CHAPTER

6

Plot

Often we use the terms **story** and **plot** as if they mean the same thing, but in literary interpretation their meanings are different. "Story" comes from the same Latin word that gives us "history." What is history? Even the soberest historians have sometimes felt that, in the memorable words of a member of the profession, "History is one damned thing after another." That is, history—and a story—is just a bunch of things that happened (or that we pretend happened, as in "Once upon a time . . .") one after the other ("and they lived happily ever after"). But when an author writes a short story, he or she designs a *structure* for it, an *organization* of events.

- This is the plot—the arrangement of episodes or doings or incidents or actions or happenings or whatever we wish to call them. The plot, again, is the cunning contrivance that is an organized whole.
- If you think of another sense of "plot," a secret plan or a scheme, you are close to the literary use of the term.

Thus, in the plot of a good story, everything hangs together, just as in a good criminal plot everything is well-coordinated: The getaway car is in place, a decoy distracts the bank guard at a crucial moment, and so forth, and the whole thing coheres. (The painter Edgar Degas had something of this sort in mind when he said that it takes as much cunning to paint a picture as to commit a crime.) Or, to return to the law-abiding world, we can recall a comparison suggested by the twentieth-century English writer Ivy Compton-Burnett: "A plot is like the bones of a person. . . the support of the whole."

Perhaps the best point of departure for understanding plot is the British novelist and short-story writer E. M. Forster's definition in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). He states that in a good plot the episodes are connected by causality:

> 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 on causality. "The king died and then 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.

Notice how Forster goes on to develop and complicate his insight:

> 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