

# **LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH**

*Fundamentals of Drama, Poetry and Prose*

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## *Fundamentals of Drama, Poetry and Prose*

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## Chapter 4

### The Structure and Elements of Prose - Peter O. Makinde & Luke Okolo

Having structure in literature is key to building a strong narrative. With the help of an example from a classic fairytale, Cinderella, discover these building blocks of quality storytelling as it guides and illustrates all five essential elements of a narrative plot: Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution.

The term prose is derived from the Latin word, “Prorsus” meaning “continuous” or “straight on.” Prose is verbal or written language that follows the natural flow of speech. It is the most common form of writing, used in both fiction and non-fiction. Prose, therefore, means a continuous piece of writing which goes straight to tell a story until the end when all the loose ends of the story are tied up to make a complete and unified whole. Prose exists in many forms such as autobiography, biography, memoir, short story, novella, novel and so on. The novel is the most familiar of the sub-genres of prose.

The prose (essentially the novel and short story) has some important elements that make it constitute a whole. In *A Guild to Studies in the Novel*, Ujowundu posits that “a piece of fiction cannot be regarded as a novel unless it has the unity of structure” (9). To achieve the unity of structures a number of elements/techniques are necessary. They are what Duruaku and Nwachukwu-Agbada *et al* refer to as “Elements of the Novel” and “Elements of Prose Fiction” respectively; and they are plot, character/characterisation, diction (language), subject matter and theme, setting, narrative techniques – style and point of view.

#### 1. Plot

The plot of a novel is the plan or the scheme of the action. This plan is not just a plan, but a carefully thought-out plan in which all the events, all the actions and reaction of the characters contribute, carrying the reader over a number of exciting moments until the climax of the story. Plot refers to the manner in which the events or incidents narrated in the work are arranged. There are two types of plots: the linear or chronological (also called organic) plot and the episodic or inorganic plot (also referred to as loose plot).

In a linear, chronological or organic plot structure, the story commences from the beginning and there is a gradual development of actions in chronological order to the end of the story being told. In this type of plot structure, there is always a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning is where the reader knows some of the principal characters and the problems (conflict). In the middle, the story becomes interesting with complications and mounting suspense while the ending ensures the resolution of the problem and release of the heightened tension. The ending may not be satisfactory to the reader but must surely make him ruminant about life.

In an episodic or inorganic or loose plot, the writer may decide to write in a non-chronological order. Prose plot of this type tend to be a series of episodes strung together. But at the end, all the loose ends are brought together. In the plot of such a story, the narrative moves from place to place and focuses from one character to another resulting in having many characters some of which may be undeveloped. The story may be a little difficult to understand.

Note that the plot is not the same as the story. A story is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence (how they happened), but a plot is also a narrative but with emphasis on causality, that is, cause and effect. Causality, in a nutshell, is the primary difference between a story and a plot.

## **2. Character and Characterization**

A character is a person in a narrative or story. The characters are the people in a story who effect the actions that take place. Every story is a narrative about people and what they do. Characterization is the writer's representation of the people whose lives and actions constitute the story. While character is the person in the story, characterization is the portrayal of their personality. A character is exposed to the reader through his appearance, what he says of others and himself, what he thinks, what he does under different conditions, his background, what other characters say about him, and what the author says about him through his description and authorial interruption.

Authors have three major methods of presenting characters: showing, telling and naming. Showing allows the author to present a character talking and acting, and lets the reader infer what kind of person the character is. In telling method, the author intervenes to describe and sometimes evaluates and passes comments on the character for the reader. Naming, however, is a method whereby the name of the character gives the reader inkling, that is, suggests some attributes or qualities of the character. Note that a well constructed character should be consistent in behaviour and life-like and so familiar.

There are two major types of character: flat and round. A flat character does not transform, improve, or change throughout the story. He shows only one aspect of human behaviour. As a result, he is referred to, sometimes, as a cardboard figure.

Another name for a flat character is stock character. A round character exhibits different aspects of human behaviour including surprising the reader. He is dynamic and changes as the story progresses, because he develops.

There are also non-human characters such as spirits, abstract values, and animals. It is through characters that an author conveys his view of the world. This is the reason some critics take it as the second most important element of the prose.

### **3. Diction or Language**

This is mainly the expression of the character's decision, beliefs, and emotions using suitable language. Diction or choice of words is the language of the characters as well as author's use of words and expressions in words, phrases and sentences to describe people, events, places, ideas and actions. Diction could be formal, informal, figurative or allusive.

Diction could be a distinguishing factor between characters. It could give us insight about their social, economic and educational states and background. If the story is in English, for instance, what kind of English does he speak? Pidgin, transliteration (word-for-word translation from vernacular), bombastic, mutilated or fragmented sentences, long and winding sentence, elegant speech, poetic speech, figurative language, proverbs or body language (mime and gestures).

### **4. Subject Matter and Theme**

For clarity purpose, subject matter and theme are not the same, and so should not be confused. It is quite unfortunate that many writers and students think both are the same. Duruaku being conscious of the misnomer states:

Theme must not be confused with subject matter, even though the subject matter yields the theme of the work. Subject matter is the issue raised or discussed in the novel; theme is the statement the author makes with that subject matter. Subject matter can be a word or a phrase, but theme is a statement (47).

In his analysis, he suggests that assuming the subject matter is democracy, the theme could be "Democracy thrives when good men govern" or "Power belongs to the people." In other words, the theme is "an issue of life which a writer discusses or highlights in a work of art." The message a writer wants to pass in his writing is the theme. It is the theme that gives the story focus, unity, impact and makes it worthwhile.

### **5. Setting**

The setting of a prose is the physical or social environment within which the characters in the work operate. It is the background against which the characters live out their lives. It includes the place in which the characters live; the time or period in which they live; and the atmosphere or mood created in the work by the events that occur and the disposition of the characters. Setting refers to time, place or geographical location, and social situation in which the characters operate in a work.

With reference to time, the setting could be a point (or certain points) in time. The background against which we see the characters and the happenings may be specified as morning or evening; rainy or dry season; morning, afternoon or night. The work could be cast in the historic past, in the present, and in the future. A prose may not indicate a specific time.

In terms of place, we refer to the geographical location of the events in the work. Place or geographical locale could be an imaginary or real place, which could also be a country or a city, and so on.

Setting also includes the prevalent feeling that is conveyed to the reader which could be eerie, menacing, tense, threatening, relaxing, nostalgic, cheerful, pessimistic, optimistic, gloomy, and so forth.

## **6. Style**

The style is the way the story is written. It refers to “artistic decision in language and narrative techniques” (Duruaku 51). This involves the use of irony, symbols, satire, flashback and other prose elements.

## **7. Point of View**

Point of view is a critical distinguishing aspect of prose and clearly stands it out from other genres of literature. An author chooses a point of view or several points of view from which he or she will tell the story. The following are major ways of telling a story.

### **i. First Person Narrative (Autobiographical Method)**

In this method, the story is told in the first-person singular – “I”. The narrator is the one who has experienced or witnessed or heard about the events, so he is a major character who tells the story from his observation. And so, he tells us only what he sees, hears, does and experiences. The limitation of this technique is that the narrator can only guess what other characters think which could be right or wrong. Again, he cannot know what is happening elsewhere since he cannot see beyond his sight, that is, he cannot know what his eyes do not behold and what his ears cannot hear.

### **ii. Third Person**

In this point of view, the narrator does not introduce himself as a character. He assumes the personality of one of the characters, and sees, hears, experiences everything that the selected characters go through. The narrator’s or author’s personal comments about event, situations and personality is deliberately excluded. The narrator does not present information sourced from the thought or mind of the characters. The reader has the responsibility of forming his independent opinion about each character. This is the reason it is known as *third person objective point of view*.

### **iii. Third Person Omniscient or Eye of God**

In this narrative approach, the narrator who is an outsider and not a character tells the story. He is like a referee in a contest who observes all the characters from that vantage position. It enables him to see the characters through and through to the

point of even knowing their thoughts and future actions. Because of this opportunity of seeing all and knowing all, he can report all the incidents accurately, even incidents that happened in the past and at distant places; and he tells us why they did. This is why it is called eye of God or all knowing. This technique makes extensive use of third person pronoun like he, she, they, it, and it is free from all limitations.

Other methods points of view are selective or limited Omniscient, stream of consciousness, epistolary and mixed method.

### **The Relevance of Prose to the Society**

Drawing on the view of C.S. Lewis, a British scholar and novelist, when he avers, “*Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.*” Supporting the above and in reference to the general view that literature is the mirror of life sums up the relevance of prose to the society as it serves as representation of life.

Prose fiction, whether in the form of the novel or short story, is unarguably the most popular and widely consumed literary genre. The relevance of prose therefore cannot be underestimated in that they provide us with more than the immediate interest of narrative – of something happening – and more than the pleasures of imagination; rather, they enlarge our understanding of ourselves and deepen our appreciation of life.

Robert DiYanni in his impressively wide-ranging study *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay* (1997:27) in elaborating on the relevance of prose points out that:

We read stories for pleasure; (because) they enlighten us. Stories draw us into their imaginative worlds and engage us with the power of their invention. They provide us with more than the immediate interest of narrative of something happening and more than the pleasure of imaginations: they enlarge our understanding of ourselves and deepen our appreciation of life (27).

This goes a long way to show that we can immerse ourselves in a fictional world in this way without necessarily applying a great deal of critical or intellectual effort.

If fiction narratives are meant to enlarge our understanding of ourselves and deepen our appreciation of life, we need to read them in a more objective way, subject them to a more critical scrutiny to see whether they reinforce or challenge our existing ideas about the world around us. When we pay close attention to the texts we read, it enhances our understanding and in turn increase our pleasure in reading.

Pointing out further on the relevance of prose to the society, Milligan (1983, pp. 7–8) posits that novels ... are exciting machines (verbal machines) which transport their readers in space and time. They challenge us to meet the unfamiliar. They offer us a share in the pleasure of making because the designs they consist of are not simply there to be seen; they have to be understood, constructed, recreated by the reader out of the materials and according to the patterns which the fabric of their language contains – or conceals. When we become expert readers, we may begin to see some flaws in the workmanship or in the coherence of the design itself. But as beginning students, our first task is to become aware of the pattern of meanings which can be discerned in the novel we are studying. It is only with practice and experience that we shall begin to see that the flood of books we call novels have features in common which allow us to group them together. Each novel has its own pattern, but as our experience widens, we may begin to identify patterns running through the history of the form as a whole. These patterns cannot be assembled into a grand design, but the forms of fiction, the ways in which stories have been told, have their own history. An understanding of that historical pattern, haphazard and fragmentary as it may be, does give us some insight into the forms of life which literate societies have evolved in history, some awareness of their predominant interests, and of the myths and guiding principles which have sustained them. With the representation of life, prose fictions project and expose us to a near real life events that help to shaping our individual ideologies and personality as we see through the eye of the novelists what life represents.

Another powerful relevance of prose is that it is the vehicle of important moral and social traits. The authors through the characters in their stories convey to us a great deal of social truths and morality. For example, Jane Austen in her work *Pride and Prejudice* exposed lack of good moral upbringing of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet daughter's especially in Lydia (one of Bennet's daughters) as she lacks good moral judgment. Beyond entertainment, which prose fiction does, prose works gives the opportunity to learn much about how best to live our lives in ways that can only be captured by fiction. Fiction is a misnomer of any great work of literature. Fiction contains wisdom for living in the society that cannot be captured in any other way. We don't just read fictional (prose) books-they read us as well. The human condition is complex and contradictory, layered like an ice-cream parfait, with flavor blending among layers. A great novel reflects that complexity. We may read it several times, as we do with our favourites and each time it is like finding an old friend and gaining new insights from that friend. We put it down with new understanding of the world around us and most importantly of ourselves and the society at large.

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