

English Literature GCSE

Course plan

This plan shows the structure of the course and gives an outline of the contents.

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English Literature GCSE Course guide

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Sample of the GCSE English Literature Course from Section 1

Topic 3

Plot, narrative and structure

Introduction

Authors can organise the events in their novels in different ways, using various techniques. You should be aware that a novel is a literary creation and has a structure which is deliberately crafted by the writer. This topic gives you a little more information about some of the basic decisions an author makes when constructing their text.



You will probably need 1 ½ hours to complete this topic.

Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- identify the difference between plot and narrative
- explain some of the basic structural decisions writers make in shaping their narrative.

Plot vs narrative

Plot

The **plot** of a story is simply the things that happen in it. The simplest analysis of the plots of a large number of novels would be:

- the main characters are introduced to us
- things happen to them or they do things
- there is a reason for stopping the story.

Even the plot of a substantial novel such as *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen can be described in these simple terms:

- The Bennet family are introduced to us; then two unmarried men are introduced.
- The eldest Bennet daughter falls in love with one of them; the second daughter dislikes the other. Certain misunderstandings and prejudices are sorted out.
- The two couples get married.

Of course, there are many more characters in the novel and a lot more complications. The youngest Bennet daughter also gets married and this contributes to the confusion for a while; it also helps to clear up some of the earlier obstacles to the marriages of the older two.

So plots may be quite complicated. There can also be one or more **sub-plots**. A sub-plot is a less important part of the story. Nearly always, however, the sub-plot has some connections with the main plot and helps the novel to reach its conclusion.

Narrative

So, if a plot is simply the things that happen in a story, what is a **narrative**? Well, quite simply, a narrative is a plot conveyed in a particular way. However, although this *sounds* simple, turning a plot into a narrative involves a whole range of decisions.

In fact, it could be argued that this is what a novel *is*: a plot conveyed through hundreds, in fact many thousands, of narrative decisions. And it could *also* be argued that when we talk about studying, or analysing, or writing about, a novel, what we are really talking about is studying, or analysing, or writing about, all those hundreds or thousands of narrative decisions and their effects.

Let's take a simple example of a story most of us know, such as Goldilocks and the Three Bears. It is a story with quite a simple plot, but a writer could choose to tell that story in lots of different ways – and each different way would be a different narrative.

- The writer could have a **narrator** who isn't one of the characters tell the story. The narrator would be able to write about what was happening to each of the characters in different times and places, and even see inside their heads to describe what they were thinking. This is what we call an **omniscient** (meaning they

know everything) **third-person** (meaning they are outside the story) narrator.

- Alternatively, the writer could tell the story from Goldilocks' point of view. This would be what we call a **limited** (because they don't know everything) **first-person** narrator (because she would be telling the story from her standpoint using 'I...').
- The story could be told from the point of view of one of the bears. This would give us a different limited, first-person narrator.
- The story could be told as a diary entry from Baby Bear, written after the events have happened.
- The writer could even tell the story as a series of newspaper stories and police reports: BURGLARY AND VANDALISM AT BEAR COTTAGE!
- The story could switch between different characters' points of view.

You can probably think of many more examples, and each one would be quite a different *narrative*, even though the *plot* would be the same. When we talk about, or write about, how a novel works and its effects, it can be useful to talk, or write, in terms of narrative decisions, narrative techniques and narrative effects.

Activity 1

(Allow 10 minutes)

Choose a fairy tale, a novel, or a film you know quite well. Write down three to five different narrative decisions a writer could make which would mean that the same *plot* would become a very different *narrative*.

Whichever story you chose, you could (among many other things):

- have a third-person, omniscient narrator
- have different limited, first-person narrators
- have the story written as a diary entry, told in a letter, as a newspaper article, or a journal article
- have the story begin at the end, or in the middle, and then move back to the beginning.

We will encounter lots of narrative decisions as we move through the different topics. Some of them are very small, such as the

choice of one word rather than another, or the choice of a particular simile or other aspect of figurative language – though of course these small decisions can have very powerful and important effects. However, there are a few very big narrative decisions which any writer needs to make, and for the rest of this topic, we will focus on one of the biggest.

Order

Most of us would probably approach the telling of a story by starting at the beginning and saying what happened in the order in which events took place. If, for example, you were involved in an accident and had to describe what happened on an insurance form, you would try to make the order of events as straightforward as possible. Telling a story in the order in which the events occurred is known as a chronological narrative structure. Sometimes, however, we find ourselves telling someone about something we have done and realise that we have to go back and explain something that happened earlier in order to make our story clear. Doing this might show that we are not as organised in our thoughts as we should be. But novelists very frequently ‘go back’, not because they are disorganised, but because it is more effective to introduce earlier events at certain times in the story. When events are not described in the order in which they occur this is known as a non-chronological narrative structure.

Activity 2

(Allow 10 minutes)

Give an example of an author having a very good reason for not telling the story in a chronological order.

If you think about crime novels and detective fiction, for example, it would be quite impossible for the author to tell us the events in the order in which they happened because the whole point of the story is to find out what happened before the police became involved. There would be no suspense if the author described the murderer’s motives, then told us how he did the murder, then described the way the police detective found out all the things we already know.

So, usually, the reader is brought in halfway through the action. A corpse is discovered. The story goes *forward* as we follow the detective investigating the murder. His or her investigation goes back to find out what happened before the corpse was discovered.

We are therefore quite used to stories being told in an order that is not chronological. Sometimes authors use '**flashbacks**' to explain something about a character or an event. Again, this is done for a very good reason. Things that happened in a character's childhood, for example, might be very important in helping to understand events later on. But the author does not necessarily want to dwell on the childhood to the extent of describing it in any detail at the beginning of the story. Instead, he or she introduces a memory or a scene from the character's childhood, which helps us to understand something about them as an adult.

Booker Prize winner Pat Barker's novels about the First World War (*Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road*) are good examples of this technique, though it is not usually childhood that Barker goes back to. The stories are about men who have been out fighting in France and have suffered psychological damage from their experiences. They may not remember the experiences, or may be unable to communicate them, but it is by finding out what happened to them that we see why they are so damaged.

Another method an author might use to tell the story is by having several of the characters tell the story as they saw it. This leads to certain events being told more than once from different viewpoints and we find ourselves going back in time as a new narrator takes over. A fascinating example of this occurs in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*, where each of the main characters gives her version and interpretation of the events of the plot. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is another novel in which the story is told by several narrators, and the action of the novel is described in an order which is far from chronological.

Another quite simple but important reason for having a non-chronological structure is that an author can choose to start at a really exciting point in the narrative in order to grab the reader's attention. In drama in particular, this is known as beginning ***in medias res*** – in the middle of things. (Note that non-English terms – except those in common use, like naïve or élite – are usually written in italics.) This is another way of using a non-chronological structure and it is also what is called a **narrative hook** – a technique used by a writer to draw the reader into the story and make them want to read on.

Episodes

In most novels there are scenes which are particularly dramatic or which are small stories in themselves. This is certainly true of *Frankenstein*, for example. However, a novel, in the end, is usually more than a series of short stories. The **episodes** have a purpose and are linked to each other in some way, each one contributing to the plot as a whole. Similarly, the plot of *Wuthering Heights* is made up of many episodes, which span more than one generation.

As with everything we say about novels, there are exceptions to this too. In *Huckleberry Finn* (Mark Twain), *Little Women* (Louisa M Alcott) and *Cranford* (Mrs Gaskell), each chapter is a self-contained episode and could be read as a short story on its own. There are links between them, however. Each chapter is about the same main characters; some developments of a plot might have to be known in order to understand certain elements of the individual story; and each chapter contributes to the overall theme of the novel.

Framed narratives

One technique which writers sometimes use is a **framed narrative**. This is when a section of a novel – quite often the *vast majority* of a novel – is presented as a story being told to someone, or as some kind of text *within* the wider text. For example, the framing narrative could be me in 2016 telling someone about something that happened to me – the **embedded narrative** – in the 1990s. We can think of the embedded narrative as a 'story within a story'. This technique is generally another form of non-chronological writing, with the 'present' of the embedded narrative being before the 'present' of the framing narrative.

This is an important technique used by a number of writers, and it is one which Mary Shelley uses in *Frankenstein*. The creature's story is an embedded narrative within Victor's story, which is itself an embedded narrative within the overall framing narrative of Robert Walton's letters to his sister. Although it sounds a little complicated, it is quite a common technique, and you may be able to think of your own examples from film and television as well as novels. One example is the 1997 film *Titanic*, directed by James Cameron and starring Kate Winslet and Leonardo di Caprio as Rose and Jack. The film begins (and ends) with Rose as an old woman, on board a research ship which has found the wreck of the *Titanic*. This is the framing narrative, with the vast majority of the film being the embedded narrative of Rose's story of her experiences on the *Titanic* as a young woman.

Self check

(Allow 10 minutes)

Describe some of the options that a novelist has when structuring the plot of a story.

You will find feedback to self checks at the end of the section.

Summary

- The plot of a story is the events which occur.
- A narrative is a plot conveyed in a particular way.
- Writers make lots of narrative decisions when constructing their narrative, and one of the most important of these is the order in which the events are told.

Key terms

chronological: telling a story in the order in which the events occurred (cf. **non-chronological**)

embedded narrative: a story within a story

episode: a scene or event within a wider narrative and contributing to the plot as a whole

first-person narrator: a narrator telling the story from their own point of view, using 'I'

flashback: in a narrative, going back to an event earlier in the story

framed narrative: when a section of a novel – often most of the novel – is presented as a story being told to someone, or as some kind of text *within* the wider text; the story being told is the **embedded narrative**, while the circumstances under which it is told form the framing narrative

in medias res: of a narrative, starting in the middle of the action

limited narrator: a narrator who doesn't know everything (cf. **omniscient narrator**)

narrative: the way the plot is conveyed, not necessarily as a straightforward account of events

narrative hook: a technique used by a writer to draw the reader into the story and make them want to read on

narrator: the character telling the story

non-chronological: telling a story in a different order from that in which it actually occurred (cf. **chronological**)

omniscient narrator: a **narrator** who knows everything (cf. **limited narrator**)

plot: of a story, the things that happen in it

sub-plot: a less important part of the story but usually having some connection with the main plot; often helps the novel to reach its conclusion

third-person narrator: a **narrator** telling the story from outside



What next?

We hope this sample has helped you to decide whether this course is right for you.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us using the details below.

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