

Story map: Setting, plot, mood, theme

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As students progress in literacy, we expect them to understand more about the characteristics of literature. While some students may infer the characteristics of a short story as a result of well-phrased questions by the teacher (e.g., Why do you think most authors spend time describing where and when the action is taking place?), others seem to miss the subtleties of such questioning. Thus, teachers may seek more direct techniques for teaching students about literature. One such technique is a story map, sometimes referred to as a story grammar. A story map attempts to show the students a path through a story.

Setting, plot, mood, and theme are universal elements of stories. These terms and subsidiary terms constitute the map that teachers may have students follow as they analyze a short story. The *setting* establishes where and when the story takes place. The *plot* may tell who is involved, what the beginning situation is, what conflict occurs, and usually leads to some resolution of the situation or conflict. The *mood* is a sense or feeling that creates an emotional effect. The *theme* is the conclusion to be drawn which may reflect values extolled in the story. General guiding questions for each of these elements are listed in the figure.

Major terms and subsidiary terms should be defined or clarified with examples. Suppose students were analyzing "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." By analyzing the setting, plot, mood, and theme, students have a way to approach the story that reveals the essential story elements. As students look for these elements within a story, they may take notes or write about them. While this process may not seem like a

map in the graphic sense, it accomplishes what a mental map is supposed to do: It provides a set of guiding steps to lead the learner through a complex set of circumstances.

The following analysis demonstrates the use of story map elements for "The Boy Who Cried Wolf."

Setting. When and where does the story take place? "Once upon a time" indicates that the story is set in the indefinite period associated with legends and fairy tales. "A shepherd tending his sheep on a hillside outside a village..." creates the pastoral scene for the action that follows. The setting of this story becomes very important because the action revolves around the loneliness and isolation of the shep-

herd boy—the basic motivation for the plot.

Plot. Plot is concerned with who is trying to accomplish what. The shepherd boy is the one who initiates and promotes the action of the story. The first incident identifies his sense of isolation and his curiosity about what would happen if he cried the warning signal "Wolf!" Conflict arises when he pulls the same trick more than once. The townsfolk ignore him even though finally there is a real crisis as the wolf attacks the sheep. The resolution of this story is found in the loss of the sheep and the shame of the boy.

Mood. The reader must determine from the incidents and the language of the story the kind of mood created by

Outline for a story map

Setting

Where is the action?

When does it happen?

How would you describe the place?

Plot

Who is involved?

What is the beginning situation?

How would you describe the conflict?

How is the major conflict worked out?

Mood

What were your feelings during different events in the story?

Did you sense that the author was trying to create a certain feeling in the language or images she or he used? How?

Theme

What conclusions did you draw about life as a result of reading this story?

Was the author stating a set of values throughout the story?

How would you describe those values?