> 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. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: "And then?" If it is in a plot we ask: "Why?" That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel.

Thus, if "The king died, and a week later the queen was killed by a drunk driver who was driving the wrong way down a one-way street," we would have one thing after another, a story but not a plot.

Most of the time, the plot of a short story proceeds chronologically, as Forster indicates: this happened first, and this happened next, and so on to the end. There may be **foreshadowing** along the way, where the author hints at or implies a turn or twist that the story will take. We also may encounter a **flashback,** which occurs when the author returns us to an incident or episode that preceded the events being recounted in the story. For this reason it often can be useful to set out the plot on a timeline so that we can perceive its structure visually. Such a visual aid can help us to see what happens and prompt us to analyze why it happens as it does—the motives, the causes that move the plot from here to there.

Sometimes, though, an author will choose not to present the plot of a story in chronological order. We might start in the middle (*in medias res* is the Latin phrase), with, say, the death of the king, then move backward to the marriage of the king and queen, and then move forward to the death of the queen. Or the plot might begin in the middle, move backward, forward, then backward again, and so on. The novelist Joseph Conrad, author of *Heart of Darkness* (1899), has a good term for this—he calls it "sifting," moving the plot back and forth like a miner prospecting by a stream, back and forth, back and forth, sifting as the gold comes into view.

In the *Poetics* (c. 330 BCE), the Greek philosopher Aristotle examines the plot of tragic drama, not of prose fiction, but his observations also highlight plot as a structure, as a principle for the organization of a literary work. He emphasizes that the beginning, middle, and end should be unified: "The whole, the structural union of the parts [must be] such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed." If the end of the plot is in some ways implicit in the beginning, and the narrative is, so to speak, the unfolding of the plot, does this mean that the reader can guess the end even at the beginning? Almost never. We can again quote E. M. Forster, who says that the incidents, the episodes, are "unexpected. This shock, followed by the feeling, 'Oh, that's all right,' is a sign that all is well with the plot: characters, to be real, ought to run smoothly, but a plot ought to cause surprise." We don't think this point can be overstated: A good plot surprises—but *not* because the author is free to write anything and everything. The plot must not only surprise but must also evoke the sense, "Oh, that's all right."

Some authors favor simple plots, whereas others prefer complex plots that require us to do careful work to figure out what happened. Even at the end, we might not be certain that we know. We then might be tempted to say that the story is confusing, and we might go so far as to say that it is badly written. But authors have their reasons for what they decide to do. The purpose of an intricate plot might be to show us that it sometimes is difficult to know what happened in a situation and why it did. The meaning and significance of this situation might be ambiguous, or indeterminate.

A short story is short: usually it focuses on a single plot. In this respect it differs from a play like Shakespeare's *King Lear,* which weaves together for comparison and contrast the main plot and the subplot—sometimes termed the primary and the secondary plots. Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, and other novelists work on a wide-ranging, panoramic scale. In their books, we find multiple plots, a half-dozen or more. In Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–1853) and in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) the authors present a number of intersecting plots. They design an elaborate structure that the author of a short story, whose space is limited, does not. A short story is perhaps closer to a lyric poem than to a novel: It usually aims at a single effect.

Authors enjoy telling stories; they take pleasure in leading us through a plot. The Canadian novelist and critic Robertson Davies (1913–1995) explains it this way:

> If you're a writer, a real writer, you're a descendant of those medieval storytellers who used to go into the square of a town and spread a little mat on the ground and sit on it and beat on a bowl and say, "if you give me a copper coin I will tell you a golden tale."

Here is a very short story told by a writer who often said he worked in the tradition of the old storyteller, sitting on a mat, that Robertson Davies speaks of.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

W(illiam) Somerset Maugham (1874–1965), born in Paris but of English origin, grew up in England, where he was trained as a physician but never practiced medicine. Rather, he preferred to make his living as a novelist, playwright, and writer of short stories. The following story is in fact a speech uttered by a character, Death, in one of Maugham's plays, Sheppey *(1933).*

The Appointment in Samarra [1933

Death speaks: There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from the city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.