Glossary of Short Fiction Terms

The following terms are common to the study and analysis of short fiction, though many also apply to other literary genres—novels, drama, poetry, and non-fiction. Italicized words in the entries refer to additional terms that are briefly defined or defined elsewhere in the Glossary.

(the) Absurd: Worldview or perspective in which the breakdown of political order or religious faith conveys meaninglessness. Characteristics of absurd stories often include non-realistic characters, circular plots, lack of exposition or motivation, incoherence, miscommunication, contradiction, inconsistency, and randomness. Anton Chekhov's and Nikolai Gogol's stories portrayed futile existences and were forerunners of the modernist tradition of the absurd. A reaction to World War II, 1950s "theatre of the absurd" reinvigorated European theatre. The absurdist view, though often comic, stresses human haplessness or irrationality. Elements of the absurd are present in Kafka's "Report for an Academy" and Böll's "My Sad Face." See *(the) Surreal*.

Allegory: Narrative in which characters, actions, places, and objects are given abstract qualities, resulting in two meanings, the literal and the symbolic. To avoid censorship, many writers resort to allegory to suggest meanings outside the narrative. Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" has sometimes been read as allegory, the rooms in the abbey representing the stages of life from birth to death. The search for unattainable beauty in Calvino's "The Origin of Birds" also suggests an allegorical dimension.

Allusion: *See* "Glossary of Poetry Terms."

Ambiguity refers to qualities in or properties of a text that make a specific interpretation uncertain or unstable, or suggest many possible meanings derived through re-reading. In general, "ambiguous" or "open-ended" modern stories stimulate the reader's imagination. Stories often reveal many levels of insight, making literary criticism possible. A similar term, *indeterminacy* refers to the resistance of a text to definitive readings. See *Author-reader relationship.*

Archetype: "Primordial image" that, according to psychologist Carl Jung, represents part of the collective unconscious of humans. Though it is a common practice to study poems, drama, and fiction through images within literary works, contemporary Jungian depth psychologists like James Hillman and Madeline Sonik suggest archetypes are basic structures of the psyche that unite authors, characters, and readers. Archetypal images appear in myths, dreams, rituals, and other collective experiences. Writers often use them to give depth and resonance. Examples include the shadow ("other") self (Lawrence's "The Blind Man," Cortázar's "Axolotl"), the animal guide (Van Camp's "Sky Burial"), the journey, quest, or the descent to the underworld (Wharton's "A Journey"), the devil (Ross's "The Runaway"), the old man, the wise mother, and other cross-cultural images, characters, settings, and occurrences. See *Motif.*

Atmosphere: See *Mood.*

Author-Reader relationship can be defined as a set of potentialities that exist between the author and reader of a text. Research in the last 40 years has shown that authors often have specific expectations of their readers; the *implied reader* is one who possesses the "competencies" to respond to cues in a literary text. Although reader-response criticism suggests that competent readers are never completely passive, writers (usually through their *narrators*) may directly evoke reader involvement in the creation of a text or its meaning. For example, the narrator of Calvino's "The Origin of Birds" asks the reader to imagine the story as a comic strip. More generally, readers might need to fill in "gaps" in a story or make other inferences, such as the order of events or the narrator's *tone*.

Character: Combination of attributes that make up a completed being and which a reader is capable of imagining. E.M. Forster's useful definition of "round or flat characters" applies mostly to longer modernist fictions: many short stories do not include a "round" character.

Round (dynamic) characters are complex and may embody inconsistencies in their thoughts or actions, whereas *flat* (static) characters are distinguished by only one quality, displayed consistently in a work. In Wilson's "The Window," Mr. Willy is a *round* character; he interacts with various *flat* characters, which subtly reveal his limited perspective. A character may undergo *development* through the course of a story and/or come to a vital realization, a new or changed perception, as Mr. Willy does. See *Epiphany*. There is usually, though not always, one main character (*protagonist*) in a short story. In Hempel's "Nashville Gone to Ashes," animals are given distinguishing characteristics.

Postmodern characters are elusive by definition, neither flat nor round, but "empty," isolated, individual identities lost in a dehumanized world. As authors reject or subvert the *mimetic* traditions of realism, characters may be unrealistic, "human-like" if improbable, talking birds, insects, or animals, such as the reborn ape in Kafka's "Report for an Academy" and Qwfwq, the math equation, in Calvino's "The Origin of Birds." "Authors" may appear as "characters" in their fiction. Unlike modernist characters with free will who struggle to reach goals, these characters are frequently victims in a stylized world—such as King's flying Indians in "A Short History of Indians in Canada." Their stories can have no epiphany, no conclusions, no awareness, and no insights since their precarious world has no meaning.

Character may be revealed through direct means (*description*, *exposition*) or indirect means (*dialogue*, or action/*plot*). Character *stereotyping* occurs when a character (either intentionally or unintentionally) is made to represent a predictable collective trait. A *caricature* is exaggerated or distorted in some way to reveal a limited human aspect, often for humorous or satiric purposes.

Chronology ("logic of time," Greek)**:** While the classic story is linear in its temporal arrangements, other basic chronological tools include *flashbacks* or *foreshadowing*. A typical linear dramatic story begins near the climax and moves towards a resolution. A non-linear chronology reveals a character through associative events. As the world becomes more complex, fiction writers skeptical of "beginnings" and fearful of apocalyptic "ends" have broken traditional patterns. Since disrupting linear time affects causality, sometimes reader coherence is also disturbed. Even so, the connection of incidents reveals "a unity of action," as defined by Poe. See *Flashback, Foreshadowing.*

Climax: See *Dramatic Structure*.

Closure (*clausura*, "closing," Latin): Refers to the ending of literary works. A *closed denouement* satisfies aesthetic and all dramatic requirements. A character moves through a dramatic arc, solves a problem or returns full circle to his/her origins. By contrast, *open-endedness* (*open denouement*) refers to the lack of resolution of one or more elements. The open-ended nature of short fiction is one of its distinctive features, in contrast to the novel. As a rich area for research, scholars continue to explore complexities of closure in fiction and the reader's need for either closure or explanation. By avoiding any sense of completeness, a minimalist story has no closure; the reader's experience of certain words, phrases, or tones of the story determines possible meanings. Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" and Crane's "The Open Boat" have a clear sense of closure; Hempel's "Nashville Gone to Ashes" is less certain.

Denouement: See *Dramatic Structure*.

Dialogue: Representation of a character's speech in drama or fiction typically used to reveal character and/or plot; what characters *say* as opposed to what they *do* (action).

Diaspora: Literally, "a scattering of seeds": the dispersal of ethnic, racial, or cultural groups from their homeland due to persecution or other forms of political/social/economic oppression, or due to natural disaster. The Diaspora (usually capitalized) is more than simply the *subject* of much postcolonial writing; it encompasses the personal and collective search for identity and legitimacy in a world where the distributions of power are unequal or arbitrary. An example of a writer of the Diaspora is Edwidge Danticat.

Diction: Word choice; could refer to specific words or the level of language used throughout a work—e.g., elevated, colloquial, formal, abstract, concrete. The formal diction in Kafka's "Report for an Academy" is appropriate for the audience being addressed; however, it also could suggest a mocking *tone*. Diction may reveal something about the character or world he or she inhabits—serving the ends of *realism*—or be a feature of a particular writer and thus be associated with *style*—for example, *Minimalism, Impressionism*.

Dramatic structure: Originates from drama. The phases of a plot include *exposition* (explanation), *rising action* (beginning with the incident that introduces the conflict), *climax* (high point of conflict), and *falling action*, leading to the *denouement* (resolution). Ross's "The Runaway" has such a structure. This durable form, sometimes called "well made" or "formula fiction," lends itself to much published fiction, TV scripts, and films. However, many literary writers abandoned dramatic structures as misleading or misrepresentative of reality. Such writers rely on emotional complexity, precise details, and thematic imagery.

Epiphany: Literally, a "showing forth," a manifestation of a spiritual truth. In Greek drama, the epiphany was marked by the appearance of a god who imposed order and harmony on the human-created disorder; in Christian tradition, the Feast of the Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Christ's divinity to the Three Wise Men. In fiction, an epiphany is a discovery or realization made by the main characters, resulting in a change in their perception or producing a new way of looking at something. Many modernist short stories employ a form of epiphany, though there is considerable debate about the term's meaning and its applicability to short fiction in general. For James Joyce, an epiphany was the recognition in an ordinary event of an extraordinary meaning not perceived before. In terms of a story's dramatic structure, the epiphany is a *climax* of recognition.

Exposition: The part of the narrative that gives background information or other necessary detail before the initiating incident. In a fairy tale like "Cinderella," this would include the "Once upon a time" opening up to the invitation to the royal ball (i.e., the incident that begins the conflict). In the traditional linear structure, the exposition occurs at the beginning, but it could occur at any point in the narrative where explanation is needed. Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" uses exposition to set the scene and reveal character. Not all stories begin with exposition. Crane's "The Open Boat," like many modernist and postmodern stories, begins *in media res* (literally, "in the middle of things") with background information provided through action and dialogue. See *Dramatic Structure*.

(the) Fantastic: In its most general sense, *the Fantastic* refers to incidents, settings, or characters that are not "true to life" or that could not take place in a cause-effect world—which defy rational explanation. Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov stressed the role of the reader when he identified the fantastic as a dividing line that causes us to hesitate in our confrontation with "an apparently supernatural event." Cortázar's "Axolotl" and Murakami's "The Seventh Man" comprise elements of the Fantastic. See *the Gothic, the Grotesque, Magic Realism*.

Flashback: Technique of recalling a past action or event in order to illuminate the present situation. Mansfield's "Daughters of the Late Colonel" uses flashbacks.

Foregrounding: An element of a text that is highlighted or stands out is said to be *foregrounded*. For example, Trinidadian speech patterns are foregrounded in Mootoo's "Out on Main Street"; Gilman foregrounds the diary form in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Foregrounding points to the way stories are constructed by the *principle of selection* whereby an author chooses specific techniques and details (discarding other ones) to create a desired aesthetic effect; some of these will be more important than others.

Foreshadowing: Technique of anticipating a future action or result. Although foreshadowing may create suspense, keeping the reader interested, it can serve more complex goals, such as drawing attention to character flaws (Ross, "The Runaway") or evoking sympathy or *pathos* (Danticat, "Children of the Sea"). Foreshadowing occurs in Cortázar's "Axolotl" when the narrator states, "The axolotls huddled on the wretched narrow (only I can know how narrow and wretched) floor of moss and stone in the tank."

Frame (tale/narrative): Among the oldest of literary devices, the frame is a form of structural repetition in which a text begins and ends in the same way: it is "framed" by similar or identical phrasing, by its setting, or by its narrator.

Genre: Flexible system originating with Aristotle of classifying literary works by their shared characteristics: for example, literature can be grouped into poems, plays, novels, short stories, and nonfiction prose (essays). Smaller divisions, or *subgenres*, are sometimes made—short stories might be classified as myths, fairy tales, fantasies, mysteries, westerns, horror, or science fiction, each of which might be further subdivided.

(the) Gothic: Drawn from architecture, refers to a subgenre of the novel popular in England from 1790 to 1820. Characteristics of the gothic—gloomy atmosphere, images of decay and death, supernatural occurrences, enclosed spaces, and domineering male characters—were often incorporated into later fiction (for example, 19th-century novels by the Brönte sisters and Charles Dickens). Since the 1970s some have claimed a "gothic revival" or a *new gothic* that reflects the dark anxieties, fears, and preoccupations of today's world. The gothic foregrounds plot, subject matter, and setting over character, striving to create a terrifying or portentous mood. The gothic has been studied as a subversive form that questions prevailing assumptions, such as the subjugation of women. Poe's "Masque of the Red Death and Gilman's and "The Yellow Wallpaper" employ gothic elements.

Graphic Literature (Fiction/Narrative): In graphic literature, plot, setting, character, and other narrative elements are conveyed through successive frames and gutters containing visual images as well as dialogue (in speech balloons) and exposition (in captions). Graphic literature is usually distinguished from comic books by its greater seriousness and sophistication, as well as by its use of flawed characters in place of superheroes.

(the) Grotesque: Associated with comedy and/or satire, the grotesque evokes the abnormal, animalistic, or freakish through a style of exaggeration or distortion. American writers Edgar Allan Poe, Nathanial West, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Katherine Dunn are known for their use of the grotesque. Kafka uses the grotesque in "A Report for an Academy" in his description of the sailors and the ape's attempts to mimic them.

Humour (the comic): Complex and often underrated quality in fiction, humour can be differentiated in its kind, purpose, effects, and underlying mechanisms. Verbal humour, such as puns and *word play*, operates at the level of language, whereas situational humour is inherent in a

specific situation. In drama, low comedy with its pratfalls, mistaken identities, and misunderstandings is different from high comedy, a sophisticated form that appeals more to the intellect and stresses *wittiness*. In its purpose, humour can range from primarily entertainment to a sustained critique on human institutions to bring about change. See *Satire*. Humour can be mild, moderate, or harsh, producing different effects in its audience, from approval to censure. It can unleash emotions as divergent as rage or sadness.

Humour of the incongruous is based on a contrast between expectation and the unexpected, what *shouldn't* happen but does. *Humour of the familiar* is based on similarity, occurrences that we recognize. In TV comedies, this humour might take the form of a character behaving in a predictable way, being "true to type." Kafka's "A Report for an Academy" and King's "A Short History of Indians in Canada" rely on humour of the incongruous; Mansfield's "Daughters of the Late Colonel" makes some use of humour of the familiar (for example, Cyril's timidity before his intimidating grandfather). In fiction, humour is often mixed with other forms to produce a complex response. In Hempel's "Nashville Gone to Ashes," for example, it underscores an unsatisfying relationship between a wife and husband. *Black humour* can produce unease or nervous laughter as the reader acknowledges an aspect of the human condition. See *Irony*.

Image(ry): Words that convey sense impressions, particularly sight, but also sound, touch, smell or taste, used in almost all literary writing. Images may occur as precise objects in descriptive passages where their primary focus is on the physical world, or they may become symbols in *figurative* (non-literal) language. Thinking in unlikely imagery is an important aspect of "non-realistic" fiction, such as the talking ape in Kafka's "Report for an Academy." By using non-traditional imagery in fiction, as Aboriginal writers Thomas King ("A Short History of Indians in Canada") and Richard Van Camp ("Sky Burial") do, understanding also changes. Distinctive or contrasting image patterns may highlight a story's theme. See *Motif*.

Impressionism: An elusive term, as both a movement within modernism (originating in painting which broke up the picture surface with dabs of colour) and a general term that can apply to the qualities of a writer's style, especially in the modernist era. Instead of the static descriptions of traditional *realism*, impressionistic techniques reveal a character's constantly changing thoughts, feelings, sensations, and impressions. Literary modernists used impressionistic techniques, such as broken speech and rapid shifts in thought, to show the mind in flux and the complexity of the subjective self. Katherine Mansfield and Stephen Crane often highlight techniques that reveal the immediate perceptions and spontaneous intuitions of their characters.

Indirection: Literary works do not usually state their themes or describe their characters directly but use techniques, devices, and strategies to get them across. Thus, what is stated is different from what is implied. The use of *dialogue* to reveal character is an example of indirection; similarly, *irony* is an indirect technique because it reveals a more significant meaning under the surface one.

Initiation story: Narrative pattern in which the central character, usually young and naïve, undergoes a test or trail that prepares him or her for entry into the adult world. The dramatic arc then follows a curve from ignorance to knowledge. Because initiation into a group has a social dimension, each incident or event may comment on some aspect of society. Fables and folktales often focus on an initiation process. Although the main character in "The Open Boat" is an adult, his experience can be seen as a kind of initiation.

Intertext(uality): Reliance of a text on other texts (not necessarily written ones) or the incorporation of other texts within the primary text. A writer might use an intertext to enrich, *parody*, or revise the original text. See *Allusion*, *Text.*

Irony: *See* "Glossary of Poetry Terms."

Literary Criticism/Theory: Several important critical approaches to short fiction have evolved in the last century. While they haven't completely supplanted *Formalism* (*New Criticism*), dominant from the 1920s to the early 70s, they have broadened its focus, challenging many of its assumptions—for example, that isolating a text from the author's life and culture is the best way to analyze it. Formalist critics from the southern U.S. states focused their study on a limited number of works thought to exemplify the highest artistic standards (and detract attention from the Deep South's poverty and racism), most written by male, white writers. Their initially effective explication was later criticized for religious conservatism, bias, ignoring changing values, separating books and authors from historical context, and ignoring or misrepresenting women. Since their so-called *Western* or *Traditional Canon* was never fixed or fully agreed upon, a later generation of scholars claimed it excluded contradictions and diversity within the tradition, including works of "minority" writers, such as women of colour, an author's political stance, and even ambiguities in language. Yet text-centred criticism was here to stay. The term *Deconstruction*, originating in the 1960s theories of Jacques Derrida, is a more recent *text-centred* approach to the study of literature. Deconstructionists probe for gaps and inconsistencies in a text to encourage variant readings.

By contrast, *context-centred* approaches consider texts as embedded in social, historical, and cultural forces. *Postcolonialism* centres on the literature of former European colonies, critiquing Eurocentric perspectives while exploring the theme of collective and personal identity. Beginning as a critique of patriarchal structures, *Feminist literary criticism* expanded to focus on the study of gender itself, embracing such areas as race and class, anthropology, psychology, ecology, and economics. *New Historicism* stresses the historical time the text was written while *Reader-Response Criticism* addresses issues relating to the act of reading. Other important critical approaches, such as *Gay/Lesbian Studies* and *Ecocriticism*, have evolved within the last 20 years in response to changing social awareness.

Lyric: A short poem that expresses strong feeling or spontaneous emotion. Some commentators believe stories are closer to poetry than are other prose forms like the novel due to their compression and intensity. Narrative fiction tends towards cause and effect; lyric fiction may aspire to dreamlike evocation, with poetic devices such as alliteration or even rhyme. Sometimes the epiphany is presented lyrically. Thus, literary critics often explore the *lyricism* (lyrical qualities) of short fiction.

Magic realism: A loosely defined term, which originated in painting and became well known through Borges, Cortázar, and other Latin American writers. Rejecting rational explanations of reality, magic realists foreground magical or "impossible" elements in an otherwise realistic narrative to produce what an early practitioner, Alejo Carpentier, termed a "heightened reality." Magic realism differs from the *fantastic* and *the surreal* since its effects are found in reality. Magic realism jolts us out of our accepted and static patterns of experience, to *defamiliarize*, or make uncertain, these patterns. Because magic realism refers to the unknowable (be it shamanism or organized religion) or conflicting perspectives of reality (such as indigenous views versus the conqueror), it has found favour with postcolonial writers. Cortázar's "Axolotl" and King's "A Short History of Indians in Canada" make use of magic realist techniques.

Metafiction: Created by American author William Gass in a 1970 essay, the enigmatic and contested term metafiction described a phase of experimental writing in the 1960s. The term called attention to the conventions and artifices involved in making fiction as a reaction against post-World War II literary realism. Common devices include directly commenting on or questioning the way the story is told. One of the themes in a metafictional work is the status of fiction and fiction-making; metafiction uses the work itself to explore this status and thus is sometimes called a "self-conscious" fictional form.

Metaphor: *See* "Glossary of Poetry Terms."

Mimesis ("imitate," Greek): Originated in Ancient rhetoric and was applied to the arts; in fiction, the attempt to imitate life or draw on life-like attributes of a person, object, setting, etc.

Minimalism: Much-debated term referring to a style of writing that is pared to the essence with few modifiers or descriptive words; a minimalist story dismisses plot, has average characters, suggests life is a continuum with little meaning, is open to multiple interpretations, and eliminates narrative conventions. Minimalism can also be narrated in a detached, banal, or ironic *tone*. The essence of minimalism, whether applied to a style or form, is in its omissions and what the reader is left to infer by a close reading of the story. Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and Amy Hempel are frequently cited as minimalists.

Modernism (1895-1945): Period of artistic innovation and renewal in literature as well as in the other arts. Characteristics of modernists include 1) reaction against Victorian values, morality, and sense of order; 2) emphasis on subjective rather than objective experience; 3) experimentation in styles and techniques, such as non-linear narratives and multiple perspectives; 4) interest in psychology and a rejection of religion; 5) creation of a new artistic self-consciousness, resulting in theorizing about art and in "movements" like *impressionism*, imagism, and *surrealism*. Key modernists include Stephen Crane, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner. Other important modernists, like W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, were poets.

Monologue: Form of first-person narration that records uninterrupted the thoughts and/or feelings of the narrator. The change from *omniscient* to *restricted point of view* was a milestone in the history of the story. Omniscient narrators were often replaced by uncertain protagonists who pleaded for the reader's sympathy as they related their experiences late in the dramatic complication. Though a monologue reveals the inner world of the speaker, it is usually directed to one or more listeners. Kafka's "Report for an Academy" is an example. *Inner (Interior) Monologue* is a more extreme form that presents unedited the character's thoughts and feelings, sometimes unpunctuated and in the present tense. By contrast, *epistolary fiction* (an "epistle" is a letter) takes the form of letters—not speech—that reveal a character's inner world (Danticat, "Children of the Sea").

Mood: Emotional response or complexity of responses generated by the elements of a work—for example, calm, terror, empathy, sadness, humour, suspense. Mood and *atmosphere* are closely related, but atmosphere is usually evoked by setting, whereas mood could arise from other elements, including dialogue, character, imagery, diction, or situation. See *Tone*.

Motif: Originating from music where it means a repeated note or phrase, refers to a distinctive narrative element, such as an image, action, incident, or concept, that becomes significant through repetition and its connection to a work's theme—an example is the chiming of the clock in the seventh room in Poe's "Masque of the Red Death." See *Imagery, Symbol*; see also "Glossary of Poetry Terms."

Motivation: factor or, more likely, complexity of psychological factors that help determine characters' behaviours or account for their thoughts or words. Motivation is often the focus of *psychological realism*.

Myth: The oldest creative use of language is a mythic tale told by a narrator. The storyteller's art is to share an experience or explain spiritual and natural phenomena, such as the origins of the world. It forms part of a group's oral tradition and is passed down from generation to generation. Sometimes the word *mythic* is applied to an event or situation of collective or archetypal significance. For example, the journey of a character in Danticat's "Children of the Sea" recalls the journey of African slaves to America and the Caribbean ("The Middle Passage"). *Legends* unify members of a community by describing the heroic exploits of its individuals, like the heroes of Homer's epics, *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey*.

Narrative: (from the same root as "story") means "to know" the world of experience. Theorists suggest Western narrative is framed by two worldviews, Biblical narratives and mythological epics. Although cultural differences affect interpretation, all stories in all cultures tend to have the same basic patterns despite form or content. See *Narrator*.

Narrator: The person telling the story. Narrators vary in their *presence* (3rd-person narrators), *involvement* (1st-person), and *reliability* (1st-person). Closely related concepts include *Point of View* and *Voice*.

Third-person narrators differ in their degree of presence in or absence from the narrative. Until the 20th-century, *intrusive narrators* were common, interrupting the narrative flow when they wished to comment on a character's action, for example. With the exception of narrators of metafiction intruding to comment on the story or its artifice, such interventions are uncommon in fiction today. A narrator's distance, or detachment, can often be determined by *voice*. Even the most detached narrator, however, is not the same as the author—the person who *wrote* the story.

Involved narrators are main characters in their stories, often revealing their actions, motivations, and feelings directly; however, they do not have access to the inner worlds of other characters, so their viewpoint is limited by their subjectivity. Some first-person narrators are primarily *observers* or combine involvement with observation (Ross, "The Runaway").

A *reliable narrator* can be trusted to give a truthful or accurate picture of events and character. Most third-person narrators are reliable; however, first-person narrators may be *unreliable* not only because they are limited by their subjectivity but also because they may consciously or unconsciously distort, deceive, or minimize their role or responsibility. Where narrators are unreliable, readers may have to decide whether this is due to their limited perspective or their intentional deceptiveness. The device of an unreliable narrator can serve to draw a reader into the story in an effort to sort out the truth—for example, Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." A *naïve narrator* may be unreliable by virtue of his or her youth or inexperience.

Naturalism: Outgrowth of realistic writing in the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries. Unlike its predecessor, "Romanticism" (1789-1830), naturalism uses scientific methods of observation and stresses a character's helplessness before external forces, like society, nature, or heredity. Naturalistic writers, such as French novelist Émile Zola and North American writers like Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Sinclair Ross, often portray their protagonists as victims of fate.

Parody: In general, parody involves an imitation of another work or style, using exaggeration or distortion to make fun of its dominant characteristics. Many contemporary short fiction writers

consider the conventions of traditional stories, concepts of character, and manipulation of language to be well worn and use parody in order to renew fiction in new forms. Kafka's "Report for an Academy" uses some parody.

Plot: Stories are how we shape experience, be it through direct chronology or rearranged elements. In a classic definition, E.M. Forster described story as the events, and plot as the best arrangement or sequence of incidents within a narrative. Traditionally, the plot focuses on the external actions of characters; however, it could also focus on the inner world. A century of film, painting, collage, montage, photography, and later TV and the internet suggested innovative ways to shape short fiction. See *Chronology*.

Point of View (POV): The angle of vision from which the story is told affects the reader's reaction to the characters. The reduced use of omniscient narrators and loss of traditional dramatic structures and resolutions led to the significance of the narrating mind and a new way to experience character and meaning for the reader.

If the first-person point of view is used ("I," "we"), the narrator will have limited access to characters and incidents other than what is personally experienced or witnessed. Authors may use first-person narrators to establish an intimate bond with the reader.

Third-person point of view ("she," "he," "they," "them") offers greater variety, from wide to narrow angle. A narrator capable of moving from one character's perspective to another's and from one scene to the next is essentially *omniscient*, or all-knowing. More common are third-person narrators who are *restricted* to the consciousness of one character, usually the main character. American writer Henry James called the character who did the seeing the "central intelligence" (though James often used a less important character in this role). Still other narrators can move in and out of the minds of more than one character in a scene but otherwise lack the range of the omniscient narrator. Second-person point of view ("you") is less common, though first-person narrators may occasionally address their audience as "you." See *Narrator, Voice*.

Postmodern(ism) (1980s-): Postmodernism (PM) incorporates diverse aspects of contemporary culture. Although notoriously difficult to define, postmodernism in literature reflects—and sometimes pursues—the goals of modernism, but rejects such assumptions as the authority of the author, univocal (one-voice) perspectives, unifying narratives, and other "absolutes." In their place, it often stresses plurality, possibility, and play. PM short fiction tends to focus on the intense "moment" or "instant" (see *epiphany*, a related concept) since the future is uncertain. Since the moment is constantly changing, writers simultaneously balance uncertainty, disruption, and innovation with new images and clever wordplay. See *Modernism*.

Protagonist: ("first actor") Main character in a fictional work. The *antagonist* opposes the main character, though this opposition isn't necessarily conscious or intentional. Not all stories include an antagonist. In Ross's "The Runaway," the protagonist is the narrator's father; their neighbour, Luke Taylor, is the antagonist, who provokes the story's central *conflict*.

Realism: With its roots in the work of French novelists Gustav Flaubert and Honoré de Balsac, realism spread to North America in the late 19th-century, depicting the lives of ordinary, usually middle-class characters using everyday language. Realism began as a response to *Romanticism*, with its larger-than-life characters and exotic settings. The spirit of realism was boosted by the scientific advances in the mid-19th century and the rise of rational inquiry. As realism developed, writers sought to incorporate its basic characteristics by applying them to specific subjects and settings.

The focus also shifted from nature to mass culture, often presented as threatening or incomprehensible. With the distrust or loss of faith in knowledge, the omniscient narrators of Tolstoy's or Dickens's times tended to be replaced by limited perspectives and narrowed points of view. The research of Darwin, Freud, and Einstein shattered long-held views about "reality," while World War I tore apart cultures, audiences, and identities. Writers no longer tried to present "objective reality." Realistic places were presented as fragments of character consciousness, and realistic characters were presented as paranoid, brooding, alienated, or distrustful. The after-effects of propaganda and mass advertising meant even language could no longer be trusted.

Given the many permutations of realism, it has been argued that most literary writing in the last 100 years is realistic writing despite the growth of apparently "non-realistic" genres such as *the Fantastic* and *magic realism*, especially in Latin America and parts of Europe. *Psychological realism* focuses on characters' motivation and other aspects of their psychological make-up; *social realism* shows characters at odds with society's institutions; *moral realism* centres on the ethical choices confronting characters; *urban realism* portrays characters adapting to or victims of dehumanized urban landscapes; *documentary realism* combines factual rigour with invention to produce a "life-like" recreation. Some critics apply the term *neo-realism* to European writers like Italo Calvino or Americans like Amy Hempel who seem to present strict documentary reportage but have many interpretative levels "to make the real seem strange." See *Naturalism*.

Satire: Genre that mocks or criticizes institutions or commonly held beliefs by using humour, irony, or ridicule. The purpose behind satire can vary from the desire to raise awareness or institute change to the simple need to make people laugh at themselves (for example, much satire in TV comedies like *The Simpsons* has no moral function). The degree of satire can range from poking fun to harsh condemnation. Stories with satiric elements include Kafka's "Report for an Academy," Böll's "My Sad Face," and King's "A Short History of Indians in Canada." See *Humour, Irony, Parody*.

Setting: The time and place of the story. Unlike novels, stories are often restricted to one setting, but longer stories, such as Danticat's "Children of the Sea," can have two or more settings.

(Short) Story Cycle: Series of linked stories usually collected in book form; similar to a *novel in stories*, but stories in story cycles do not always use the same characters. Instead, they may have the same setting or interweave common issues or themes. In *Krik? Krak!* Danticat uses a variety of characters and settings (many stories, including "Children of the Sea," refer to the town of Ville Rose, Haiti) to explore Haiti's tragic past.

Style: 1) An author's style resides in the distinctive way he or she uses words and other linguistic or textual elements, such as *diction*, rhythm, *tone*, sentence structure, *syntax*, punctuation, *figures of speech*, *allusions*, etc.; it can be applied to one work or to various works throughout a writer's career. The style of a story will usually be connected with larger structural elements, such as character or theme. 2) The term can also be applied to forms or structures with distinctive features, such as the diary form in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."

Structure: Arrangements of parts into an aesthetic whole. A structural approach to a work emphasizes the interrelation of parts. See *Plot, Chronology.*

(the) Surreal: In part a reaction against World War I and in part a continuation of "Romanticism," the surrealists held lofty mystical ambitions to transform reality through the power of the imagination. While the *absurd* generally focuses on the outer, the surreal surrenders

the ego and focuses on dreams, sensory confusion, symbolism, the occult, and visions. It was an influential precursor to magic realism, modern art, and new wave cinema. Surrealistic writing deliberately blurs the boundaries between the outer and the inner through a dream-like atmosphere, which surrealists call "le merveilleux" or "revelation." Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" and Cortázar's "Axolotl" contain surreal elements.

Symbol: *See* "Glossary of Poetry Terms."

Syntax: Word order; the arrangement of words in a sentence or larger unit. *Inverted* or *disrupted syntax* refers to a style that departs from normal word order.

Text: Production—not necessarily a literary one—that encodes one or more messages or meanings, that lends itself to interpretation, and/or that provides aesthetic pleasure to a reader or viewer. The meaning of texts is often embedded in cultural expectations and/or conventions. Examples of written texts include essays, books (such as novels), articles in newspapers, poems, short stories, weblogs, emails; examples of visual texts include plays and other performances, movies, video games, and advertising.

Tale: Of more ancient lineage than the short story, the tale is a brief, entertaining narrative that stresses plot at the expense of character (which are often stereotypes). Not dependent on the laws of everyday reality, the tale may include supernatural elements. Poe called his stories "tales," as did his contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne. Angela Carter said she preferred the tale because it represented a deeper reality behind everyday experience.

Theme: *See* "Glossary of Poetry Terms."

Tone: *See* "Glossary of Poetry Terms."

Understatement: Figure of speech in which something is stated as less (important) than it really is. See *irony*. Stephen Crane and Amy Hempel often use understatement.

Voice (or **narrative voice**): Voice is to narrator as speech is to speaker—that is, you can isolate different attributes of an author, narrator, or character by his or her tone, vocabulary, speech patterns, and the like. A fiction entangles multiple perspectives of an author, a narrator, and the speaking characters, so voice may be a complex concept. The attributes of *reliable* and *unreliable narrators* direct or misdirect readers as they emerge through language: tone, diction, dialect, style. See *Narrator*.