

CHAPTER 5 INTRODUCTION TO PROSE

What is Prose?

Prose is a work of imagination that is mainly narrative in form and is not patterned into lines or stanzas. It may be spoken or written. It has been described as the commonest form of literature. Prose that are spoken are oral narratives. They are transmitted by words of mouth. Examples of this prose are folktales and fables. This type of prose has no individual author but belongs to the community. The authorship is said to be anonymous.

The other type of prose is composed and written by individuals. This kind of prose forms the focus of this study. Examples of this type of prose are Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime*, Henry James's "The Pupil" and Femi Oluigbile's "Men at War".

Prose may be narrative, descriptive or expository. It is written in sentences and paragraphs and chapters.

Types of Prose

Prose can be divided into fiction and non-fiction.

Fiction is a narrative whose events are not real but imaginary and invented. Events in fiction are created by the author. They are not true to any specific reality and they are not expected to contain real facts. Examples of fiction are **novels, novellas and short stories**.

The **novel** is a long narrative about imaginary characters and their actions. The characters and their actions are usually portrayed within the limits of real life. Examples of the novel are Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Bayo Adebowale's *Out of His Mind*.

There are different types of novel, namely:

- i. *The Social Novel*: This emphasizes the influence of the social and economic conditions of an era on shaping characters and determining events. This type of novel recommends political and social reforms.
- ii. *Historical Novel*: This is a realistic novel that makes use of actual events and personages from the historical past to add interest and **picturesqueness** to the narrative. The historical novel not only takes its settings and some characters and events from history, but also makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters and the course of the narrative.
- iii. *The Regional Novel*: It emphasizes the setting, speech, social structure and customs of particular locality. It discusses the important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling and interacting.
- iv. *Novel of Character*: This is called a psychological novel. The interest is on the protagonist's motives for what he or she does and on how the protagonist as a person will turn out. Example, *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* by Samuel Richardson (1740).

A prose comprises plot, themes, characterization, setting, language and style.

- v. *Epistolary Novel*: This is a novel written in form of a letter. The novel is one long letter as a collection of letters. An example is *So Long a Letter*.

The **novella** is shorter than the novel but longer than the short story. Its length is about between ten thousand words and twenty-five thousand words. Examples of novellas are Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" and Zainab Alkali's "The Virtuous Woman".

The **short story** is shorter than the novella. Its length is about ten thousand words or less. The short story has a few characters and focuses on a single event. Examples of the short story are Achebe's "Girls at War" and Femi Olugbile's "Men at War".

Non-Fiction: Non-fiction works are narratives about real life experiences. In these narratives, real life experiences are treated with some degree of imagination. Types of non-fiction include **biography, autobiography, memoir and journals.**

Biography: This narrative is the account of a particular person's life written by another person. Examples of biography are *Chief Sam Mbakwe: A Great Son of Achievement and Courage* by Okechukwu Okibedi, *Chinua Achebe : A Biography* by Ezenwa Ohaeto, and *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay* by Wole Soyinka.

Autobiography: This is an account of someone's life written by the person himself or herself. An autobiography always covers some period in the life of the writer. The focus of the narrative is usually on a certain phase in the life of the author. The focus may be on the years of childhood. Examples of autobiography are Wole Soyinka's *Ake: Years of Childhood*, Taha Hussein's *An Egyptian Childhood* and Nafissatou Diallo's *A Dakar Childhood*. They all focus on the years of childhood. Barak Obama's *Audacity of Hope* is also an autobiography.

Memoir: The memoir is close to an autobiography. It recounts events in the life of the writer. The memoir is however different from an autobiography because it does not emphasize the author's self development. A memoir focuses on the people that the author has known and the events he has witnessed. Olusegun Obasanjo's *My Command* and Phillip Effiong's *Nigeria and Biafra* are memoirs.

The Journal: This prose is a record of day-to-day events that take place in the life of a person and is recorded by him or herself.

Characteristics of Prose

Prose forms have some characteristics. These characteristics can also be called narrative elements. The elements include subject matter, theme , plot, characterization, setting, language and point of view.

Subject Matter of Prose

The subject matter of prose is the topic or the issue being discussed in the work. The subject matter of *Lord of the Flies* is human nature. The subject matter of both Achebe's "Girls at War" and Olugbile's "Men at War" is war. Prose can take its subject matter from any topic or issue.

Theme in Prose

Every prose work has one or several themes. The theme is the message that the writer wants to pass across in his or her work. The theme of a prose is not the same as its subject matter. It is its central idea. The theme is always stated or suggested in different ways in the work. The theme could be social, political, religious or academic. It could come from any aspect of life.

Plot in Prose

Plot is the arrangement or outline of the events in a prose. It is how the events are related and are planned to achieve particular effects. A plot may be simple, compound or complex.

Some other elements are involved in the discussion of plot. They are **conflict**, **suspense**, **climax** and **dénouement**. Usually, a plot has a beginning, a middle and an end.

Conflict

Conflict is the tension in a situation. It grows out of the struggle by two opposing forces in a story.

Suspense

Suspense occurs when the reader is excited and gets more interested in the narrative. He or she may experience some tension and become anxious as he or she reads on to see how the conflict will be resolved.

Climax

Climax is that part of the story when the tension reaches a maximum and resolution is about to take place.

Dénouement

This is the untying of the plot's complications at the end of the story.

Setting in Prose

Setting is the overall background of the story. Generally, it has to do with the place and time of the actions and events in the work. Stories are set in a place and within a time. Setting also consists of the physical, social, cultural background in the story. The author provides information about the setting of the story in many ways. He does so by identifying the environment by place names and stating the time of the events.

The author can also describe the physical, social and cultural environment where the story takes place. The author may actually just suggest all these in the story. The pieces of information are scattered in the story. They occur for instance in the speech and interaction among the characters. They may come up in the comments, description and narration by the author.

Characterization in Prose

Characterization is the presentation of characters in a narrative. Characters are agents of actions and events in prose. They are the 'persons' represented in the narrative. The characters are often given names or identified by certain traits. They are given roles to play in the story. The roles characters play and their interaction with one another show who they are. The author makes them interact with one another in the story and provides information about them in many ways.

Characters are categorized. The major character is called the hero or heroine. If he is a male, he is the hero and if a female, the heroine. This character may also be called the protagonist. The term 'protagonist' applies when there is another character who opposes the hero or the heroine. The character who opposes the main character is called the antagonist. The hero, heroine or protagonist is strong, noble, virtuous and able to perform heroic deeds. The antagonist is the opposite of the protagonist. He is bad and immoral in many respects.

Point of View in Prose

There is a narrator in every prose. The position of this narrator to the story is called ‘point of view’ or ‘viewpoint’. It is the point from which the events in the story are related. There are different types of points of view. Some examples are:

Omniscient point of view

Omniscient point of view occurs where the narrator moves from character to character, place to place, and episode to episode. The narrator has complete freedom and knowledge of the thoughts and feelings of characters. He or she provides information needed at will. The narrator is all seen and all knowing.

First person narrative points of view

Here, the story is told in the first person by one of the characters. He makes constant use of the personal pronoun “I”. It is also called participant narrator viewpoint.

The third person point of view

Here, the author chooses a character and tells the story in terms of that character. The events narrated are limited to what only the character can see.

Language and Narrative Devices

Language in prose comprises many elements. Among these elements are **allusion**, **symbolism**, **foreshadowing**, **flashback** and **irony**.

Allusion: This narrative device involves making an implicit reference to another work of literature or art, to a person, or an event.

Symbolism: It is the practice in prose of using a thing to represent or stand for something else .

Foreshadowing occurs in prose when events that are yet to take place are mentioned or hinted at.

Flashback occurs in prose whereby a writer recalls incidents, scenes or events that took place in the past.

Irony occurs in prose when the meaning a character intends is different sharply from that which is expressed

Summary and Conclusion

Prose is a genre of literature. It is narrative in form and has a story line. Every prose has a subject matter and is on a theme or themes. The theme may be on any issues. Elements such as plot, characterization, setting, language and point of view are narrative techniques. They are used to develop the theme or themes of the prose.

There are different types of prose. Prose may be spoken or written . It may be in a conventional narrative or may come in a letter or letters. Prose may be wholly invented or be based on facts. It may be long or short, or of a medium length. It may emphasize different issues such as region, psychology, history, horror, crime and detective. It may focus on social and economic conditions. Prose is classified into different types based on the criteria above.

Revision Questions

1. Define prose and give five various examples.
2. List six common narrative elements and discuss two of them.
3. Identify four non-fictive prose types and give one example in each case.
4. Write a brief note on the following: (a) conflict (b)suspense (c) point of view.

5. Define the following prose types and give two examples in each case: (a) the novel (b) the novella (c) the short story.

Objective Questions

1. An example of non-fiction is _____.

A. an epistle B. the memoir C. the novel D. the novella E. the short story

2. According to the length or volume of words, prose can be divided into _____ types.

A. six B. four C. two D. five E. three

3. The dominant idea or message in a prose is called

A. rhene. B. myth. C. theme. D. rheme. E. pheme.

4. Agents of actions or events in any prose are called

A. actors. B. casts. C. heroes. D. heroine. E. characters.

5. The cause-effect sequence narration of a story is called

A. plot. B. conflict. C. dénouement. D. setting. E. allusion.

6. The overall background against which a story is presented is called

A. setting. B. environment. C. plotting. D. locale. E. atmosphere.

7. A narrative based on real life experiences is a

A. fiction. B. non-fiction. C. fable. D. detective. E. pamphlet.

8. The main female character in a story is referred to as

A. hero. B. heroin. C. foil. D. heroe. E. heroine.

9. The longest prose is the _____

A. novella. B. nirvana. C. novelette. D. novel E. Noveau.

10. The work of fiction that is shorter than the novel is

A. the short story. B. the novel. C. the novella. D. the novelette. E. the fable.

Answers to Objective Questions

(1)B (2) E (3) C (4) E (5) A (6) A (7) B (8) E (9) D (10) C