in love is determined to leave her. The townspeople have their own problems and dilemmas: removing her father's body for burial, confronting Miss Emily about the smell in her house, and getting her to pay taxes—and each problem and dilemma is addressed according to the personalities and social environment involved.

I have simplified the scope of the narrative to emphasize the interrelationships of the social environment to the personal histories of the characters. The story would not work at all without the dependence of one aspect of the story to another. I invite you to find this work and examine it carefully for its subtle mastery in using the above definition of story. And I invite you to apply this definition to other meaningful works, and to those works of fiction that seem to fail in one way or another. I believe these works fail because they do not complete the requirements of the organic whole. And that is where the best of fiction can be found.