

APPROACHING FICTION

英语小说导读

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PREFACE

For Chinese students majoring in English language and literature, English literature is one of the compulsory and most important courses. However, the English literature courses offered at most universities and colleges are taught merely at the level of learning general information and developing literal understanding. Admittedly, such courses help them a lot in their acquisition of the English language. But the function of English literature reaches far beyond that. In reading English literature, a student should have the power to discern how human beings translate their experience into artistic expression and representation; how writers, through their creative impulses, convey to us their insights into human destiny and human life; and how social concern is involved in a specific form of human imagination. In addition, students should elevate to the level of cultivating a curiosity for the unknown, thinking cogently and logically, expressing themselves clearly and concisely, and observing the world around them critically and objectively. But most students are still at a loss as to how they can effectively analyze a literary work by themselves in any of these respects, even though they have read plenty of excerpts from representative works in the British and American literary canon. And they tend to have little idea what role the beginning part plays in the whole story, how the plot develops and comes to resolution, in what way point of view determines a reader's understanding of the story, and how the images and symbols are related to the theme. Upon consideration of these factors, we have compiled this

book with the intention of cultivating both students' literary sensibilities and their critical power when reading English short stories and novels. This book, intended for senior university students and postgraduate students, not only discusses the essential structural elements of fiction but also enlightens students as to the basic concepts and principal terms in literary criticism with regard to fiction. With a cherished ambition to compile the best book available in China in this area and to make it of true benefit to students, the compiler has carefully selected fictional works of various styles and in different categories of subject matter, and has referred to many an authoritative work of criticism, assimilating important ideas from them. The bibliography at the end of this book can serve as a source for students' reference in further research work on fiction as well as an acknowledgment of my sources. Special thanks are extended to X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia (*Literature*, 1995); to C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon (*A Handbook to Literature*, 1986); to Cleanth Brooks, John Thibaut Purser, and Robert Penn Warren (*An Approach to Literature*, 1964); and to the Beijing Municipal Committee of Education for many of the valuable ideas, literary concepts and comments, and financial assistance received in compiling and publishing this book.

Yuan Xianjun

October 26, 2003

Introduction

Reading a Story

A woman is sitting in her old, shuttered house. She knows that she is alone in the whole world; every other thing is dead.

The doorbell rings.

At one glance, we know for certain that what we have just read is a story. If we are asked why it is a story, we may answer immediately that it tells us something imagined rather than real. And it has something to do with an image of people we meet in our daily life. This may be our natural response to a story. If we are informed of the structure of a story, we may say that it is a story because it has a character and the character does something in a certain place at a certain time. Although in reading such a short story we do not come to know the character well, for a moment we enter her thoughts and begin to share her feelings. Then something amazing happens. The story ends with suspense, and it leaves us in a wonder or, perhaps, in deep thought: Who or what rang the bell? And we may even have a series of questions: Is this a haunted house? Why is the character a woman rather than a man? Why is the present tense used rather than the past? Why is the house old and shuttered? Who is recounting the story? What effect is pro-

duced by the word “knows”? Why does the author select the word “dead” in ending the paragraph? Why does the author arrange another paragraph with just three words? What is characteristic of the wording and of the sentence structure? What is the moral sense of the story? In asking such questions and trying to answer them, we are actually approaching the story. Like many longer and more complicated stories, this one, in its few words, stimulates our imagination.

To examine a story we must have a framework of ideas about its structure and functions. In this book, we are going to read fifteen short stories (though much longer than this one), and one novel, and by breaking them into their parts, we shall have a keener sense of how a work of fiction is constructed. Our analysis will involve **plot**, concerning what happens; **character**, generally considered a person who takes certain actions; **point of view**, concerning the angle from which a story is related; **setting**, the place and time in which events happen; **theme**, which requires us to investigate the meaning of the characters' action; and **style**, focusing our attention upon the linguistic features of the work.

Fiction, originating from the Latin word *fictio*, meaning “a shaping, a counterfeiting”, is a general term for such an imaginative work in prose as briefly discussed above; it is a story told in prose, a story which is assumed to be made up so as to express and explore the author's feelings and ideas about life through the imagery of characters and action. In modern criticism, the category of fiction includes the short story, the novel, the novella and related genres. Whether a text is fiction or not does not depend on its length but on its structure and function. All novels, novellas and short stories share generally the same structure with similar basic elements. Therefore short stories are selected in our analysis of

“fiction” for the convenience of teaching multiple texts within a single course.

Although fiction, as the original meaning of the word indicates, is essentially imagined (and may even be completely counterfeited), that does not mean that in a work of fiction there is nothing real and that a writer of fiction may not use material drawn from real life: in fact most of his/her material comes from or conforms to life. But in reading fiction we are concerned not with where the writer gets his/her material, nor even with the material itself, but with what he/she does with it—with the pattern and meaning he/she gives it, with how strongly he/she charges it with emotion, with how persuasively he/she makes it embody his/her view of life. In works such as Balzac's *The Human Comedy*, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, we see a great amount of “facts”. In reading such fiction we almost always have a sense of “verisimilitude to life.” But the factual information is of secondary importance. Authenticity in fiction, in an Aristotelian sense, is authenticity to art of fiction rather than to reality as understood from a sociological or historical perspective. A historical novel may be based on historical events but the focus is concentrated on quite different things than would be found in a history book. Perhaps Novalis's analogy of dancing and walking—literary works and non-literary works respectively—may well tell the major difference between a work of fiction and a work of non-fiction: dancing is for its own sake, while walking is a means to a certain destination. The “facts”—what happens to whom on the literal level—are very important in our reading of fiction. In fact, having a firm command of the facts of a story, a novella or a novel is the first step to approach fiction. Unless the literal facts of a work of fiction are clearly understood, we can never construe its total meaning, not to speak of its significance. Never-

theless, we have to keep in mind that the facts in fiction are not the facts in reality.

As we have said, fiction is a means, like other forms of art, for a writer to explore his/her experience of life and to understand his/her vision of life. We should say that the impulse that leads people to read fiction is fundamentally the same as the impulse that leads to its creation. The reader enters, consciously or unconsciously, into a fuller understanding of life by reading fiction. Fiction, while providing the reader with an aesthetic experience produced by the writer through his/her mastery of language, also extends the reader's own experience of life, and at the same time feeds his/her fundamental curiosity about life and its meaning.

Chapter One

Plot

Plot, or the structure of action, carries a variety of meanings in modern criticism. But it generally refers to the scheme or pattern of events in a work of fiction. The word *plot* has been used to indicate almost any kind of action found in a story. The concept of plot even in modern times is derived from Aristotle's use of the Greek word *mythos* in his definition of tragedy: *mythos* is the imitation of an action (*Poetics*). Aristotle lists six basic elements of the structure of tragedy but regards plot as the soul of tragedy. Of the structural whole, plot constitutes the dynamic framework to which the other five elements affiliate and around which the story develops. For Aristotle, plot must assume a certain form (for instance, the reversal of a situation, such as when the main character moves from a favorable situation to an unfavorable one); it must have a certain order of development (that is, it must have a beginning, a middle, and an end and a certain trajectory); it must involve certain agents whose actions compose its development; and it usually has a certain social background. The gradual building of the mental tension of the protagonist is also part of the plot, and the inevitable change in the fate of the protagonist, or even other characters, produces a psychological effect on the reader (or, in traditional tragedy, the spectator). This effect consists of arousing and purging certain feelings (*catharsis*). In addition, plot must abide by the law of probability: the development of the plot in a story must be logically probable rather than factually possible. Of course, all these are realized by means of language.

Aristotle's theory of plot is based on his analysis of some Greek tragedies, most especially Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. The theory doubtless applies to classical tragedy, and elements of his concept can be found in use in many novels and stories.

However, few modern critics approach plot from this complicated Aristotelian perspective. Plot, under the pens of modern novelists and storytellers, has become much more flexible than that envisaged by Aristotle. Perhaps a simple but serviceable approach to plot is that of E. M. Foster: "We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling upon causality. 'The king died and the queen died,' is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief,' is a plot. The time sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: 'The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.' This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow." (*Aspects of the Novel*, 1927)

Like any shapely story, the story we read at the beginning of the introduction, though very short, involves the unfolding of a **dramatic situation**: the woman believes that she is the only person alive in the world, and it is in such a state of mind that she hears the doorbell ringing. Here we first discern a **conflict** within the woman's mind, and then we see a conflict between her knowledge and the outer world. A dramatic situation thus refers to the fact that a person is involved in some conflict. The plot of a story is abundant of such situations in which clashes of wills, desires, or powers occur—whether it be a conflict of character against character, character against society, one society against another, character against some natural force, or character against himself/herself.

Like anything, a plot, according to Aristotle (*Poetics*), has a beginning, "that which does not itself follow anything by causal

necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be” ; a middle, “that which follows something as some other thing follows it”; and an end, “that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it”—though sometimes the three parts are not clearly distinguished. But the three parts must make a **unity**: a plot should “imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjoined and disturbed.” The beginning part of a plot or story we usually call **exposition**: it is the opening portion that sets the scene (if any), establishes the atmosphere, introduces the major character(s), tells the reader what has happened before the story opens, and provides other background information in order that the reader may understand and care about the events to follow. In a novel, the part that we call exposition may be rather long, while in a short story the exposition may end in the first or second paragraph. After the exposition, as Kennedy and Gioia observe, the author of a story generally arranges some other events which involve the development of the plot. (*Literature*, 1995) It is not uncommon for the writer to build up the **suspense**, or a series of suspense as in a novel, to incite the reader’s curiosity as to how it will all turn out. At that point the reader usually feels a pleasurable anxiety that heightens his/her attention to the development of the plot. An artistic storyteller can develop a feeling of anticipation in the reader by arranging some **foreshadowing** to indicate what is to happen. As the story goes on and as the clash becomes apparent, we shall have a **crisis**, a moment of high tension. The crisis may be momentarily resolved. Then an even greater crisis—the turning point in the action—may occur. At last events come to a **climax**, the moment of the greatest tension at which the outcome is to be decided. The **conclusion**—also called the **falling action**, **resolution** or **denouement** (the final unraveling of the plot in fiction, the solution of the mystery, generally involving not only a satisfactory outcome of the main situation but an explanation of all the secrets and misunder-

standings connected with the plot complication)— quickly follows.

Such a structure of events may be called the plot of the story. By the word **plot** we simply mean the artistic arrangement of those events in the story. It would be possible, though tedious, to relate all incidents, all events, all thoughts passing through the minds of one or more characters during a certain period of time. But the plot demands that the author select from the welter of incidents or events and make an arrangement that has a certain unity, points to a certain end, and has a common relation representing not more than two or three threads of interest and activity. Different arrangements of the same material are possible. It depends upon how the writer executes with his/her narrative techniques. A writer may choose to tell of the events in chronological order, the sequence of events as they happen naturally; or he/she may begin the story with the last event and then tell what led to it or start *in medias res* (Latin, “in the midst of things”), first presenting some significant moment and then filling what happened earlier. Common narrative devices employed by writers in their stories are the **flashback** (as in George Eliot’s *Silas Marner*, where the protagonist’s early life is recounted in the later part of the book); the **interleaving** (as in Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary*, where the narrative at one point jumps backwards from the lovers on a balcony to the busy market place below); the **cliffhanger** (as commonly used by Charles Dickens in his novels, where one episode ends with a moment of uncertainty about what will happen next—suspense—and leads closely to another episode); and random jumping backwards and forwards in time to create thematic juxtaposition or connection (as in Aldous Huxley’s novel *Eyeless in Gaza*).

Like many other terms in literary discussion, “plot” is blessed with several meanings, which might even arouse ambiguity. For instance, some critics try to distinguish a plot of action (*mythos*) in Aristotle’s sense from a plot of character (*ethos*) or a plot of thought (*dianoia*), all of which involve actually potentially great change. Some try to distinguish such terms as *syuzhet* and *fabula*

(as Russian formalists do in their discussion of plot and story). Some attempt to extend the meaning of plot to make it a function of a number of elements in fiction. Ronald S. Crane says (*Critics and Criticism*, 1952), "The form of a given plot is a function of the particular correlation among... three variables which the completed work is calculated to establish, consistently and progressively, in our minds." The three variables are "(1) the general estimate we are induced to form... of the moral character and deserts of the hero... (2) the judgments we are led similarly to make about the nature of the events that actually befall the hero... as having either painful or pleasurable consequences for him... permanently or temporarily; and (3) the opinions we are made to entertain concerning the degree and kind of his responsibility for what happens to him." In such a definition (which sounds Aristotelian), although much has been added to the simple idea of an arrangement of incidents or events, the basic view of plot as some large controlling frame is still present.

Although a highly dramatic story may tend to assume a clearly recognizable structure of conflict, crisis, climax, and conclusion, many contemporary writers avoid the foregrounding of the plot in their stories, perhaps indicating the dullness and dryness of modern life. Nevertheless, to whatever extent the plot of a story unfolds itself, it provides the author's significant interpretation of some phase of life. Plot brings order out of life and it focuses and clarifies life.

A & P

by John Updike, 1961

In walks three girls in nothing but bathing suits. I'm in the third check-out slot, with my back to the door, so I don't see them until they're over by the bread. The one that caught my eye first

was the one in the plaid green two-piece. She was a chunky kid, with a good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can with those two crescents of white just under it, where the sun never seems to hit, at the top of the backs of her legs. I stood there with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers trying to remember if I rang it up or not. I ring it up again and the customer starts giving me hell. She's one of these cash-register-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows, and I know it made her day to trip me up. She'd been watching cash registers for fifty years and probably never seen a mistake before.

By the time I got her feathers smoothed and her goodies into a bag—she gives me a little snort in passing, if she'd been born at the right time they would have burned her over in Salem—by the time I get her on her way the girls had circled around the bread and were coming back, without a pushcart, back my way along the counters, in the aisle between the check-outs and the Special bins. They didn't even have shoes on. There was this chunky one, with the two-piece—it was bright green and the seams on the bra were still sharp and her belly was still pretty pale so I guessed she just got it (the suit)—there was this one, with one of those chubby berry-faces, the lips all bunched together under her nose, this one, and a tall one, with black hair that hadn't quite frizzed right, and one of these sunburns right across under the eyes, and a chin that was too long—you know, the kind of girl other girls think is very “striking” and “attractive” but never quite makes it, as they very well know, which is why they like her so much—and then the third one, that wasn't quite so tall. She was the queen. She kind of led them, the other two peeking around and making their shoulders round. She didn't look around, not this queen, she just walked straight on slowly, on these long white prima-donna legs. She came down a little hard on her heels, as if she didn't walk in her bare feet that much, putting down her heels and then letting the weight move along to her toes as if she was testing the floor with every step, putting a little deliberate extra action into it. You nev-

er know for sure how girls' minds work (do you really think it's a mind in there or just a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar ?) but you got the idea she had talked the other two into coming in here with her, and now she was showing them how to do it, walk slow and hold yourself straight.

She had on a kind of dirty-pink—beige maybe, I don't know—bathing suit with a little nubble all over it and, what got me, the straps were down. They were off her shoulders looped loose around the cool tops of her arms, and I guess as a result the suit had slipped a little on her, so all around the top of the cloth there was this shining rim. If it hadn't been there you wouldn't have known there could have been anything whiter than those shoulders. With the straps pushed off, there was nothing between the top of the suit and the top of her head except just *her*, this clean bare plane of the top of her chest down from the shoulder bones like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light. I mean, it was more than pretty.

She had sort of oakay hair that the sun and salt had bleached, done up in a bun that was unraveling, and a kind of prim face. Walking into the A & P with your straps down, I suppose it's the only kind of face you *can* have. She held her head so high her neck, coming up out of those white shoulders, looked kind of stretched, but I didn't mind. The longer her neck was, the more of her there was.

5 She must have felt in the corner of her eye me and over my shoulder Stokesie in the second slot watching, but she didn't tip. Not this queen. She kept her eyes moving across the racks, and stopped, and turned so slow it made my stomach rub the inside of my apron, and buzzed to the other two, who kind of huddled against her for relief, and they all three of them went up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-spreads-spaghetti-soft-drinks-crackers-and-cookies aisle. From the third slot I look straight up this aisle to the meat counter, and I watched them all the way. The fat one with the tan sort of fumbled with the cookies, but on second thought she put the packages back. The

sheep pushing their carts down the aisle—the girls were walking against the usual traffic (not that we have one-way signs or anything)—were pretty hilarious. You could see them, when Queenie's white shoulders dawned on them, kind of jerk, or hop, or hiccup, but their eyes snapped back to their own baskets and on they pushed. I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering "Let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah, yes, applesauce!" or whatever it is they do mutter. But there was no doubt, this jiggled them. A few houseslaves in pin curlers even looked around after pushing their carts past to make sure what they had seen was correct.

You know, it's one thing to have a girl in a bathing suit down on the beach, where what with the glare nobody can look at each other much anyway, and another thing in the cool of the A & P, under the fluorescent lights, against all those stacked packages, with her feet padding along naked over our checkerboard green-and-cream rubber-tile floor.

"Oh Daddy," Stokesie said beside me. "I feel so faint."

"Darling," I said. "Hold me tight." Stokesie's married, with two babies chalked up on his fuselage already, but as far as I can tell that's the only difference. He's twenty-two, and I was nineteen this April.

"Is it done?" he asks, the responsible married man finding his voice. I forgot to say he thinks he's going to be manager some sunny day, maybe in 1990 when it's called the Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company or something.

10 What he meant was, our town is five miles from a beach, with a big summer colony out on the Point, but we're right in the middle of town, and the women generally put on a shirt or shorts or something before they get out of the car into the street. And anyway these are usually women with six children and varicose veins mapping their legs and nobody, including them, could care less. As I say, we're right in the middle of town, and if you stand

at our front doors you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real-estate offices and about twenty-seven old freeloaders tearing up Central Street because the sewer broke again. It's not as if we're on the Cape; we're north of Boston and there's people in this town haven't seen the ocean for twenty years. The girls had reached the meat counter and were asking McMahon something. He pointed, they pointed, and they shuffled out of sight behind a pyramid of Diet Delight peaches. All that was left for us to see was old McMahon patting his mouth and looking after them sizing up their joints. Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them, they couldn't help it.

Now here comes the sad part of the story, at least my family says it's sad but I don't think it's sad myself. The store's pretty empty, it being Thursday afternoon, so there was nothing much to do except lean on the register and wait for the girls to show up again. The whole store was like a pinball machine and I didn't know which tunnel they'd come out of. After a while they come around out of the far aisle, around the light bulbs, records at discount of the Caribbean Six or Tony Martin Sings or some such gunk you wonder they waste the wax on, six-packs of candy bars, and plastic toys done up in cellophane that fall apart when a kid looks at them anyway. Around they come, Queenie still leading the way, and holding a little gray jar in her hand. Slots Three through Seven are unmanned and I could see her wondering between Stokes and me, but Stokesie with his usual luck draws an old party in baggy gray pants who stumbles up with four giant cans of pineapple juice (what do these bums *do* with all that pineapple juice? I've often asked myself) so the girls come to me. Queenie puts down the jar and I take it into my fingers icy cold. Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream: 49¢. Now her hands are empty, not a ring or a bracelet, bare as God made them, and I wonder where the money's coming from. Still with that prim look she lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her nubbled pink top.