10

WRITING ABOUT FICTION: THE WORLD OF THE STORY

There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.

—Willa Cather

The narrative impulse is always with us; we couldn't imagine ourselves through a day without it.

—Robert Coover

A novel that does not uncover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel's only morality.

—Milan Kundera

Fiction is nothing less than the subtlest instrument for self-examination and self-display that mankind has yet invented.

—John Updike

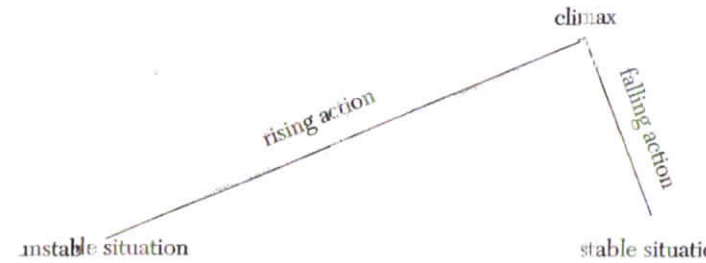
PLOT AND CHARACTER

Plot has two meanings: (1) what happens, the basics of the narrative, and (2) the writer's arrangement or structuring of the material into a story. Thus, in the first sense, all tellings of the life of Lincoln have the same plot, but in the second sense, a writer who begins with the assassination and then gives the earlier material is setting forth a plot that differs from one given by a writer who begins at the beginning.

It is usual to say that a plot has an **introduction,** a **complication,** and a **resolution;** that is, it gets under way, then some difficulty or problem or complexity arises (usually a **conflict** of opposed wills or

es), and finally, there is some sort of settling down. A somewhat aphoric way of putting it is to say that the plot can often be seen as tying and then the untying of a knot; the end is the **dénouement** ench for "untying").

A closely related way of looking at the organization of the happenings nany works of fiction is to see the plot as a pyramid or triangle. The man critic Gustav Freytag, in *Techniques of the Drama* (1863), intro- ed this conception in examining the five-act structure of plays, but it be applied to some fiction, too. In this view, we begin either with an able situation or with an apparently stable situation that is soon dis- ed; that is, some difficulty or problem or complexity arises (usually a **flict** of opposed wills or forces). The early happenings, with their in- sing tension, constitute a **rising action,** which culminates in a **nax** or **crisis** or **turning point.** (The word *climax* comes from a ek word meaning "ladder." Originally, the climax was the entire rising on, but the word has come to mean the high point or end of the rising on.) What follows the decisive moment is the **falling action,** which s in a stable situation—a situation that the reader takes to be final. characters need not die; the reader feels, however, that nothing e is to be said about them.



Here is a diagram showing Freytag's pyramid. Remember that a story ! not have this structure. Early fiction tends to have a good deal of ical action—wanderings, strange encounters, births, and deaths. But ome fiction, little seems to happen. These apparently plotless stories lly involve a *mental action*—a significant perception, a decision, a fail- of the will—and the process of this mental action is the plot.

The sense of causality is in part rooted in **character**. Things happen, ost good fiction, at least partly because the people have certain per- lities or characters (moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities) and, n their natures, because they respond plausibly to other personalities.

What their names are and what they look like may help you understand them, but the best guide to characters is what they do. As we get to know more about their drives and goals—especially the choices they make—we enjoy seeing the writer complete the portraits, finally presenting us with a coherent and credible picture of people in action.

In this view, plot and character are inseparable. Plot is a series not simply of happenings, but of happenings that come out of character, that reveal character, and that influence character. Henry James (1843–1916) puts it thus: "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" But, of course, characters are not defined only by what they do. The narrator often describes them, and the characters' words and dress reveal aspects of them.

You may want to set forth a character sketch, describing some person in the story or novel. You will probably plan to convey three things:

appearance,
personality, and
character—"character" here meaning not a figure in a literary work but the figure's moral or ethical values

In preparing a character sketch, take these points into consideration:

1. What the person says (but remember that what he or she says need not be taken at face value; the person may be hypocritical or self-deceived or biased).
2. What the person does—including, if possible, what the person thinks.
3. What others (including the narrator of the story) say about the person.
4. What others *do* (their actions may help indicate what the person could do but does not do), including what they *think* about others.
5. What the person looks like—face, body, clothes. These details may help convey the personality of the character, or they may in some measure help to disguise it.

Writing about a Character

A character sketch, such as "Holden Caulfield: Adolescent Snob or Suffering Saint?," may be complex and demanding, especially if the character (the figure) is complex. Notice that in the example just referred to, the writer sees that Holden, the protagonist in J. D. Salinger's *The*

Catcher in the Rye (1951), might be interpreted in two very different ways, as a snob or as a saint. In fact, the student who wrote the essay argued that Holden has touches of the adolescent snob but is chiefly a suffering saint.

An essay on a character is necessarily in some degree an interpretation, and such an essay has a thesis or argument holding it together. Usually, however, you will want to do more than set forth your view of a character. Probably, you will discuss the character's function or contrast him or her with other characters or trace the development of the character's personality. (One of the most difficult topics, the character of the narrator, will be discussed later in this chapter, under the heading "Point of View.") You will still want to keep in mind the five suggestions for getting at a character (as well as others on page 141), but you will also want to go further, relating your findings to additional matters of the sort we will examine now.

Organizing an Analysis of a Character As you read and reread, you will highlight and annotate the text and will jot down notes, recording (in whatever order they come to you) your thoughts about the character you are studying. Reading with a view toward writing, you'll want to

1. jot down traits as they come to mind ("kind," "forgetful," "enthusiastic") and
2. look back at the text, searching for supporting evidence (characteristic actions, brief supporting quotations), also looking for counterevidence so that you may modify your earlier impressions.

Brainstorming leads to an evaluation and a shaping of your ideas. Evaluating and shaping lead to a tentative outline. A tentative outline leads to the search for supporting evidence—the material that will constitute the body of your essay.

When you set out to write a first draft, review your annotations and notes, and see if you can summarize your view of the character in one or two sentences:

X is . . .

or

Although X is, . . . she is also . . .

That is, *try to formulate a thesis sentence or a thesis paragraph*—a proposition that you will go on to support.

You want to let your reader know early, probably in your first sentence—and almost certainly by the end of your first paragraph—which character you are writing about and what your overall thesis is.

The body of your essay will be devoted to supporting your thesis. If you have asserted that although so-and-so is cruel and domineering he or she nevertheless is endowed with a conscience, you will go on in your essay to support those assertions with references to passages that demonstrate them. This support does *not* mean that you tell the plot of the whole work; an essay on a character is by no means the same as a summary of the plot. Because you must support your generalizations, you will have to make brief references to specific episodes that reveal his or her personality, and almost surely you will quote an occasional word or passage.

An essay on a character may be organized in many possible ways. Much will depend on your purpose and thesis. You may want to show how the character develops—gains knowledge or matures or disintegrates. Or you may want to show what the character contributes to the story or play as a whole. Or, to give yet another example, you may want to show that the character is unbelievable. Still, although no single organization is always right, two methods are common and effective.

One effective way of organizing an essay on a character is to let the organization of your essay follow closely the sequence of the literary work; you might devote a paragraph to the character as we first perceive him or her and then in subsequent paragraphs go on to show that this figure is later seen to be more complex than he or she at first appears. Such an essay may trace your changing responses.

A second effective way of organizing an essay on a character is to set forth, early in the essay, the character's chief strengths and weaknesses, and then to go on to study each trait you have listed. The organization would (in order to maintain the reader's interest) probably begin with the most obvious points and then move on to the less obvious, subtler points. The body of your essay is devoted to offering evidence that supports your generalizations about the character.

What about a concluding paragraph? The concluding paragraph ought *not* to begin with the obviousness of "Thus, we see," or "In conclusion," or "I recommend this story because. . . ." Especially if your essay has moved from the obvious traits to the more subtle and more important traits, and if your essay is fairly short (say, fewer than 500 words), a reader may not need a conclusion. Further, why blunt what you have just said by adding an unnecessary and merely repetitive summary? If you do feel that a conclusion is necessary, you may find it effective to write a

summary of the character, somewhat as you did in your opening. For the conclusion, relate the character's character to the entire literary work; give the reader a sense of the role that the character plays.

A Sample Essay on a Character: "Holden's Kid Sister"

A student decided to write about Phoebe, Holden Caulfield's sister in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Before writing, he reread the book, highlighting certain passages about Phoebe. He then reviewed the text and jotted down some key ideas:

Phoebe Josephine Caulfield
Holden's kid sister
playful, funny, fun to be with
likes movies
invents new name (Weatherfield)
good dancer
academically good ("smart"; "good in all subjects")
Actually, Holden says this, and as he somewhere says, he's a terrible liar--but here he's probably telling the truth. He wouldn't lie about her. (Does this point have to be proved?)
good listener (that's what H. needs; it seems that almost everyone else is trying to tell him some phoney stuff, but P. accepts him)
good listener but she doesn't always agree with him or approve of what he's doing.
Example: disapproves of his leaving school
BUT though she's upset by it, she sticks with him
Other examples needed?
She's loyal--and she loves him. Does anyone else love him?

This material provided much of the first draft, which was submitted to peer review. The student then revised the draft, partly in accordance with the suggestions offered and partly in the light of his own further thinking. Here is the final version.

Holden's Kid Sister

Phoebe Josephine Caulfield, Holden's ten-year-old sister in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, is a child with a mind of her own. She doesn't care for her middle name, and so on the first page of one of her many notebooks she gives herself a new one: "Phoebe Weatherfield Caulfield." She is, we gather, playful and imaginative, but she is also in touch with reality, and able to get along well in the world. She has friends, and at school she is "good in all subjects." The quality that most impresses a reader, however, is not her academic success but her loyalty to Holden, and even when she criticizes Holden she does so out of deep love for him.

Since Holden is the narrator of the book, all that we know of Phoebe is seen through his eyes, but there is no reason to doubt his comments about her. Fairly early in the book, in Chapter 10, he gives us a long description, in the course of which he says that she is "pretty and smart," a redhead, "skinny," and (more important, of course) "affectionate." Later Holden tells us that she shares his taste in movies, and that she is a perfect partner when she dances with him. That is, Phoebe is on Holden's wavelength; the two can move in harmony, and not only when they dance. She is a good listener, and Holden desperately needs someone who can listen to him, since most of the people in his world are big talkers and are trying to impose their own values on him.

This is not to say, however, that Phoebe approves of all of Holden's actions. When she learns that he has left school, she is upset with him, but the reader always feels that any criticism she makes proceeds from her love for Holden. She is so loyal to him that she wants to leave school and go with him when he tells her he plans to run away from New York and hitchhike to the West. Her loyalty, her refusal to leave him, causes him to abandon his desperate plan to flee.

Her sincerity and her love for Holden are not enough to restore him to mental health (at the end of the book we learn that he "got sick and all" and is now in some sort of asylum), but the reader knows that if any character in the book can provide the human warmth that Holden requires, that character is his bright, strong-willed, loving "kid sister."

A Brief Overview of the Essay

- The title is informative and at least moderately interesting—more interesting, for example, than "Phoebe Caulfield."
- The writer does not cite pages because the instructor did not ask him to do so, but if your instructor asks you to give references, use the form prescribed. (On citations, see pages 310–321.)
- The opening paragraph announces the topic, gives a brief description of Phoebe (her age, her imaginativeness), and ends by focusing on her most important trait, her love for Holden.
- The body of the essay (paragraphs 2 and 3) offers a few additional minor details, but chiefly it supports (by means of the comment on dancing) the earlier generalization that Phoebe is uniquely in harmony with Holden. It does not summarize the plot, but it does refer to certain episodes, and it interprets them in order to show how they reveal Phoebe's character.
- The final paragraph, the fourth, offers additional support (her plan to run away with Holden), and it concludes with a glance at the conclusion of the novel. The essay more or less echoes the chronology of the book, but these last sentences are not mere plot telling. Rather, they solidify the writer's view of Phoebe's character and her importance to Holden.

FORESHADOWING

The writer of fiction provides a coherent world in which the details work together. **Foreshadowing,** which eliminates surprise or at least greatly reduces it and thus prepares us for what will occur later, is a powerful tool in the hands of the writer of serious fiction.

James Joyce's "Araby" (1914)—it is printed on pages 338–342—is another example of a story in which the beginning is a preparation for all that follows. Consider the first two paragraphs:

> North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' school set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two stories stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.
>
> The former tenant of our house, a priest, had died in the back drawing-room. Air, musty from having been long enclosed, hung in all the rooms, and the waste room behind the kitchen was littered with old useless papers. Among these I found a few paper-covered books, the pages of which were curled and damp: *The Abbot,* by Walter Scott, *The Devout Communicant* and *The Memoirs of Vidocq.* I liked the last best because its leaves were yellow. The wild garden behind the house contained a central apple-tree and a few straggling bushes under one of which I found the late tenant's rusty bicycle pump. He had been a very charitable priest; in his will he had left all his money to institutions and the furniture of his house to his sister.

This story, like others, has at least three lives:

- when we read the story, sentence by sentence, trying to turn the sequence of sentences into a consistent whole;
- when we have finished reading the story and we think back on it as a whole; and
- when we reread a story, knowing already even as we read the first line how it will turn out at the end.

Let's assume that you have not read the whole of "Araby." On the basis only of a reading of the first two paragraphs, what might you highlight or underline? Here are the words that one student marked:

blind	musty
quiet	kitchen was littered
set the boys free	leaves were yellow
brown imperturbable faces	wild garden . . . apple-tree
priest	charitable priest

No two readers will come up with exactly the same list (if you live on North Richmond Street, you will probably underline it and put an

exclamation mark in the margin; if you attended a parochial school, you'll probably underline "Christian Brothers' school"), but most readers, despite their varied experience, would agree that Joyce is giving us a picture of what he elsewhere called the "paralysis" of Ireland. How the story will turn out is unknown to a first-time reader. Perhaps the paralysis will increase, or perhaps it will be broken. Joyce goes on adding sentence to sentence, trying to shape the reader's response, and the reader goes on reading, making meaning out of the sentences.

As we read further, we are not surprised to learn that the boy for a while manufactured quasi-religious experiences, religion being dead—remember the dead priest and his rusty bicycle pump. Shop boys sing "litanies," his girlfriend's name springs to his lips "in strange prayers," and his vision of her is a "chalice" that he carries "safely through a throng of foes." He plans to visit a bazaar, and he promises to bring her a gift; but after he has with some difficulty arrived at the bazaar, he is vastly disappointed by the trivial conversation of the attendants, by the counting of the day's receipts (money changers in the temple), and by the darkness ("the upper part of the hall was now completely dark"). The last line of the story runs thus: "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger." Everything in the story coheres; the dead-end street, the dead priest, the rusty pump—all are perfect preludes to this story about a boy's recognition of the nothingness that surrounds him. The "vanity" that drives and derides him is not only the egotism that moved him to think he could bring the girl a fitting gift but also the nothingness that is spoken of in the biblical "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

In preparing to write about foreshadowing,

- Reread the story; now that you know how it ends, you will be able to see how certain early details are relevant to the ending.
- Underline or highlight these details, and perhaps jot down brief notes in the margins, such as "images of emptiness" or "later turns out ironically."
- At a later stage in the process of writing, you will find it useful to jot down on a sheet of paper key phrases from the text and to annotate them with such comments as "The first of many religious images" and "Same image appears later."

Organizing an Essay on Foreshadowing

What is the best way to organize an essay on foreshadowing? Probably you will work through the evidence chronologically, though your initial paragraph may discuss the end and indicate that the remainder of the essay will be concerned with tracing the way in which the author prepares the reader for this end and simultaneously maintains the right amount of suspense.

- If the suspense is too slight, we stop reading, not caring what comes next.
- If it is too great, possibly we are reading a story in which the interest depends entirely on some strange happening rather than a story with sufficiently universal application to make it worthy of a second reading.

Your essay may study the ways in which details gain in meaning as the reader gets farther into the story. Or it may study the author's failure to keep details relevant and coherent, the tendency to introduce material for its momentary value at the expense of the larger design. An essay on an uneven story may do both: It may show that although there are unfortunate irrelevancies, considerable skill is used in arousing and interestingly fulfilling the reader's expectations.

If you feel that the story is fundamentally successful, the organization of your thoughts may reflect your feelings. After an initial paragraph stating the overall position, you may discuss the failures and then go on at greater length to discuss the strengths, ending strongly on your main point. If you feel that the story is essentially a failure, perhaps first discuss its merits briefly and then go on to your main point—the unsatisfactory nature of the story.

SETTING AND ATMOSPHERE

Foreshadowing normally makes use of **setting.** The setting or environment in the first two paragraphs of Joyce's "Araby" is not mere geography, not mere locale: It provides an **atmosphere,** an air that the characters breathe, a world in which they move. Narrowly speaking, the setting is the physical surroundings—the furniture, the architecture, the landscape, the climate—and these often are highly appropriate to the characters who are associated with them. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), the passionate Earnshaw family is associated with Wuthering Heights, the storm-exposed moorland, whereas the mild Linton family is associated with Thrushcross Grange in the sheltered valley below. Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"(1835) also has two settings, Salem in the daytime and a nearby forest at night. A reader of the story probably comes to believe that Salem is associated with order, decency, and the good, and the dark forest with chaos and evil.

Setting includes not only the physical surroundings but a point or several points in time. The background against which we see the characters and the happenings may be specified as morning or evening, spring or fall, and this temporal setting in a good story will probably be highly relevant; it will probably be part of the story's meaning, perhaps providing an ironic contrast (think of the festive, carnival setting in Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," a story of a murder) or perhaps exerting an influence on the characters.

Note: Although your instructor may ask you to write a paragraph describing the setting, more often he or she will want something more complicated, such as an essay on the *function* of the setting. For such an essay, you may find it useful to begin with a paragraph or two describing the setting or settings, but be sure to go on to analyze the significance of this material.

SYMBOLISM

Writers of fiction do not write only about things that have happened to them. They write about things they have seen or heard, and also about thoughts and emotions.

Inevitably, writers use **symbols.** Symbols are neither puzzles nor colorful details but are among the concrete embodiments that give the story its content. In "Ripe Figs" (pages 12–13), Maman-Nainaine tells Babette that when the figs are ripe Babette can visit her cousins. Of course Maman may merely be setting an arbitrary date, but as we read the story we likely feel—because of the emphasis on the *ripening* of the figs, which occurs in the spring or early summer—that the ripening of the figs in some way suggests the maturing of Babette. If we do get such ideas, we will in effect be saying that the story is not simply an anecdote about an old woman whose behavior is odd. True, the narrator of the story, after telling us of Maman-Nainaine's promise, adds, "Not that the ripening of figs had the least thing to do with it, but that is the way Maman-Nainaine was." The narrator sees nothing special—merely Maman-Nainaine's eccentricity—in the connection between the ripening of the figs and Babette's visit to her cousins. Readers, however, may see more than the narrator sees or says. They may see in Babette a young girl maturing; they may see in Maman-Nainaine an older woman who, almost collaborating with nature, helps Babette to mature.

Writers use symbols because they want readers to perceive—at least faintly—that certain characters or places or seasons or happenings have

rich implications, stand for something more than what they are on the surface. How do writers help us to perceive these things? *By emphasizing them*—for instance, by describing them at some length—or *by introducing them at times when they might not seem strictly necessary,* or *by calling attention to them repeatedly.*

Consider, for example, Chopin's treatment of the season in which "The Story of an Hour" (page 24) takes place. The story has to take place at *some* time, but Chopin does not simply say, "On a spring day," or an autumn day, and let things go at that. Rather, she tells us about the sky, the trees, the rain, the twittering sparrows—and all of this in an extremely short story in which we might think there is no time for talk about the setting. After all, none of this material is strictly necessary to a story about a woman who has heard that her husband was killed in an accident, who grieves, then recovers, and then dies when he suddenly reappears.

Why, then, does Chopin give such emphasis to the season? Probably because she is using the season symbolically. In this story

- the spring is not just a bit of detail added for realism. Chopin puts considerable emphasis on it, loading it with suggestions of renewal, of the new life that Louise achieves for a moment.
- But here, a caution. To say that the spring in this story is symbolic is not to say that whenever spring appears in a story it always stands for renewal—or that whenever winter appears it always stands for death. Nor does it mean that since spring recurs, Louise will be reborn. In *this* story Chopin uses the season to convey certain specific implications.

Is the railroad also a symbol? Probably not—although readers may disagree. The railroad accident in "The Story of an Hour" may be just a railroad accident, essential to the plot but not to our sense of what the story is about. Chopin doesn't seem to be using the railroad to say something about modern travel, or about industrialism. The steam-propelled railroad train could be used symbolically, to say something about industrialism displacing an agrarian economy, but does Chopin give her train any such association? If she had wished to do so, she would probably have called attention to the enormous power of the train; she would have let us hear the shriek of its whistle and let us see the smoke pouring out of the smokestack and the intense fire burning in the engine, or she would have let us sense its indifference as it charged through the countryside, defacing the landscape and displacing farmworkers. Had she done so, it would be a different story. Or she might have made the train

a symbol of fate overriding human desires, but, again, she does not endow her train with such suggestions. She gives virtually no emphasis to the train, so it is reasonable to believe that it has virtually no significance for the reader. (Incidentally, Chopin's father had died in a train accident, and so it is conceivable that the episode in the story had some special significance for Chopin, but that is a matter for a psychoanalytic interpretation.)

A Sample Essay on Setting as Symbol: "Spring Comes to Mrs. Mallard"

The following essay is about Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (pages 24–26). If you have not yet read the story, take a moment now to do so.

Amy Jones, a first-year student, has kindly provided her last notes, an outline that guided her while she wrote her first draft. Not all of the notes ended up in the final version, but they were a great help in shaping the essay.

thesis: setting here not place but time—springtime title?
- Chopin and Spring
- Chopin's Spring
- Mrs. M's Spring
- Mrs. M's Symbolic Spring
- Spring in "The Story of an Hour"
- Spring Comes to Mrs. M
- Setting as Symbol
- Setting as Symbol: Spring in . . .

setting in "Hour"

Define setting??? place and time
- Chopin doesn't give date (or city); but in a house

spring:
- "the tops of the trees . . . were all aquiver with the new spring" (parag. 5)
- "sparrows were twittering in the eaves" (parag. 5)
- "There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds" (parag. 6)
  - why clouds? brightness pushing through darkness, like joyous new life pushing aside grief???

~~"spring days and summer days"—special significance of summer?? Or just means "lots of days"?~~

~~old way of life~~

~~"Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door!"~~

elixir (near end) medicine???
doctors say died of heart disease
End with a quotation? Or with something about life turning to death?

Title implies thesis. Opening paragraph identifies author and story; topic (setting) is introduced.

Spring Comes to Mrs. Mallard

In reading Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" a reader is hardly aware of where the story is set. We are not told the country or the city, or the period, and so (if we think about it at all) we probably assume the story is set during Chopin's own lifetime, perhaps even during the year in which she wrote it, in Chopin's own territory, although there really is nothing very specific about Louisiana in this story. Nor do we learn, at the very beginning of the story, whether the action is taking place indoors or outdoors. However, since the story begins by telling us that Mrs. Mallard's sister, Josephine, gently breaks the news of the death of Mr. Mallard, we probably assume it is taking place at Mrs. Mallard's house. This assumption is confirmed a little later, when we hear that Mrs. Mallard, once she has heard the terrible news, "went away to her room alone" (26).

Transition ("But") leads to next point (that the season is emphasized).

But if Kate Chopin doesn't tell us anything about the society in which the figures in the story live, she tells us quite a bit about the time of the year during

which the story takes place. The story is very short—only about two and a half pages—but Chopin finds space in which to tell us not only that the time is spring, but also that from a window in her room Mrs. Mallard

Quotation introduced as supporting evidence (set off because it is longer than four lines).

> could see the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing finally reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves. (26)

This is the fullest description of the time of year in the story, but there are other shorter references, so we can say that the springtime is given considerable emphasis, considering how short the story is. For instance, the quoted paragraph is followed by a shorter paragraph that mentions "patches of blue sky" (27), and in fact "blue sky" is mentioned again, two paragraphs later. There is nothing especially remarkable about the sky being blue, and so one might wonder why Chopin bothers to tell us that the sky is blue when she doesn't even tell us where her story is set. And then, in the next paragraph, she tells us more about the sky: "There was something coming to her. . . . What was it? She did not know. . . . But she felt it creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air" (27).

Brief quotations used as additional evidence.

Thesis is further clarified.

Given this emphasis on the spring air, we can now see that Chopin is contrasting two aspects of setting, the season versus the place, springtime versus the closed room. The spring air is invading the room in which Mrs. Mallard has locked herself. At first Mrs. Mallard resists the mysterious invasion: "She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back" (27), but, the reader comes to understand, "this thing" is the spirit of "the new spring life" which we learned earlier in the story, set the tops of the trees aquiver. The trees, the swallows, and the blue sky are signs of the spring, and the spring symbolizes life. The locked room, where Mrs. Mallard goes to grieve, is a place of mourning, of death, but Mrs. Mallard is a living creature, and though she sincerely grieves she cannot shut out life.

Thesis is hammered home.

Now it is clear why Chopin did not bother to tell us in what city, or even in what kind of house, the action takes place. It doesn't matter. What does matter is the feeling of new life that Mrs. Mallard feels, and this can best be shown by relating it to springtime, a time of new life.

Concluding paragraph furthers the argument (passage about "elixir") and also, in its final sentences, wraps up essay.

Even though she has confined herself to her room, through the window Mrs. Mallard drinks the spring air. In Chopin's words, "She was drinking in the very elixir of life through that open window" (27). An

elixir, according to The American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition, is "a substance believed to maintain life indefinitely." This word is an effective word to describe the way Mrs. Mallard feels, as the sights and sounds of spring press upon her and give her a new sense of life. But of course although spring renews life indefinitely, each year bringing new vegetation, people do not live indefinitely. In fact Mrs. Mallard will live for less than an hour. Chopin does not make it clear to a reader whether Mrs. Mallard dies because she really has "heart trouble," as we are told in the first paragraph, or because she has lived an intense spring moment as an individual and so she cannot stand the thought of a lifetime with her husband. But what is perfectly clear is that one aspect of the setting—springtime, a season full of new life—is essential to convey to the reader a sense of Mrs. Mallard's new (and tragically brief) feelings.

New page]

Work Cited

Documentation

Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour." An Introduction to Literature, eds. Sylvan Barnet et al. 12th ed. New York: Longman, 2001. 26-28.

POINT OF VIEW

The Dublin in "Araby" (338–342) is the Dublin that James Joyce thought existed, but it must be remembered that although an author *writes* a story, someone else *tells* it. We hear the story from a particular **point of view,** and this point of view in large measure determines our response to the story. A wide variety of terms has been established to name differing points of view, but the following labels are among the most common. We may begin with two categories: third-person points of view (in which the **narrator** is not a participant in the story) and first-person points of view (in which the "I" who narrates the story plays a part in it).

Third-Person Narrators

The **third-person** or **nonparticipant point of view** itself has several subdivisions. At one extreme is the **omniscient narrator,** who knows everything that is going on and can tell us the inner thoughts of all the characters. The omniscient narrator may editorialize, pass judgments, reassure the reader, and so forth, in which case he or she may sound like the author. Here is Thomas Hardy's editorially omniscient narrator in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), telling the reader that Tess was mistaken in imagining that the countryside proclaimed her guilt:

> But this encompassment of her own characterization, based upon shreds of convention, peopled by phantoms and voices antipathetic to her, was a sorry and mistaken creation of Tess's fancy—a cloud of moral hobgoblins by which she was terrified without reason.

Still, even this narrator is not quite Hardy; he does not allude to his other books, his private life, or his hope that the book will sell. If he is Hardy, he is only one aspect of Hardy, quite possibly a fictional Hardy, a disembodied voice with particular characteristics.

Another type of third-person narrator, **selective omniscient,** takes up what Henry James called a "center of consciousness," revealing the thoughts of one of the characters but (for the most part) seeing the rest of the characters from the outside only.

Wayne Booth, in a thoughtful study of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816), explains the effectiveness of selective omniscience in this novel. He points out that Emma is intelligent, witty, beautiful, and rich. But she is

flawed by pride, and, until she discovers and corrects her fault, she almost destroys herself and her friends. How may such a character be made sympathetic, so that we will hope for a happy conclusion to the comedy? "The solution to the problem of maintaining sympathy despite almost crippling faults," Booth says,

> was primarily to use the heroine herself as a kind of narrator, though in third person, reporting on her own experience. . . . By showing most of the story through Emma's eyes, the author insures that we shall travel with Emma rather than stand against her. It is not simply that Emma provides, in the unimpeachable evidence of her own conscience, proof that she has many redeeming qualities that do not appear on the surface; such evidence could be given with authorial commentary, though perhaps not with such force and conviction. Much more important, the sustained inside view leads the reader to hope for good fortune for the character with whom he travels, quite independently of the qualities revealed.
>
> —*The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1983), 245–246

Booth goes on to point out in a long and careful analysis that "sympathy for Emma can be heightened by withholding inside views of others as well as by granting them of her."

In writing about point of view, one tries to suggest what the author's choice of a particular point of view contributes to the story. Booth shows how Jane Austen's third-person point of view helps keep sympathetic a character who otherwise might be less than sympathetic. Notice that Booth states the problem—how to draw an intelligent but proud woman so that the reader will wish for a happy ending—and he presents his answer convincingly, moving from "It is not simply . . . " to "Much more important . . . " (to reverse the order would cause a drop in interest). He then moves from a discussion of the inside treatment of Emma to the outside treatment of the other characters, thus substantiating and enlarging his argument.

The third-person narrator, then, although not in the ordinary sense a character in the story, is an important voice in the story, who helps give shape to it. Another type of third-person narrator is the so-called **effaced narrator.** (Some critics use the term **dramatic point of view** or **objective point of view.**) This narrator does not seem to exist, for (unlike the editorially omniscient narrator) he or she does not comment in his or her own voice and (unlike the omniscient and selective omniscient narrators) does not enter any minds. It is almost improper to speak of an effaced narrator as "he" or "he or she," for no evident figure is speaking. The reader

hears dialogue and sees only what a camera or a fly on the wall would see. The following example is from Hemingway's "The Killers" (1927):

> The door of Henry's lunchroom opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter.
>
> "What's yours?" George asked them.
>
> "I don't know," one of the men said. "What do you want to eat, Al?"
>
> "I don't know," said Al. "I don't know what I want to eat."

But even an effaced narrator has a kind of personality. The story the narrator records may seem "cold" or "scientific" or "reportorial" or "objective," and such a **tone** or voice (attitude of the narrator, as it is detected) may be an important part of the story. The French critic Rémy de Gourmont's remark, quoted in Ezra Pound's *Literary Essays* (1954), is relevant: "To be impersonal is to be personal in a special kind of way. . . . The objective is one of the forms of the subjective."

In writing about a third-person narrator, speak of "the narrator" or "the speaker," not of "the author."

First-Person Narrators

To turn to **first-person, or participant, points of view:** The "I" who narrates the story (recall that at the end of "Araby" the narrator says, "I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity") may be a major character in it (as he is in "Araby," in *The Catcher in the Rye*, and in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*) or may be a minor character, a mere witness (Dr. Watson narrates tales about Sherlock Holmes, Nick Carraway narrates the story of Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*). Of course, the narrator, even when a relatively minor character, is still a character, and, therefore, in some degree the story is about him or her. Although *The Great Gatsby* is primarily about Gatsby, it is also about Nick's changing perception of Gatsby.

First-person narrators may not fully understand their own report. Take Huck Finn in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In one passage Huck describes the "astonishing things" performed at a circus he witnesses, including a drunk who badgers the ringmaster until he is permitted to try to ride a horse. The drunk turns out to be an expert performer and is part of the circus act, but Huck thinks the ringmaster was genuinely deceived by a performer who "had got up that joke all out of his own head." In using Huck as the narrator, Mark Twain uses an **innocent eye,** a device in which a good part of the effect consists in the

discrepancy between the narrator's imperfect awareness and the reader's superior awareness. Mark Twain makes much more important use of the device in another passage, when Huck is listening to Jim, an escaped slave:

> Jim talked out loud all the time while I was talking to myself. He was saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free state he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife, which was owned on a farm close to where Miss Watson lived; and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them.
>
> It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, "Give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell." Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was this nigger, which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children—children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm.
>
> I was sorry to hear Jim say that, it was such a lowering of him.

We hear *unconscious* irony in Huck's words, especially in his indignation that Jim "would steal his children—children that belonged to a man I didn't even know." In short, Huck is an **unreliable narrator.** Unreliable narrators come in a variety of types: Narrators may be unreliable because (for example) they are naive children, or are senile, or are morally blind, or are caught up in a rage.

On the other hand, we sometimes feel that a first-person narrator (Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* [1902] and several other novels is an example) is a very thinly veiled substitute for the author. Nevertheless, the words of a first-person narrator require the same kind of scrutiny that we give to the words of the other characters in a story or play. The reader must deduce the personality from what is said. For instance, the narrator of "Araby" never tells us that he was a good student, but we can deduce that he was a bookish boy until he fell in love: "I watched my master's face pass from amiability to sternness; he hoped I was not beginning to idle."

A first-person narrator is not likely to give us the help that an editorially omniscient narrator gives. We must deduce from this passage in "Araby" that the narrator's uncle drinks too much: "At nine o'clock I heard my uncle's latchkey in the hall-door. I heard him talking to himself and heard the hall-stand rocking when it had received the weight of his overcoat. I could interpret these signs." In a first-person narrative it is sometimes difficult for the reader to interpret the signs. In a sense the author has given the reader two stories: the story the narrator tells and the story of a narrator telling a story.

Note: In writing about point of view in a first-person narrative, such as *Huckleberry Finn,* after an introductory remark to the effect that Huckleberry Finn narrates the story, use the character's name or a pronoun ("Huck fails to see . . . ") in speaking of the narrator.

Caution: Essays on narrative point of view have a way of slipping into essays on what the story is about. Point of view is relevant to the theme of the story, but if you are writing about point of view, keep this focus in sight, explaining, for instance, how it shapes the theme.

NOTES AND A SAMPLE ESSAY ON NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW IN JAMES JOYCE'S "ARABY"

Here are some of the notes—a journal entry and a rough outline—and the final version of an essay on the narrator in Joyce's "Araby." The story is printed in Appendix A on pages 338–342. Doubtless some of the notes were based on passages that the student had underlined or highlighted in the text.

1st-person point of view, but what sort of person?

Several sorts

Opening ¶ seems objective point of view

Boy is sensitive to beauty: likes a book because pages are yellow (346); plays in stable where he hears "music from the buckled harness" (346);

Boy is shy: hardly talks to girl: "I had never spoken to her" (347); "At last she spoke to me" (347) Here narrator is personal, not objective omniscient

But he plays with other boys; they don't seem to regard him as different. Typical boy? Prob. not. ~~My eyes were often full~~

~~of tears" (347).~~ But not from "the rough tribes from the cottages."

But narrator is no longer a kid; grownup, looking back on childhood; sometimes he seems almost amused by his childhood ("Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praise which I myself did not understand," 347, sometimes seems a bit hard on his earlier self: "all my foolish blood"; "What innumerable follies laid waste my waking and sleeping thoughts," 347); "~~My soul luxuriated" (273).~~ So, a third aspect to narrator

Ending: very hard on self: "I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity" (349)

But opening is very different, unemotional. In fact, come to think of it, opening isn't even clearly a first-person narrator. But there is a special personality in semicomic comment that houses themselves were "conscious of decent lives within them." The third aspect or maybe even a fourth

[Final draft]

The Three First-Person Narrators of Joyce's "Araby"

James Joyce's "Araby" is told by a first-person narrator, but this point of view is not immediately evident to a reader. The story at first seems to be told by an objective third-person narrator:

> North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two stories stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbors in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.[1]

These words seem objective and omniscient, but the very next paragraph begins by saying, "The former tenant of our house. . . ." The word our indicates that the narrative point of view is first-person. On rereading the first paragraph of the story, a reader probably still feels that the paragraph is chiefly objective, but perhaps the reader now gets a little sense of an individualized speaker in the passage about the houses being "conscious of decent lives within them," and the houses have "imperturbable faces." That is, the narrator personifies the houses, making them "conscious" and rather smug. Apparently he is detached, and somewhat amused, as he thinks back to the middle-class neighborhood of his childhood.

In many passages, however, the narrator describes his romantic childhood without any irony. For instance, he says that when he was in love with the girl, his "body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires" (346). We can say then, that so far the narrator has two aspects: (1) an adult, who looks back objectively, or maybe with a little sense of irony, and (2) an adult who looks back almost nostalgically at himself when he was a child in love.

But there is a third aspect to the narrator, revealed in several passages. For instance, he says that the girl's name was "like a

[1] James Joyce, "Araby." An Introduction to Literature, 12th ed., Ed. Sylvan Barnet et al. (New York: Longman, 2001), 345–349.

summons to all [his] foolish blood" (346) and that he engaged in "innumerable follies" (347). What may seem to be the strongest passage of this sort is at the very end of the story, and it is the strongest partly because it is in such an emphatic place: "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity" (349). But this passage is not exactly what it first seems to be. The narrator is not condemning himself, saying that as a child he was "driven and derided by vanity." He is saying, now, as an adult, that at the time of the experience he saw himself as driven and derided by vanity

The fact that he says "I saw myself" is almost a way of saying "I saw myself, falsely, as. . . ." That is, the narrator makes it clear that he is giving the child's view, and the reader understands that the child was unusually sensitive. In several passages the narrator has distanced himself from the child (as in the "foolish blood" passage), but the reader does not see the child as foolish, just as highly romantic. The very fact that the narrator calls the child "foolish" is enough for a reader mentally to come to the child's defense, and in effect say, "Oh, no, don't be so hard on yourself."

The earlier passages in which the narrator condemns his childhood experience thus serve to help the reader to take the child's part. And now, at the end of the story, when the narrator reports the child's severe judgment on himself, the reader leaps to the child's defense. If the narrator had not occasionally commented negatively on his childhood, readers might themselves have thought that the child was acting absurdly and also thought that the

narrator was too pleased with himself, but since the narrator occasionally passes a negative judgment on the child and ends by telling us that the child judged himself severely, too, the reader almost certainly wants to reassure the child that his behavior was not nearly so bad as he thought it was—and in fact it was really quite touching.

In some ways, then, this narrator is an unreliable narrator. Such a narrator is usually a naive person, who doesn't understand what is really going on in the story. The narrator of "Araby" is not naive—he is obviously a very sophisticated person—but sometimes is an unreliable guide so far as his own childhood goes. But because the narrator sometimes takes a very critical view of his childhood, a reader mentally defends the child. The third (critical) aspect of the narrator, then, actually serves to make the reader value the child's behavior rather than judge it negatively.

A Brief Overview of the Essay

- The **title** is engaging—the idea of *three* first-person narrators at first sounds paradoxical. And it probably is enough if a title is engaging and proves to be relevant. But keep in mind that the best title often is one that gives the reader a hint of your thesis. Here the title might have been "How Reliable Is the Narrator in 'Araby'?" or perhaps "Reliable and Unreliable Narrators in Joyce's 'Araby.'" The choice of a title is important.
- The **organization** is reasonable. It begins with the beginning and it ends with the end. Such an organization is not a requirement, but it is not to be shunned. Do not, however, allow such an organization to turn what should be an analytic essay into a long summary of the story. You are arguing a thesis, not writing a summary.

- The **proportions are good.** The thesis is that the third, or critical, voice in the essay is important in (paradoxically) getting sympathy for the boy, and so the third voice is given the most space.
- **Quotations** are used to let the reader know exactly what the writer is talking about. They are used as part of the argument, not as padding.

THEME: VISION OR ARGUMENT?

Because modern fiction makes subtle use of it, point of view can scarcely be neglected in a discussion of **theme**—what a story is about. Perhaps unfairly, modern criticism is usually unhappy when the author's voice, especially in older fiction, seems too controlling, explicit, or heavy-handed. We would rather see than be lectured. We are less impressed by "It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" (from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) than by this passage from the same book:

> Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

The second quotation, but not the first, gives us the sense of reality that we have come to expect from fiction. As the novelist Flannery O'Connor puts it in *Mystery and Manners* (1957), we expect a storyteller to speak "*with* character and action, not *about* character and action" (76).

Determining and Discussing the Theme

First, we can distinguish between *story* and *theme* in fiction. Story is concerned with "How does it turn out? What happens?" Theme is concerned with "What does it add up to? What motif holds the happenings together? What does it make out of life, and, perhaps, what wisdom does it offer?"

In a good work of fiction, the details add up, or, to use Flannery O'Connor's words, they are "controlled by some overall purpose." In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), for example, there are many references to popular music, especially to jazz. These references contribute to our sense of the reality in Fitzgerald's depiction of America in the 1920s, but they do more: They help comment on the shallowness of the white middle-class characters, and they sometimes (very gently) remind us of an alternative culture. One might study Fitzgerald's references to music with an eye toward getting a deeper understanding of what the novel is about.

PRELIMINARY NOTES AND A SAMPLE ESSAY ON THE THEME OF EUDORA WELTY'S "A WORN PATH"

Below are the notes and the final essay of a student, Jim Wayne, who chose to write about the theme of Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path." We recommend that you read the story first; it is printed on pages 342–348 in Appendix A of this book.

After reading and rereading the story, Jim jotted down a set of preliminary notes. Some were observations based on passages he had underlined, and others were questions that he wanted to think further about. The jottings include material specifically on the story, references to other writers, and general issues that the student found relevant to his reflections on the story's theme. When he reviewed these notes before preparing an outline and starting on a first draft, Jim deleted some of them, having decided that they were not useful for this essay. Still, they were worth jotting down, for often a writer can see what is useful and belongs in an outline only after he has collected a range of notes.

Preliminary Notes

My response: Enjoyable, carefully written, good details. Comic in places. Mysterious.

Not much happens. What is this story really about?

"Negro," "colored": What is Welty's attitude toward African-Americans? What is the relationship between the black woman and the white characters? Is Welty making a point through the story about blacks and whites in the South? The publication date is 1941—segregation was common then. "I know you old colored people," the white hunter says. Racial stereotypes. The gun—threat of

violence? If the story is supposed to take place around the time of publication, Phoenix, "too old at the Surrender," would be about ninety.

White characters: hunter, lady in town, attendant & nurse at clinic. (Doctor's office? Hospital?)

colors: e.g., second paragraph—dark striped, bleached, "eyes were blue with age," golden, yellow, red, black, copper.

"chains"—chains worn in slavery.

Welty's point of view? (Note: Check for biog info about Welty.)

Details about Phoenix Jackson—peculiar name.

a phoenix:

1. A bird in Egyptian mythology that lived in the desert for 500 years and then consumed itself by fire, later to rise renewed from its ashes.
2. A person or thing of unsurpassed excellence or beauty; a paragon. (American Heritage Dictionary, 4th. ed.)

—"Phoenix rose carefully."

Random House Unabridged Dictionary says about the phoenix—"often an emblem of immortality or of idealism or hope."

Jackson:

Thomas Jonathan Jackson, known as "Stonewall." 1824–63.

American Confederate general who commanded troops at both battles of Bull Run (1861 and 1862) and directed the Shenandoah Valley campaign (1862). He was accidentally killed by his own troops at Chancellorsville (1863). (Concise Columbia Encyclopedia)

Names connected to the story's theme? Phoenix—rebirth, return, renewal.

No other character is named—not even grandson.

Significance of the title? Why not make "Phoenix" the title?

Descriptions of the woods ("deep and still") remind me of the forest in Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown." Scary, weird. Check Frost's poem, the line "the woods are lovely, dark and deep."

Time of year: December, cold ("frozen"), Christmas—Christianity? Christian symbolism (birth of Jesus).

Places: From country to city.

Phoenix on a journey, a quest. "Through the maze now"—labyrinth. A traveler, a pilgrim. By herself—no one to help her on the way. But she is known at the clinic, has been there before.

Humor in the story? Phoenix talks to animals; crossing log across creek.

Is she crazy? But determination, dignity ("face very solemn"). Does she trick the hunter? The attendant? Clever, shrewd.

Phoenix is poor—has to walk, even her cane made from an umbrella. she sees the nickel, called a "charity case," "Charity" marked in the clinic book when she gets the medicine.

Emphasis on her old age. But makes the trip anyway—love for her grandson. Where are the parents?

Puzzling details: "like a festival figure in some old parade," "pearly cloud of mistletoe."

Supernatural elements--Ghost, scarecrow, spell.

' God watching me the whole time."

Grandson is important, but not a character in the story. Why not? Or can we say he is a character? But we don't see him, except in the talk of others.

Phoenix's reaction when asked about grandson--hard to figure out.

"We is the only two left in the world"—what does that mean?

Is the grandson left by himself while Phoenix goes to the city? Just how sick is the child? Hallucinations, imaginings, etc. Forgetful. Is there really a grandson? Alive or dead?

Ending—gift of the windmill. Sign of love between Phoenix and grandson.

Assignment says "A Worn Path" last story in Welty's collection A Curtain of Green and Other Stories. Reasons why this story a good one for ending a book of stories?

Interesting for a white author to end with story about a black character. Would story work if Phoenix were white?

Focus paper on main character? Phoenix J. herself as theme?—meaning of her life as meaning of story?

Most striking thing about Phoenix: her trip—because she loves her grandson.

Sounds sentimental, but story doesn't feel that way. How does Welty do that?

Titles for paper?—connect to discussion of theme. Phoenix=Love.

Phoenix's Love
The Bond of Love
Flight of the Phoenix
Rising from the Ashes
Rising into Love

These jottings show the large amount of preliminary work that this student did. Sometimes we imagine (or hope) that if we stare at a story or poem long enough, we will eventually "find something to write about." But

- Good writers realize that a topic and outline do not appear by magic from the pages of the assigned text.
- Writers must become *engaged* with the text, asking questions and thinking about it and taking notes to make the topic and outline begin to take shape.

In short, to write well, you have to be both an active reader and an active, alert, question-asking writer.

Jim Wayne

Critical Interpretation, Section A

February 27, 2005

Rising into Love

In Eudora Welty's short story "A Worn Path," not much happens. The main character, Phoenix Jackson, an elderly African-American woman, takes a long and difficult walk to the city of Natchez. She overcomes obstacles, has encounters with animals and talks to them, meets a white hunter, and finally reaches her destination, the clinic, where she speaks briefly with an attendant and a nurse. But the point of Welty's story is not in the plot; it is in the character of Phoenix Jackson herself. Phoenix loves her grandson and takes this difficult journey for him. In her own way, she is a moral heroine, and through her Welty shows that love is the source of personal strength and human connection.

From the very beginning, Welty suggests that Phoenix's trip is a challenging one for her. It is a cold December day, and Phoenix

herself is "very old and small."[1] She probably is about ninety, since she was too old to go to school at the end of the Civil War (1865), and the story seems to be set at about the time it was published, in 1941. We see Phoenix "coming along a path," her journey under way, as if Phoenix has already been walking for a long time. She seems not to have much or any money; she has to walk to town though it is far away, and even her cane, we learn, is "thin" and "small," made from an umbrella. But Phoenix is special, intriguing, even paradoxical, someone whom Welty wants us to notice and care about. She moves from side to side somehow balancing "heaviness and lightness"; she is "neat and tidy" but she almost trips over her shoelaces (perhaps she is too old to bend over to tie them); and she is old and worn-out yet filled with a purpose. Welty's description of her is vivid with details of color; Phoenix's eyes "were blue with age," she has a "golden color" in her forehead, and a "yellow burning" on her cheeks.

Phoenix is more than a little eccentric. She chats with animals, has a few words for the thorns that catch at her dress, and holds her cane "fiercely" as she prepares to cross the log. These details are comic, but Welty uses them to make Phoenix more endearing; she is not poking fun at her character, for these touches show the struggles that Phoenix faces and her efforts to prevail against them.

[1]All quotations from Eudora Welty, "A Worn Path" in An Introduction to Literature, 12th ed., Ed. Sylvan Barnet et al. (New York: Longman, 2001), 113–19.

This is not a story that emphasizes race relations or racism, but Welty tells us from the start that Phoenix is black, and other details reinforce this point. "Seems like there is chains about my feet," says Phoenix, a detail that brings to mind the chains worn by black people during slavery. Later, Phoenix refers to "the Surrender," the end of the Civil War, which took place when the Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered his forces to the Union general Ulysses S. Grant. Perhaps for some readers, the name Jackson evokes one of the South's greatest war heroes, the legendary General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Phoenix is a solitary figure, known only to a very few people, but, I think Welty is saying, Phoenix is in her own private way as brave, resourceful, and determined as a public military hero.

Phoenix is on a journey, a quest; she is a traveler, a solitary pilgrim—no one accompanies her—who is intent upon reaching her goal. She fears she will not get there in time, at one point crying "thick tears." And she suffers from dreams and hallucinations, believing for a moment that a boy is handing her a piece of cake and, shortly thereafter, she reaches toward a ghost that turns out to be a scarecrow. But Welty describes the landscape in terms that make it frightening to the reader, too: "Big dead trees, like black men with one arm, were standing in the purple stalks of the withered cotton field. There sat a buzzard." Phoenix's trip tires and frightens her, and Welty makes certain that we understand why; we might not be elderly or have failing eyesight or hearing ("my senses is gone"), but such a landscape—Phoenix calls it a "maze," a labyrinth—would unnerve us too.

Still, Phoenix is strong and clever. Along the way, she meets a man, a white man, a hunter with a gun and a hunting dog (the dog is on a chain and growls at another dog). He helps her and is not mean or unkind, but he treats Phoenix as an inferior, calling her "Granny" and saying, "I know you old colored people." She, however, is sharper than he is, tricking him to get the nickel that falls from his pocket, just as she later prompts the clinic attendant to give her a nickel and not just a "few" pennies.

At the clinic, Phoenix's strength and resolve continued to be tested. The attendant is gruff and demeaning ("a charity case, I suppose"), and the nurse is only slightly more polite, asking "Aunt Phoenix" to take a seat but saying to her, "Tell us quickly about your grandson, and get it over."

The grandson, we now learn, is the reason for Phoenix's journey to Natchez. She has made the trip to buy (or to be given) the medicine that the child needs, and old, weary Phoenix is the only person who can perform this deed. The child's parents are not referred to; perhaps they have left or have died. For Phoenix, her grandson is as precious as the Christ child, whose birth is celebrated this "Christmas time" of year. He is sickly, but Phoenix is certain "He going to last": Her love for him will keep him alive. Phoenix leaves the clinic with the medicine and a bit of money to buy the boy a toy windmill as a Christmas present.

Welty uses Phoenix to teach a powerful lesson about selflessness and love. Phoenix is the name of "a bird in Egyptian mythology that lived in the desert for 500 years and then consumed itself by fire, later to rise renewed from its ashes." It is a symbol for "a

person or thing of unsurpassed excellence or beauty; a paragon."[2] Phoenix Jackson is an elderly black woman in the segregated South; she is poor and uneducated. Yet she is, Welty implies, a figure of grandeur nonetheless, like the great phoenix of mythology. The trip to Natchez renews Phoenix each time that she makes it, intensifying yet again her bond of love to her grandson.

Southern society places Phoenix Jackson low on its social scale, but she strikes the reader as a better person than anyone she meets: She embodies love. If a less gifted author had written the story, it might have seemed sentimental or preachy. But Welty's portrait—comic and poignant at the same time—makes the moral lesson come alive. The others in the story pay little attention to Phoenix Jackson, but Welty makes her unforgettable to us.

[2]American Heritage Dictionary, 4th ed.

Brief Overview of the Essay

- Jim Wayne's title is a good one because it anticipates an important point that the paper makes; his opening paragraph states the thesis clearly—that Phoenix is a heroic figure. He uses quotations as evidence to support his generalizations, and his final paragraph brings the essay to a nice conclusion.
- We think that Jim's paper is a good one, and we hope that you agree. Still, could this paper be made even better? Imagine that you were asked to read it during the class's work on peer review. What suggestions, if any, would you offer?
- Are there additional details in the text that Jim could have drawn upon? Do you think he has defined the theme of the story as well as he could have? Has he made his argument convincing to the reader? When you look back over his preliminary notes, do you see questions and ideas that he could have included in the paper to make it better?
- Reread the paper line by line. Can you improve the style, word choices, sentences, and paragraphs? Mark up and make insertions on the copy of the paper here.

Basing the Paper on Your Own Responses

In his preliminary work, this student made use of a dictionary, and at one point he consulted an encyclopedia. (Notice that in the paper he footnoted the dictionary because he quoted at length directly from it. He did not cite the encyclopedia because he took from it only some "common knowledge" facts about Stonewall Jackson that are widely known and not in dispute; on this point, see pages 307–308.) The student thus developed his ideas and plan for the paper from his own reading of "A Worn Path," his reflections on and his feelings about it, his previous literary experiences—in a word, from lots of thoughtful work on the assigned topic, which was to write an essay of 1,000 words on the theme of "A Worn Path."

All of us have experienced moments of self-doubt when faced with a new assignment, especially one that represents a new challenge or that calls on us to examine a particularly complex poem or story. It is tempting to head right away to the library to track down secondary sources. But unless your instructor indicates otherwise, you should follow this student's example, basing the paper that you write on your own response to the literary work.

- Have faith in your instincts and intuitions.
- Make use of and develop your analytical skills.

Don't underestimate how much you can achieve on your own, with just the text and two or three basic reference works for help with the meanings of words and references to places, historical figures, characters in myth or legend, and the like.

A Note on Secondary Sources

Sometimes an instructor will tell the class as a whole, or will state in answer to a question, that you "may use secondary sources if you want to." You may indeed want to, because the story has aroused your curiosity and made you eager to learn all that you can about the author and the work. Or else—this can happen on occasion—after some real effort of your

own, you have found that you cannot quite figure out the story and believe you would benefit from placing your responses alongside those of other readers—scholars and critics—who know the subject well.

Be aware of the nature of the assignment, however. *This* assignment on the theme of "A Worn Path" is not a research paper as such, and it does not call for the approach that is covered extensively later in this book (see Chapter 15).

If you choose to do some outside reading in secondary sources for such an assignment, follow these guidelines:

- For any kind of paper, if you make use of someone else's insights, you need to say so and cite the source.
- Do not pull two or three books at random from the library shelves. You might get lucky: Maybe these will be good books for your work. But they might not be, and the result would then be that you have wasted your time or been misled by a book that has not won general respect from the community of scholars.
- Remember that there are *levels* of reference material, and that you might do best to move step-by-step through them even if you are seeking sources in a somewhat informal way.

If, for example, you decide that you wish to consult two or three good sources for your study of Welty's "A Worn Path," proceed in this fashion:

1. **General works—reference, overview, bibliography.**

For your point of departure, you could select *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, eds. Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin (1995). Included in this book of more than 1,000 pages is a helpful entry on Welty's life and writings, with a paragraph of bibliography.

Two similar books are *Contemporary Novelists* (1991), in the series Contemporary Writers of the English Language, and *Modern American Women Writers* (1991), whose consulting editor is Elaine Showalter and whose general editors are Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz.

Also of use is *American Women Writers. Bibliographical Essays* (1983), eds. Maurice Duke, Jackson R. Bryer, and M. Thomas Inge, which includes an excellent chapter on Welty, covering primary and secondary sources up to 1983.

How are such books located? We give detailed advice in Chapter 15. Here, it is sufficient to recommend that you "search" in the online library catalog for women writers, American women writers, contemporary authors, and similar categories. Even better: Seek out the reference librarians and ask them for guidance. Or your instructor may recommend a title or two.

These general works will assist you in identifying reference material on the author or topic you have picked or been assigned.

2. **Reference works and bibliographies for the author or topic.**

For Welty, these include:

The Eudora Welty Newsletter (published twice a year, beginning in Winter 1977). Stays up-to-date with coverage of primary and secondary sources.

McDonald, W. U., Jr. "An Unworn Path: Bibliographical and Textual Scholarship on Eudora Welty," *Southern Quarterly* 20 (Summer 1982): 101–108.

McHaney, Pearl Amelia. "A Eudora Welty Checklist, 1973–1986." In *Welty: A Life in Literature*, ed. Albert J. Devlin, 266–302. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987. See Polk.

Polk, Noel. "A Eudora Welty Checklist." *Mississippi Quarterly* 26 (Fall 1973): 663–693. Lists both primary and secondary sources. Reprinted in *Welty: A Life in Literature*, ed. Albert J. Devlin, 238–265. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987. See McHaney.

Swearingen, Bethany C. *Eudora Welty: A Critical Bibliography, 1936–1958*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984. A good resource, but note that its coverage ends in 1958.

Thompson, Victor H. *Eudora Welty: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976. Covers secondary studies from 1936 to 1975.

3. **Important books on the author or topic.**

The reference works and bibliographies will lead you to the most important books on Welty. Since you are focusing on one of her stories, you probably would want to consult:

Johnston, Carol Ann. *Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1997.

Schmidt, Peter. *The Heart of the Story: Eudora Welty's Short Fiction*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.

There are many journal articles on Welty's short fiction and on "A Worn Path" in particular, as well as collections of book reviews and critical essays, general books on southern writing, and additional primary sources. Use the right strategy for the task at hand. It is one thing to seek a few sources to stimulate your thinking for a short analytical paper, and another thing to embark on a full-fledged research assignment.

Be aware, too, that for this *kind* of paper, too much research may prove a hindrance rather than a help. Locating good sources takes time.

You might be better off if you returned to the text itself to press forward with, and develop, your own responses. Do some pre-writing, try a rough outline, and explicate a key passage. Your best resource is yourself.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) remains an engaging introduction to the art of prose fiction by an accomplished practitioner. Other highly readable books by story writers and novelists include: Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (1969); William Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1971); Eudora Welty, *The Eye of the Story* (1977); John Updike, *Hugging the Shore* (1983), *Odd Jobs* (1991), and *More Matter: Essays and Criticism* (1999); and John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* (1983).

For academic studies, see Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (1966, on oral as well as written fiction); Robert Liddell, *Robert Liddell on the Novel* (1969, a volume combining two earlier books by Liddell—*A Treatise on the Novel* and *Some Principles of Fiction*); Norman Friedman, *Form and Meaning in Fiction* (1975); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (1978); and Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (1983).

Some of the best modern studies are included in *Forms of Modern Fiction* (1948), ed. William Van O'Connor; *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction, 1920–1951* (1952), ed. John W. Aldridge; *Approaches to the Novel: Materials for a Poetics*, rev. ed., ed. Robert Scholes (1966); and *The Theory of the Novel: New Essays*, ed. John Halperin (1974). For essays defining the short story and sketching its history, see Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, eds., *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (1989). Also helpful are Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (1983), and Thomas Riggs, *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, 2nd ed. (1998).

Examples of contemporary approaches include Susan Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Fiction* (1981); Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984); David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction, Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts* (1993); and *Understanding Narrative* (1994), eds. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz.

Among recent studies, we recommend Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (1995), an important study of the genre from its classical sources through the eighteenth century; *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, eds. Deidre Lynch and William B. Warner (1996), a collection of essays on the novel from the perspectives of "comparative literature and transnational cultural studies"; and *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (2000), an anthology of classic essays.

Among journals devoted to narrative are *Journal of Narrative Technique*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Novel: A Forum*, and *Studies in Short Fiction*.

✔ A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about Fiction

Here are some questions that may help to stimulate ideas about stories. Not every question is relevant to every story, but if after reading a story and thinking about it, you then run your eye over these pages, you will probably find some questions that will help you to think further about the story—in short, that will help you to get ideas.

It's best to do your thinking with a pen or pencil in hand. If some of the following questions seem to you to be especially relevant to the story you will be writing about, jot down—freely, without worrying about spelling—your initial responses, interrupting your writing only to glance again at the story when you feel the need to check the evidence.

Title

- ❑ Is the title informative? What does it mean or suggest? Did the meaning seem to change after you read the story? Does the title help you to formulate a theme?
- ❑ If you had written the story, what title would you use?

Plot

- ❑ Does the plot grow out of the characters, or does it depend on chance or coincidence? Did something at first strike you as irrelevant that later you perceived as relevant? Do some parts continue to strike you as irrelevant?
- ❑ Does *surprise* play an important role, or does foreshadowing? If surprise is very important, can the story be read a second time with any interest? If so, what gives it this further interest?
- ❑ What *conflicts* does the story include? Conflicts of one character against another? Of one character against the setting, or against society? Conflicts within a single character?

- ❑ Are the conflicts resolved? If so, how?
- ❑ Are certain episodes narrated out of chronological order? If so, were you puzzled? Annoyed? On reflection, does the arrangement of episodes seem effective? Why or why not? Are certain situations repeated? If so, what do you make of the repetitions?
- ❑ List the major structural units of the story. In a sentence or two summarize each unit that you have listed.
- ❑ In a sentence summarize the conclusion or resolution. Do you find it satisfactory? Why, or why not?

Character

- ❑ List the traits of the main characters.
- ❑ Which character chiefly engages your interest? Why?
- ❑ What purposes do minor characters serve? Do you find some who by their similarities and differences help to define each other or help to define the major character? How else is a particular character defined—by his or her words, actions (including thoughts and emotions), dress, setting, narrative point of view? Do certain characters act differently in the same, or in a similar, situation?
- ❑ How does the author reveal character? By explicit authorial (editorial) comment, for instance, or, on the other hand, by revelation through dialogue? Through depicted action? Through the actions of other characters? How are the author's methods especially suited to the whole of the story?
- ❑ Is the behavior plausible—that is, are the characters well motivated?
- ❑ If a character changes, why and how does he or she change? (You may want to jot down each event that influences a change.) Or did you change your attitude toward a character not because the character changes but because you came to know the character better?
- ❑ Are the characters round or flat (Forster's terms)? That is, are they complex or, on the other hand, highly typical (for instance, one-dimensional representatives of a social class or age)? Are you chiefly interested in a character's psychology, or does the character strike you as standing for something, such as honesty or the arrogance of power?
- ❑ How has the author caused you to sympathize with certain characters? How does your response—your sympathy or lack of sympathy—contribute to your judgment of the conflict?

Point of View

- ❑ Who tells the story? How much does the narrator know? Does the narrator strike you as reliable? What effect is gained by using this narrator?
- ❑ How does the point of view help shape the theme? After all, the basic story of Little Red Riding Hood—what happens—remains unchanged whether told from the wolf's point of view or the girl's, but if we hear the story from the wolf's point of view, we may feel that the story is about terrifying yet pathetic compulsive behavior; if from the girl's point of view, about terrified innocence and male violence.
- ❑ Does the narrator's language help you to construct a picture of the narrator's character, class, attitude, strengths, and limitations? (Jot down some evidence, such as colloquial or—on the other hand—formal expressions, ironic comments, figures of speech.) How far can you trust the narrator? Why?

Setting

- ❑ Do you have a strong sense of the time and place? Is the story very much about, say, New England Puritanism, or race relations in the South in the late nineteenth century, or midwestern urban versus small-town life? If time and place are important, how and at what points in the story has the author conveyed this sense? If you do not strongly feel the setting, do you think the author should have made it more evident?
- ❑ What is the relation of the setting to the plot and the characters? (For instance, do houses or rooms or their furnishings say something about their residents? Is the landscape important?) Would anything be lost if the descriptions of the setting were deleted from the story or if the setting were changed?

Symbolism

- ❑ Do certain characters seem to you to stand for something in addition to themselves? Does the setting—whether a house, a farm, a landscape, a town, a period—have an extra dimension?
- ❑ Do certain actions in the story—for instance, entering a forest at night, or shutting a door, or turning off a light—seem symbolic? If so, symbolic of what?

- ❑ If you do believe that the story has symbolic elements, do you think they are adequately integrated within the story, or do they strike you as being too obviously stuck in?

Style

- ❑ Style may be defined as *how* the writer says what he or she says. It is the writer's manner of expression. The writer's choice of words, of sentence structure, and of sentence length are all aspects of style. Example: "Shut the door," and "Would you mind closing the door, please," differ substantially in style. Another example: Lincoln begins the Gettysburg Address by speaking of "Four score and seven years ago," that is, by using language that has a biblical overtone. If he had said, "Eighty-seven years ago," his style would have been different.
- ❑ How would you characterize the style? Simple? Understated? Figurative? Or what, and why?
- ❑ How has the point of view shaped or determined the style?
- ❑ Do you think that the style is consistent? If it isn't—for instance, if there are shifts from simple sentences to highly complex ones—what do you make of the shifts?

Theme

- ❑ Do certain passages—the title, some of the dialogue, some of the description, the names of certain characters—seem to you to point especially toward the theme? Do you find certain repetitions of words or pairs of incidents highly suggestive and helpful in directing your thoughts toward stating a theme?
- ❑ Is the meaning of the story embodied in the whole story, or does it seem stuck, for example, in certain passages of editorializing?
- ❑ Suppose someone asked you to state the point—the theme—of the story. Could you? And if you could, would you say that the theme of a particular story reinforces values you hold, or does it to some degree challenge them?

✔ A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about a Film Based on a Work of Literature

Many novels and short stories have been turned into films, and the relationship between film and fiction is a popular topic for courses. If your instructor asks you to write about a film version of a work of fiction, these questions may help to bring impressions out into the open and provide topics for essays.

Preliminaries

- ❑ Is the title significant? If the title of the film differs from the title of the published story, account for and evaluate the change. (Consider, for example, the slight but significant difference between the title of Thomas Hardy's novel "Jude the Obscure" [1895] and the title chosen for the film "Jude" [1996].)

Plot, Character, Setting, and Theme

- ❑ Does the film closely follow its original or not? Is the use of the camera straightforward, or highly creative? Are there, for instance, shots from high or low angles, slow or fast motion that present effectively or else distort features of the original work? (Robert Enrico's *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* [1962] is a close adaptation of Ambrose Bierce's story, and yet it is visually interesting.)
- ❑ How faithful is the film to the story in plot and in character? Evaluate the changes, if any. Are the additions or omissions due to the medium or to a crude or faulty interpretation of the original?
- ❑ Does the film do violence to the theme of the original?
- ❑ Can film deal as effectively with inner action/mental processes as with external, physical action? In a given film, how is the inner action conveyed? By voice-over? Or by visual equivalents?
- ❑ How effectively does the film convey the setting or settings that the author chose for the story?
- ❑ Does the editing—for instance, frequent sharp juxtapositions, or slow panoramic shots—convey qualities that the story writer conveyed by means of sentence length and structure?
- ❑ Are shots and sequences adequately developed, or do they seem (in film terminology) jerky? (A shot may be jerky by being extremely brief or at an odd angle; a sequence may be jerky by using discontinuous images or fast cuts. Sometimes, of course, jerkiness may be desirable.) If such cinematic techniques as wipes, dissolves, and slow motion are used, are they meaningful and effective?
- ❑ Are the actors appropriately cast? Was it a mistake to cast Robert Redford as Gatsby in Jack Clayton's film version of *The Great Gatsby* (1974)? Is Gwyneth Paltrow the right choice for the leading role in the film version (1996) of Jane Austen's novel *Emma*? John Huston, in his film (1951) of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1894; a novel about cowardice and courage in the Civil War), used Audie Murphy, one of the most highly decorated

and best-known heroes of World War II, as Henry Fleming, the young soldier who flees from battle but later gets a second chance to fight bravely. What is the effect of this casting?

Symbolism

- ❑ If in the story certain objects acquire symbolic meanings, are these same objects similarly used in the film? Or does the film introduce new symbols? Is the lighting in the film realistic or symbolic? Both?

Soundtrack

- ❑ Does the soundtrack offer more than realistic dialogue? In the film adaptations of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," for instance, we hear—much louder than normal—the sound of soldiers' boots on railroad and we even hear the sound of the hangman's rope rubbing on a crossbeam. Is the music appropriate and functional? (Music may, among other things, imitate natural sounds, give a sense of locale or of ethnic group, suggest states of mind, provide ironic commentary, or—by repeated melodies—help establish connections.) Are volume, tempo, and pitch—whether of music or of such sounds as the wind blowing or cars moving—used to stimulate emotions?

Overall Effect

- ❑ What is your overall response to the film? Do you find the literary work more compelling, more stimulating, than the film, or do you think that the film is better? What above all defines your experience of the literary work? And the experience of the film? Can one medium do something, or some things, that the other cannot?