

Hub Edits

- **E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927)**
- **Story**
- Story asks the reader to be curious
- The fundamental aspect of the novel is the storytelling aspect
 - Story is simply a narrative of events in their time sequence
 - Suspense is the most primitive aspect of the story – but we all want to know what happens next and that is why story is so important
- Story can only have one merit, that of making the reader want to know what happens next
 - Conversely, its fault is making the reader NOT want to know what happens next
 - This is the only way to judge a story (which is different from a plot and a novel) – does it make you want to read on?
- The story is the lowest and simplest of literary organisms yet common to all novels
- Daily life occurs in temporal succession but there is also a concept of “value” that measures the intensity/density of interactions
 - When we look at the past, not all events are weighted equally simply because they can all be reduced to time
 - And what the story does is to narrate the life in time, and what the entire novel does – if it is a good novel – is include the “value” part as well
 - This requires the use of other literary devices and aspects
 - We may ignore time in real life but it cannot be ignored in a novel
- Do not confuse story with plot – plot is a higher organism
 - Although story may be the basis for a plot
- The storyteller can afford loose ends in the story, unlike the weaver of plots
- The story appeals to the ear (not to the eye like prose does)
 - So the story changes readers into listeners
- The story is primitive: it reaches back to before reading was discovered
 - But, base as it is, it cannot be removed from the novel
- Because a story is primitive it appeals to what is primitive within us (the desire to know what happens next, curiosity) which explains why people are often unreasonable about what they like – because there is such a visceral emotional response (since that is what is being appealed to)
- Story is the “and then...and then” part of the novel and the novel is then filled in with other aspects
- **People**
- Character asks the reader to think of human feelings and values for the characters
- When dealing with characters we stop asking what happened next and begin asking to whom did it happen
 - So now the novelist is appealing to the reader’s intelligence and imagination, not just her curiosity
 - This is the emphasis on value
- The nature of characters in a novel are conditioned by what the novelist thinks about other people, and herself
- If a character represents an actual person fully, then that character is a factual person and not fit for a novel

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- A novel is based on evidence +/- X (with X being the temperament of the novelist)
- In people there are two sides 1) the factual side that is their actions and what can be deduced from their actions; and 2) the romantic side that includes their passions, dreams, joys, sorrows that are deep and go unmentioned
- So real life develops by external causes whereas life in the novel is intentional (even passions and crimes and misery)
 - In other words, the historian records whereas the novelist creates
- In real life we never understand each other – there is neither complete clairvoyance or complete confessional – we know each other approximately, by external signs, and this is still enough for intimacy
 - But people in a novel can be understood completely (if the novelist wishes)
 - This is why fiction characters seem more definite than characters in history – they contain no secrets
- Five facets of life 1) birth 2) death 3) sleep 4) food 5) love
 - The novelist tends to present birth as a delivery of the new baby into the narrative by an elderly character who presents it to the reader
 - But little liberty is taken with the true biological facts of birth
 - Death however is treated in a variety of ways and the novelist here gets very inventive and often strays very far from traditional biological death
 - The use of food in the novel is mainly social – it draws characters together, but they seldom require it physiologically, seldom enjoy it
 - The daily need for breakfast, lunch, dinner is seldom reflected
 - Sleep is never presented as something real people do for a third of their lives
 - But love is the facet of life often given the most treatment in novels – and often to the novel's detriment
 - Men and women in the novel share love, but men and women in real life share more than love – life is more complex
- Two reasons why love, even in sincere novels, is unduly prominent
 - 1) when the novelist begins creating characters love is an important aspect in her mind – so the new character is overly sensitive to it in her life, more than one would be in real life
 - Characters are constantly sensitive to each other in a way that has no parallel in real life (except among people who have plenty of leisure)
 - Forster believes in passion and intensity – but not this constant awareness, this endless readjusting, this ceaseless hunger
 - 2) love, like death, ends a book conveniently – it can show a permanency that can end books
- But even if love ends a novel well because it illustrates permanence – in real life love is never static
- There is a contrast between homo-sapien and homo-fictus
 - Homo-fictus is born, capable of dying, wants little food or sleep, is tirelessly occupied with human relationships, and (most important) we know more about her than we could any other creature in real life
- A character in a book is real when the novelist knows everything about it

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- Though the novelist can choose not to reveal all he knows
 - But we will get the feeling that though the character may not be fully explained, it is explicable
- So fiction is truer than history because it goes beyond evidence and what we can see and deduce from what we see – it goes into the mind
- Characters in novels are not meant to coincide with real life but must parallel it
- Flat characters are constructed around a single idea or quality – when additional factors are added they become round
 - The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence: “I will never desert Ms. Smith”
 - There are no pleasures or motivations outside this central one
- One advantage of flat characters is that they are easily recognized whenever they come in
 - Flat characters can even help a novel because they allow the author to strike with full force all at once; flat characters never need reintroducing, don’t have to be watched for development, provide their own atmosphere – they are easily remembered since they don’t change
- Fuller characters cannot be summed up in a single phrase, we remember them in connection with the great scenes through which they pass and as modified by those scenes
- Flat characters are desirable because they are always the same and therefore give the reader a sense of permanence
- But the case against ever using a flat character is that no person could be summed up in one line
 - So essentially a flat character falsifies real life
 - Though Forster insists that a novel that is complex must have room for flat characters
 - Forster calls most of Dickens’ characters flat but this is made up for by their depth of emotion
- Flat characters are not as big achievements as round ones, and are probably best when comic; a serious or tragic flat character is apt to be a bore
 - Because we don’t care if flat characters accomplish big things
- Only round people are fit to perform tragically for any length of time and only round people can move us to any feeling except humor
 - Animals in fiction are usually flat
- Minor characters in a novel can still do work – they can still elaborate parts
- When creating characters, do not stoop to caricature
- Give the reader a slightly new pleasure each time a character re-enters, not a repetitive pleasure
- Make all characters ready for an extended life (outside the novel)
- The test of a round character is if it is capable of surprising in a convincing way
 - If it never surprises it is flat; if it does not convince it is flat pretending to be round
 - The real goal is to convince the reader of what you say – it is central to point of view

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- Point of view can shift (omniscient, partial omniscient) if done well enough – see *Bleak House*, *War and Peace*
 - It is one of the great things about the novel that allows it to shrink perception, have intermittent knowledge
 - There is a parallel in real life when we are smarter at some times than at others
- But authors should be careful to NEVER (almost never) take the reader into confidence about characters
 - It leads to a drop in temperature, to intellectual and emotional laxity
 - E.g.: Doesn't A look nice – he was always my favorite
 - C always was a mystery man
 - But the author can bring the reader into confidences about the universe and to generalize about the conditions under which she thinks life is carried on
 - It is confidences about the people (characters) that are harmful – this beckons the reader away from the people to an examination of the novelist's mind
- In terms of the “secret life” (what goes on underneath the surface) – this does not include a chance word or sigh
 - This is just as much evidence as speech or a murder because by them something is revealed and thus no longer secret
- The specialty of the novel is that the author can talk about his characters, as well as through them, or can arrange for us to listen
- Remember, there is always a subconscious at work
- In literary works there are two elements 1) human individuals 2) art
 - Humans in the plot are three-quarters hidden (like an ice-berg)
- Avoid situations of stagnation where the more the characters do the less that gets done
- **Plot**
- Plot asks the reader for intelligence and memory
- A story is a caricature of events arranged in their sequence, while a plot is a narrative of events with an emphasis on causality
 - The king died and then the queen died – this is a story
 - The king died and then the queen died of grief – this is a plot
 - So in a story we ask “and then” but in a plot we ask “why?”
- A story demands only curiosity but a plot demands intelligence and memory
 - The intelligent reader, instead of just running her eye over a next fact, mentally picks it up
 - She sees it from two points of view 1) isolated 2) related to the other facts on previous pages
 - She may not understand a new fact but she expects it will serve a purpose
- The element of surprise or mystery is of great importance to a plot
 - It occurs through a suspension of the time sequence
 - Mystery is a pocket in time and it occurs crudely as in “why did the queen die?” and more subtly in half-explained gestures or words, the time meaning of which is only revealed pages ahead
 - Mystery is essential to the plot and cannot be appreciated without intelligence

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- To be curious is just another “and then”; to appreciate a mystery, one part of the mind must be left behind, while another part goes marching on
 - Memory and intelligence are closely connected – unless we remember, we cannot understand
 - If by the time the queen dies we have forgotten the existence of the king, we shall never make out what killed her
- The plot maker expects us to remember and we expect her not to leave loose-ends – every action or word ought to count; it ought to be economical and spare (even when complicated)
 - It should contain mysteries but it should not mislead
 - If this is done, the memory of the reader will hover over the pages and will constantly rearrange and reconsider, seeing new clues, new chains of cause and effect, and the final sense (if the plot is a fine one) will not be of clues or chains but of something aesthetically compact
- A novelist should never aim for beauty but she fails if she does not achieve it
- Don't bully the reader
- Characters, to be real, ought to run smoothly, but a plot ought to cause suspense
 - But a plot shouldn't triumph so completely that it comes at the expense of character and forces characters or constrains their true nature in service of the plot
- Nearly all novels are feeble at the end – because the plot requires to be wound up
 - It is where incidents and people that first occurred for their own sake now have to contribute to the denouement
 - This is where logic takes over the command from flesh and blood
- Forster: “If it was not for death and marriage, I do not know how the average novelist would conclude”
 - For this average novelist, death and marriage are almost her only connections between her characters and the plot
- This is the inherent defect of novels (feeble endings) – they go off at the end
 - Two explanations 1) failure of pep on the part of novelist (at this point in the process she is tired, worn down) 2) characters have been getting out of hand and now the novelist has to labor to bring them back into the length constraints of the work
- There is always a conflict between truth in life and truth in art
 - If you plan a plot, let it erode as you go so it will ring truer to real life – where plans often take new shape
- Why does a novel have to be planned – can it not grow?
- Why need it close – can it not open out?
- **The Fantastic-Prophetical Axis**
- There is more in the novel than time or people or logic or any of their derivatives, more even than fate
 - It is an aspect that embraces them all, it is connected with them and illuminates them – it is fantasy and prophecy
- There are in the novel two forces 1) human beings and 2) a bundle of various things NOT human
 - And it is the novelist's job to adjust these two forces and conciliate their claims

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- When you try to translate truth out of one sphere and into another, something will always go wrong
- Fantasy asks the reader for something more – to pay extra
 - E.g. the regular novelist says here is something that might occur in your lives; the fantasist says “here is something that could not occur – I must ask you accept my book as a whole and seriously accept certain things in my book”
 - But some readers do not like to suspend reality
- But a work of art has its own laws which are not those of real life – anything that suits it (and is well done) is true
 - But still, the general tone of novels is so literal that when the fantastic is introduced, some readers are thrilled and others are not
 - So think of a novel as buying an admission ticket to a story – but then the fantastic elements ask you to buy an additional ticket for a sideshow
- Fantasy implies the supernatural but need not express it
 - Devices of fantasy that are supernatural include: a god, ghost, angel, monkey, monster, midget, witch – all of them included and incorporated right into ordinary life
 - OR, there can be the introduction of ordinary people into new realms – the future, past, interior of the earth
- The fantasist adopts for her mythology some earlier work and uses it as a framework for her own purposes
 - This is parody/adaptation
- Prophecy
- The novelist’s theme is the universe, or something universal, but she is not necessarily going to “say” anything about the universe
- Prophecy, in Forster’s sense is a tone of voice
 - It may imply religious or spiritual faiths and it influences the way the novelist writes
- The prophetic aspect of the novel demands two qualities from the reader 1) humanity 2) the suspension of the sense of humor
 - Forster does not like the sense of humor in society – he thinks it is over done
- The fantasist manipulates a beam of light which occasionally touches the objects so sedulously dusted by the hand of common sense, and renders them more vivid than they can ever be in domesticity
- Prophetic fiction reaches back, it is spasmodically realistic, it tends toward unity, its confusion is incidental
 - The prophet is in a remoter emotional state when she composes
 - To have a philosophy leads to reflections on life and things, and a prophet does not reflect
 - The prophet sings (what is implied is more important than what is said)
 - i.e. The prophet paints an impression
 - Think of prophecy as a bardic tale
- End Matters
- Evil to most novelists is either sexual or social (or it is used to help plot or create an antagonist) – and this is only a feeble aspect of evil

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- Rhythm = repetition + variation
 - It grows and does not stay fixed
 - The plot in some novels has a geometric shape that best explains the course the story takes
 - Pattern is an aesthetic aspect of the novel – it may be nourished by a character, scene, or word, but it draws most of its nourishment from the plot