

Glossary of Terms for Understanding Fiction from Cleis Abeni

ERRATA

This glossary is an ongoing project. New definitions and terms are always being added. Thus, typos arise in places where I would never have expected. For this I apologize. If you see typos, misspellings or misstatements please alert me. I first began this glossary in 1991. This list is very selective and delimited. There are thousands of concepts related to fiction writing. I have only listed the terms that most arise in my work. This list is in alphabetical order.

NOTE ON “STORY” AND LITERARY STANDARDS

Before we begin the listing of terms and definitions, let me make the following statements about what “story” means to me. I would also like to explain the kinds of literary standards that inform my use and explanation of the terms in this document.

For me, the term “story” best refers to fiction that includes the well-developed union of the following elements:

1. Innovative, inspired, eloquent, grammatically fluent, rhetorically rich language and phrasing on the level of the sentence and the paragraph.
2. Freshly conceived beginnings, middles, and ends—or a sense of opening and closure.
3. A sequence of events (or plot).
4. Points of view (or perspective).
5. Scenes.
6. Places.
7. Time frames;
8. Characterizations;
9. Structures (or designs that the events *plot for*).

I also hope that such fiction includes the following:

1. Carefully phrased language that avoids clichés (including first rate grammar, syntax, and diction);
2. Evidence of preparation, like drafting and revision (rather than careless or lazy design);
3. Clear, distinct, progressive interrelationships between parts (or structural cohesiveness, well-developed design, and organizational excellence);
4. Plausibility, continuity, motivation, and consequence in the depiction of action;
5. An admirable deficit of *deus ex machina*, and other errors, clichés, or gimmicks of contrivance; and such gimmicks usually have at least two bad effects: either they draw attention to the work as a crassly commercial enterprise, and/or they draw attention to the work as a display of the author’s narcissism.

These elements of “story” constitute standards for fiction writing. I share these with you because, since I began teaching fiction writing in colleges and universities in 1994, students have sometimes questioned the validity of these standards. Some have said comments like the following, “But I don’t care about developing the material because it’s a coming-of-age piece and I’m going for an unstructured, free-associative approach” or “I like experimental approaches and I don’t want to do anything old fashioned.” I answer that I adore *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age stories, and I adore experimental artistry; but nothing should stop students from inaugurating a challenging practice of fiction writing and understanding the over two thousand year old traditions of the discipline in the English-speaking world.

The view of “story” described here is rooted in Aristotelian and Platonic ideals. These ideals were debated in foundational texts like Aristotle’s *Poetics* (350 B.C.E), Plato’s *The Republic* (360 B.C.E.), and Plato’s *Symposium* (385 B.C.E.); and these ideals have been furthered in countless texts and media in English-speaking worlds.

For as long as “stories” have been constructed there have been “anti-stories,” and the differences between these approaches are widely represented too. Philip Stevik’s classic *Anti-Story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction* (Free Press, 1971) talks about anti-stories. Stevik’s book was the first discussion of experimental fiction writing that I devoured as an adolescent. Many experimental fiction-writing approaches are excellent. However, insofar as “story” is a fundamental part of “anti-story,” it is still imperative to understand Aristotelian and Platonic approaches. Understanding the full scope of fiction writing’s artistry helps us answer three vital questions as we write and critique fiction (and answering makes our work stronger):

1. What is the story, or how is it put together?
2. What does the story *plot for*—what effect or experience issues from its design?
3. Why should anyone care—or, what is urgent about the material?

Also see the standards for genre fiction writing listed in the Turkey City Lexicon:
<http://www.sfwa.org/2009/06/turkey-city-lexicon-a-primer-for-sf-workshops/>

TERMS FOR FICTION

Action

The dramatic movement of external, concrete, physical events in time and place

Related:

1. External: within the tangible, concrete, seen, heard, sensed world
2. Internal: within the consciousness of a character

Allegory

A narrative or collection of ideas that represents ideas, which stands apart from the story's literal events or meaning

Analepsis

Plural: analepses; an interjected scene that takes the narrative back in time frame that is different from the preceding scene; flashbacks are a form of analeptic scenes that set the action in the present tense or engage other techniques (like changing the typography) to give a sense of immediacy

Back-story

An interlude (or an interruption within the narrative), which presents the experiences of a character or the circumstances of an event that occur prior to the action; another word for analepsis

Characters

The persons or living entities within literature or the arts; *protagonists* are lead characters (sometimes with heroic motives) and the most developed depictions of life in a literary work of art; *antagonists* are also lead characters, but with villainous or oppositional motives; *supporting characters* (or character actors) assist lead characters; *stock characters* are underdeveloped, stereotypical portrayals that serve comic or ancillary purposes in a literary work of art; characterization is the process of developing a character's actions and motives in a literary work of art

Context

The circumstances within which a problem or an event occurs

Continuity

A state where the relationships between parts are reliably made; when one preceding instant follows reliably from another instant without interruption and without the misstatement or the inaccurate presentation of facts

Development

Demonstrating change or evolution, from one state of being into others

Deus Ex Machina

Plot contrivance—or a detail, event, instance, character, or object that appears within the middle, or at the end of a story to fix problems with the underdevelopment of the plot or

characterization; Aristotle (the ancient Greek philosopher whose 4th century BCE treatise called POETICS advanced the rudiments of much of our traditional notion of storytelling today) decried *deus ex machina*; the words “deus ex machina” are Latin for “God from a machine” (idiomatically translated as “God on a machine”); in ancient Greek tragedy a mechane, or a crane, was used to raise and lower actors playing gods; the ancient playwright Euripides often resolved his plots by inserting gods into the action, hence the term’s theatrical origins. Aristotle criticized such approaches to plot resolution, arguing for plausible, carefully and humanly motivated action

Dialogue

Conversation between two or more people in literature and the arts, be it a play, novel, short story, movie, or other media; such conversation is usually surrounded by quotation marks in published fiction; sometimes it is identified by other typographical indications; in a play’s script, dialogue is organized according to the characters that speak it

Diegesis

1. In fiction writing, diegetic elements refer to what is told or recounted in a narrative rather than shown through description
2. In film, diegetic elements are things that characters experience within their world; thus, a film score may not be diegetic if the character cannot “hear” it within her world; however, if a character turns on the radio and music begins to play then the music is diegetic

Discourse

Discourse refers to the sum total of the way the narration is composed (including point of view and quality of address); see *free indirect style*

Editorial commentary (or editorialization)

The over-expression of opinion, rationale, or explanation within the stream of the narrative, especially comments that seem to issue from the author

Epilepsis

Present time; or sense of suspended present time; or the sense of the superimposition of present time (see analepsis and prolepsis)

Explanation

A brief expression of rationale, motivation, or circumstance

Exposition

Generally, a passage (often placed at the beginning of a narrative) that sets the overall setting, problem, or circumstance of the story while also sometimes introducing key characters

Flashback

An interlude inserted into the flow of a narrative and understood as a kind of psychic interruption (or break) from the external forward-motion of the story; most of the time flashbacks present the past as a visual enactment within the present tense; often, the typographical presentation of flashbacks sets them apart from the rest of the text (for example, a flashback may be italicized); flashbacks are often couched within the point of view of a particular character and require some preparatory staging so that readers understand who may be remembering the flashback; flashbacks are set in the present tense to emphasize the apparent immediacy of the remembering; flashbacks are unfortunately a very clichéd structural device

Free indirect style (or indirect discourse)

Narration that conveys a character's perspective in the third person *without quotation* by using language that the character would use if she or he were speaking; James Joyce's short story "The Dead" begins with an instance of free indirect style; Lily, the maid is preparing dinner for an upper-class Irish family and her thoughts are conveyed not through the direct reporting of her ideas or through quoted dialogue but rather through the diction of the narrative description in third person:

Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet. Hardly had she brought one gentleman into the little pantry behind the office on the ground floor and helped him off with his overcoat than the wheezy hall-door bell clanged again and she had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest. It was well for her she had not to attend to the ladies also.

In this passage the reader is inside of are in Lily's point of view in the 3rd person because the discourse uses idiomatic phrasing and expressions common to Lily's way of speaking and thinking (like the phrase "literally run off her feet"); this passage—and lots of the writing of the French writer Gustav (or Gustave) Flaubert—epitomizes free indirect style

Foreshadow

This pertains to all the strategies that storytellers employ to represent things before their ultimate appearance

Frigidity

Stilted third person narration divorced from characters' points of view and/or laced with outmoded, portentous, clichéd or even archaic language; this is a particular hazard for "hardboiled" detective fiction, some medieval themed science fiction or fantasy, or mystery writing

Mannerism, excessive ornamentation or over-lyricism

Third person narration in which the author sentimentalizes or fetishizes the events with verbosity, stylistic flamboyance, florid descriptors, decorative effects, quirks of diction, or outright editorializing about the characters and events of the story

Mimesis

The simulation or creation of fictional worlds as a means to represent life as it may be lived; or what is shown through description in a narrative

Plausibility

The state of being credible, reliable, acceptable or valid within a certain context; please remember that fictional worlds **should not** be judged by the dictates of life as it is lived outside of the pages of a book or magazine; plausibility should most be assessed according to the situation devised within the fictional story

Plot

The organization of events in time and place in such a way that we gradually understand the conflict and consequence of characters' actions

Point of view

There are many terms for points of view; I prefer terms linked to grammatical modes

First person point of view: the story is narrated in "I" statements within the voice of a character who plays a role in the events; tense is important as the narrator establishes her or his temporal perspective on events;

Here are some first person modes:

1. The observer-narrator: a speaker describes and comments on action with a sense that he or she is outside of the story's flow
2. Dramatic monologue: narrator tells story without major interruption or exposition as if he or she is speaking to oneself; the reader then is understood to over-hear the narration
3. Epistolary or diaristic narration (like a letter or diary): technically, this is both

second person and first person narration; narrator speaks to “the other” directly—saying “you”—and sometimes with a blend of first and second person narration, or with imperative statements, in the manner of letters or diaries; the effect: narration feels as if it has been written to one specific person (or force) who then becomes a character in the story; literary example: *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel

Second Person Point of View: the second-person mode is rare; example: “You knocked on the door. You went inside”; Very few writers employ second person narration effectively because of its arguable overuse in popular detective fiction; however, when employed with an awareness of conventions, its effect can help the narrator invite the reader to picture him or her self as a direct participant in the action

Third Person Point of View: Here are some third person point of view modes:

1. Third person limited: the narration follows one character through whose eyes we witness the story; the narration may “go inside” of the character’s mind and tell us how that character thinks and feels; the narration may describe outside events in terms the character would use
2. Third person objective (or omniscient): the 3rd person narration sees and witnesses all, either without delving into the perspective of a character or delving into everyone’s view; third-person omniscient may provide the most freedom to develop the story from multiple perspectives, and it works especially well in stories with complex plots or large settings where we must use multiple viewpoints to tell the story
3. Occasional interruptor: the author intervenes from time to time to supply necessary information, but otherwise stays in the background; the dialogue, thoughts and behavior of the characters supply other information the reader needs
4. Editorial commentator: the author’s persona has a distinct attitude toward the story’s characters and events, and frequently comments on them; the editorial commentator may be a character in the story, often with a name, but is usually at some distance from the main

Probability

Something that is likely to occur within a given context

Prolepsis

Forwarding (or flash-forwarding) in time; an interjected scene that takes the narrative chronologically forward

Scene

A scene combines time and place within a continuous occurrence bound within one specific interior or exterior place, and limited to a particular, brief period of time; a scene

may feature characters moving from an interior to an exterior location or visa versa; scenes are characterized by their limits: they are bound in place and time; the time and place boundaries are not static; rather, the boundaries *focus* the action so that readers may witness the movement of the events with detail. ***Mise-en-scène*** refers to the physical architecture, or the décor that comprises the scene

Structure

Parts held or put together in a particular way; the way in which parts are arranged or put together to form a whole; the interrelation or arrangement of parts in a complex entity

Style

In writing and the expressive arts, *style* refers to the way in which something is said, done, expressed, or performed

Symbol

Literal persons, places, and things that stand for abstract concepts or themes; the whale in the novel *Moby Dick* may symbolize humans' battle with the forces of nature

Theme

Theme refers to what the art is about, or its subject, topic, or content; sometimes the term theme also refers to a germ of an idea that is then developed throughout several variations in a work; themes can be abstract—or a matter of images, metaphors, or symbols. In the performing arts, abstract themes can be a matter of gestures and sounds whose meanings may not be readily reducible to or translated into spoken and written language; themes can also be concrete, or expressible in terms of specific actions and experiences where such matters like who are involved, where, when, and how the actions occur is known. In writing especially, an abstract theme may be clearer, more meaningful (to readers), and more urgent when it is tied to a concrete experience