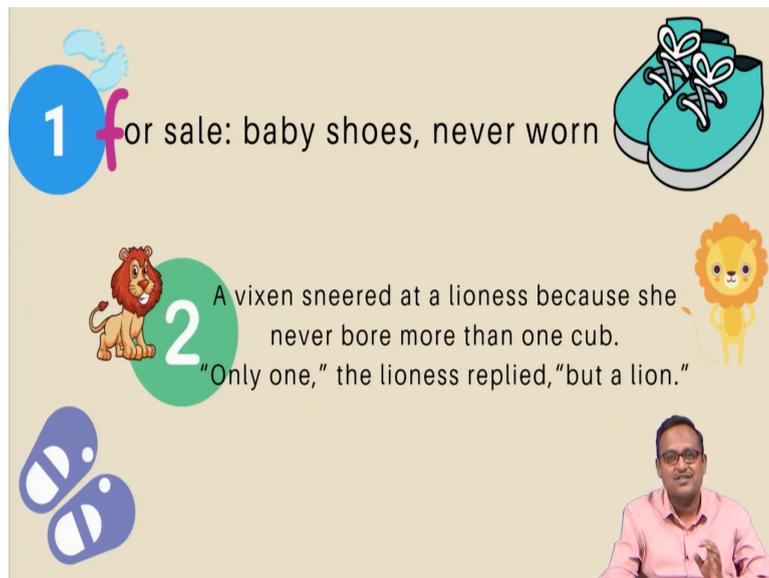


**Elements of Literature and Creative Communication**  
**Prof. H S Komalesha**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur**

**Lecture - 41**  
**Introducing Short Fiction**

Hello, all of you there. Welcome to the 9th week of our course Elements of Literature and Creative Communication. This week begins with Short Fiction. Now if you recall we began with elements of literature, an introduction to literature, and from there we moved on to discussing poetry in detail we took about 4 weeks to discuss poetry. And then we moved on to fiction we took about 3 weeks to discuss fiction. And now this week we are going to discuss short fiction. Now, of course, we have already discussed fiction. Now based on our discussion of fiction we can introduce short fiction. Well, no wonder you consider short fiction as a kind of a little brother or little sister of fiction right. You are not wrong when you consider it as a little brother or little sister. But there are a lot of similarities between fiction and short fiction. The organizing principles that govern fiction and short fiction are the same, and the structural principles that govern fiction and short fiction are the same. And as we said in one of the previous classes the differences are only in scale and magnitude. Because the scale of the novel is much more compared to the scale and magnitude of short fiction, you get to discuss a lot many things. Whereas, you will have to achieve all that in a limited span, in a limited space when it comes to short fiction. Therefore this week we can take up untethering short fiction and examine various features of short fiction. And understand what short fiction is and the different varieties in short fiction, and the historical origins of short fiction until through its modern manifestations.

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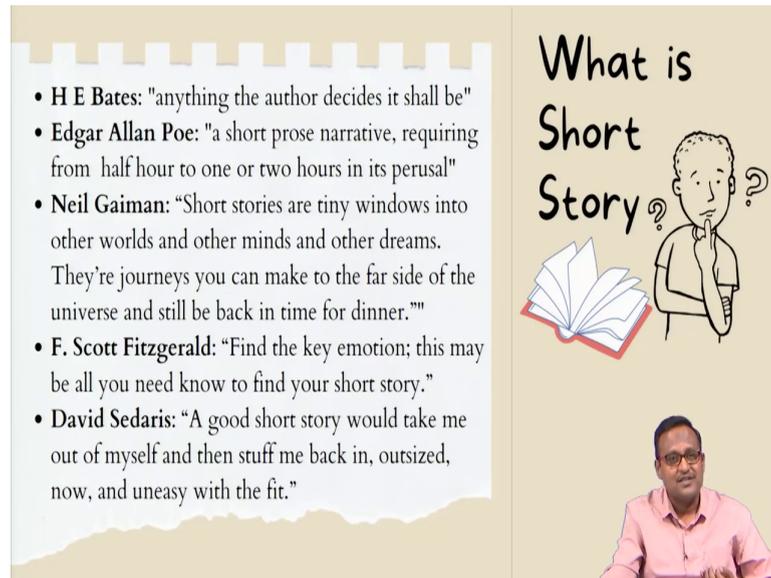
So, this is what we have in mind. Before I deal with a formal definition of short fiction and its varieties, I am going to take you through two of the shortest stories that you can think of. The first one is attributed to Hemingway of course, it's quite debatable whether Hemingway wrote that or not. However, in the popular imagination, it is been associated with Hemingway. So, let us forget the authorship for time being and focus on this particular short fiction. It is considered the shortest fiction probably one of the shortest stories the short story you can say. It looks at it just about 6 words in the first one and there is a story behind this. It is said that Ernest Hemingway was sitting in a pub with a couple of his fellow writers and they thought they could begin with some kind of a bet. maybe to go to take the drinking to an altogether different level they thought they would mix it up with whatever they were writing. So, Ernest Hemingway seemed to have wagered that he would construct a short story is about just 6 words, which would make his fellow writers it would move them like anything. And his fellow writers thought he this guy could not do that they said fine maybe during those times in 1920s 30s right. So, they wagered something like 10 dollars or 20 dollars and that is when Ernest Hemingway seemed to have come up with this short story that is the story behind this story ok.

“For sale, baby shoes are never worn.”

If you are a sensible reader or if you have a little more patience you would almost be moved to tears. So, remarkable is this short story, or these 6 words when put in this particular order

are they conveying a range of emotions. A sensible reader would tap the reservoir of life's tragedy when he or she reads these 6 words. There is a very grim tale there is a very tragic tale hidden behind these 6 words. I am sure if you read it a couple of times you would come across what it is trying to say, now look at this. Who will auction a sale, especially, or who will sell baby shoes never worn? Probably a mother, who was expecting a child and in anticipation of that bought some shoes and maybe clothes and the baby was stillborn or something happened and here is she with this for sale baby shoes never worn. An entire range of tragedy that consummates the life of a mother or young parents is presented in these 6 words, for sale baby shoes never worn. These words are capable of evoking a vast stretch of tragedy, behind the utterance of these words in other words these words uncover a sad tale of young parents using them. That is all these words act as a door and the moment you read them they just open the door and you are made to see that. This is what a short story is capable of doing, this is the potential of a short story right. Just less than 6 words, can you imagine? Less than 6 words and it conveys a powerful tragic tale that accompanies the life of these young parents or any young parents; for sale baby shoes never worn. Yeah from there let us move on to the second short story, of course, this is in a slightly elongated version we must have discussed it in one of our earlier classes, especially while discussing elements of fiction nevertheless. It is a tale taken from Aesop's fable, of course, we are going to discuss Aesop's fable in a little more detailed way in subsequent slides. This is another short story, now look at it. Less than let us say 18-20 words less than 20 words, but how powerful it is. A vixen missus fox sneered at missus lion lioness because she never bore more than one cub. If a fox gives birth at least 5 to 6 puppies are born. So, she makes fun of the lioness, and the lioness undisturbed responds, "you are right only one, but a lion." Of course, very minimum use of conversation, there are just two characters here and even the setting is not very well known. Of course, these are various elements of short fiction too, we have discussed them in the context of fiction, but we will also discuss them in the context of short fiction. The setting is morphed there are two characters and very minimum background some kind of a third-person narrative and dialogue between a vixen and a lioness look how vastly the setting is again capable of conveying a range of themes a range of ideas. So, before we continue, before I gave you the definition of short fiction, different elements of short fiction's theoretical underpinnings to short fiction. I thought it's better we get a taste of short fiction and what this particular genre or what this particular form of literature is capable of unfolding before us. Alright, I am sure these fiction samples will have given you the power pack that a short fiction holds under its breath.

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**What is Short Story?**

- **H E Bates:** "anything the author decides it shall be"
- **Edgar Allan Poe:** "a short prose narrative, requiring from half hour to one or two hours in its perusal"
- **Neil Gaiman:** "Short stories are tiny windows into other worlds and other minds and other dreams. They're journeys you can make to the far side of the universe and still be back in time for dinner."
- **F. Scott Fitzgerald:** "Find the key emotion; this may be all you need know to find your short story."
- **David Sedaris:** "A good short story would take me out of myself and then stuff me back in, oversized, now, and uneasy with the fit."

So, now let us quickly go and take a look at what short fiction is. This is how most of them that we have quoted here are exemplary practitioners of fiction and short fiction. So, this is what these writers of short fiction have got to say about short fiction. Let us begin with Bates. So, this talks about the amorphous nature of short fiction because there are some forms there are genres of literature that are quite rigid. We have discussed them right, they are rigid. It is difficult to compose them in the sense if you wish to compose you have to follow certain conventions, certain norms they work under some quite rigid genres of literature they are quite amorphous you can shape them the way you want it or it is just like water it assumes the shape of the vessel you put water into right. So, you get one particular nature of short story through this by nature short story is amorphous and malleable, like any metal that you can give shape to right like iron or gold or even silver or any other metal which has the characteristic feature of malleability, which you can shape it into different shapes. So, a short story can assume precisely what it is talking of. Now Edgar Allan Poe in fact is one the remarkable short story writers; one of the most remarkable short story writers the world has seen. He says this, short fiction is basically a short story basically a prose narrative that is short in nature and requires anywhere between half an hour to two hours in its reading perusals reading right. So, it talks about the quick time span and the temporal definition of the short story. A short story is a short sequence of narrative short prose narrative that you can finish anywhere between half an hour to let us say one and a half two hours. Because there are like you have read the short stories there are also very longest short stories. Let us say, for

instance, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is the best ever short story that Tolstoy ever wrote. It runs into something like 70-80 pages almost as good as a short novel, there are many short stories that are about 80 to 100 pages right. So, therefore, a short story is something that you can finish somewhere between half an hour or less than half an hour to two hours. Neil Gaiman a contemporary short story writer and an academic and a literary critic, says something remarkable. He says short stories are “tiny windows into the other worlds”. They are just tiny windows into other worlds and other minds and other dreams right. It is just like a window through that window you can enter into the other world, other minds, others' dreams. And the journey that you take in order to make to the far side of the universe and you still can come back for dinner right. Even if you start sometime in the evening the journey it entails is you can just go read it and come back in time for dinner, something like that that is the remarkable voyage. Spatially and temporally, this is what the short story gives. It takes you across to a different mind, to different dreams, and to a different universe. And transports you back in time before your time for dinner or breakfast depending on when you begin reading it. Then, Scott Fitzgerald, we need no introduction to him we have discussed Fitzgerald. He says, “in order to write the short story you need to find the key emotion”. This may be all you need to know to find your short story, well here is a great insight for you to be a short story writer. If any of you are nursing ambitions of becoming short story writers here is the key, identify the key element, when we say the key element key emotion. In other words, every story will have a major feeling and emotion that it wants to convey to the readers and it conveys it in a very beautiful way. There is no scope for a range of emotions a vast gamut of feelings that you can find in novels novel permits you to do that. Whereas, in short, the story sticks to one key emotion or feeling then see how you can develop it. Maybe if time permits we can even take up an activity wherein we can even make you write short stories. But until then remember to identify the key emotion, so every story will invariably have one. Now David Sedaris says, “A good short story would take me out of myself and stuff me back in outsized now and uneasy with the fit.” Now look at this in fact, these are not just random quotes we have gathered here we have carefully curated these quotes. So, to give an idea about shorts story from different perspectives. Now what is this particular quote doing here in fact, it talks about the impact of the short story. Now Scott Fitzgeralds' definition talks about the key ingredient of short fiction - what is the key ingredient of short fiction? Now Neil Gaiman talks about again the impact of short fiction; or more than the impact, the kind of transaction that happens when you read short fiction. The transactional nature of reading short fiction is unveiled when you read Neil Gaiman and Edgar Allan Poe talk about the

temporal concept of a short story, which can be read and finished in less than about one hour to two hours something like that. And Bates' definition talks about the very nature of a short story, so these are these different definitions approach the short stories in multiple ways. So, David Sedaris talks about the impact of the short stories. Now having read a short story you feel as if you are lucky when you have read a short story, you feel you have been expanded your consciousness has expanded. So, therefore, when you try to get back into your original self you feel slightly uncomfortable because you are heavy with what you have gathered after having read the short story right. You are heavy because, as I said immediately after you have read a short fiction you are still dripping with the effects of having read the short fiction. Therefore it may be difficult it is something like this. That immediately after you come out you find it difficult to wear your clothes, because of various things. Or imagine you have just expanded yourself and you have the old clothes and when you want to fit yourself in you have to struggle a lot right something like that is the impact of short fiction. So, this is why I am sure these definitions should give you an overall idea about what short fiction does.

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*Short Stories: Some Insights*

"A short story is, or should be, a simple thing; it aims at producing one single vivid effect; it has to seize the attention at the onset, and never relaxing, gather it together more and more until the climax is reached. The limits of the human capacity to attend closely therefore set a limit to it: it must explode and finish before interruption occurs or fatigue sets in." H. G. Wells

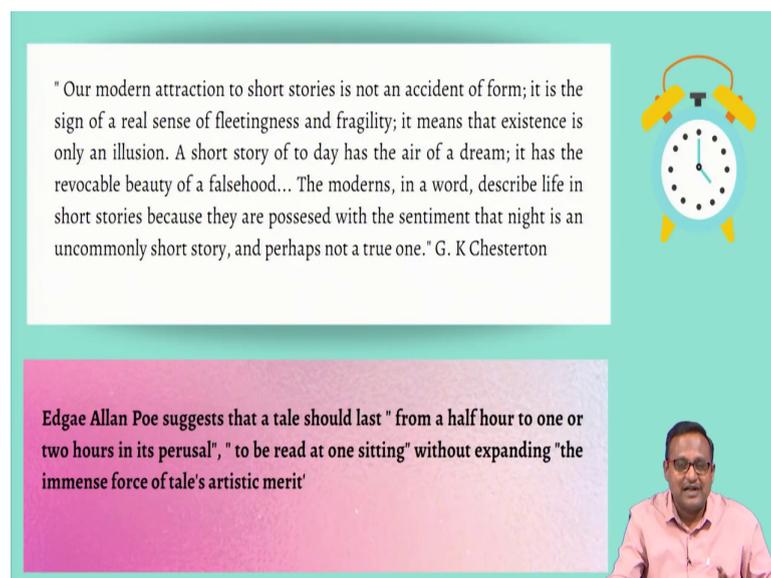
"The short story is an arrow that hits the bull's eye and the novel is like hunting rabbits," -- Gabriel Garcia Marquez

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And some more insights about short fiction, we have another remarkable writer H. G. Wells. He says that the intention of a short story is to produce one single vivid effect. Of course, echoing one of the other short story writers who talk about identifying one key emotion. So, here too H. G. Wells seems to echo that you need to produce one single vivid very lively effect in a short story. And how do you compose it? When you write you should write it in such a way that it should seize your attention right in the very beginning. Because remember,

unlike the novel which gives you the luxury of expanding your introductions into several pages. A short story does not give you that luxury because you have the constraint of pages you have the constraint of time. Therefore, you have to start doing it right from your first sentence right from your first paragraph right. That is the reason why the moment it begins it must seize the attention and capture the attention of the reader and it should not leave it until the climax is reached. Like once you get under the grips of the short story, it only lets you go when you reach towards the end of the short story something like this alright. Now yeah here is Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a remarkable novelist we have discussed earlier and also an extraordinary short story writer. He distinguishes a short fiction from a novel or fiction he says, “a short story is like an arrow that hits the bull’s eye, whereas a novel is like hunting rabbits.” Now, reading novels requires a lot of patience, it is an entire game in itself. Whereas in a short story there is no time, wherever you are just aiming for it hit the bullseye that is it, this is Marquez for us.

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" Our modern attraction to short stories is not an accident of form; it is the sign of a real sense of fleetingness and fragility; it means that existence is only an illusion. A short story of to day has the air of a dream; it has the revocable beauty of a falsehood... The moderns, in a word, describe life in short stories because they are possessed with the sentiment that night is an uncommonly short story, and perhaps not a true one." G. K Chesterton

Edgae Allan Poe suggests that a tale should last " from a half hour to one or two hours in its perusal", " to be read at one sitting" without expanding "the immense force of tale's artistic merit'

After this let us see now having understood various components of short fiction yeah we have Edgar Allan Poe and also G. K. Chesterton, who have something remarkable to add to whatever we have read. G. K. Chesterton says that there is a reason why modern human beings in the 19th-20th century, especially in the 20th century, are fond of this particular short fiction. So, there is something in the very form of short fiction that makes them, that human beings are attracted to the very form. Forget what the content says the very form of short fiction, the structure of short fiction. The structure of short fiction is symptomatic of the sign

of fleetingness and fragility. Because we do not have modern human beings we do not have the luxury of detailed life. In the sense, that we always hurry we are always in a hurry. That is the reason why we are drawn to short stories because it tries to give you whatever it gives you in the short span of a leisurely time that you have. You do not have a lot of leisurely time at your disposal. Therefore within the short span of time, it tries to give you the effect that you desire or that you want or that you hope to get in a novel. What is that? A sense of fleetingness, a sense of fragility that comes to define modern human beings, if there are two characteristic features that define modern human beings or modernity itself that is fleetingness and fragility right. So, the short story is capable of conveying that. So, it can give you the existence of an illusion in a wonderful way. That is why it has the quality of a dream, it has an air of a dream, something when you wake up disappears. Similarly, the short stories too in its impact. So, these are some things that we can keep in mind while understanding short fiction.

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Now, we have already discussed elements of fiction, and more or less short fiction too. What is the difference between a short story and short fiction, of course, we get to know. But today we almost use them in a synonymous way though there is a subtle distinction between a short story and short fiction. Because the short story has come to dominate the very form of short fiction short story is one of the components of short fiction, but today it is come to almost dominating the form, that is why most of the time you find people interchanging the term right. But we get to discuss various other forms of short fiction. But here whether it is a short

story or short fiction these are the five different elements. We have already discussed them in detail, but let us quickly take a look at them. The first is a character you need to have a set of characters not an elaborate set of characters, at least a few characters maybe two. But of course, in the very shortest story that we read, there are no characters remember there are no rules, without any of them or with just only one of them or two of them you can construct a short story we have discussed. So, these are the various permutations and combinations writers use in order to construct their stories. Now the second is setting, the third is a plot, an element of conflict towards the end we get an overall theme of the short story. Let us quickly take a look at what exactly they mean.

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**Character: Why things happen / Who Acts?**

Things to ponder upon...

- What the person says ...
- What the person does...
- What others say about the character...
- What others do...
- What the person looks like...

"What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" - Henry James

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When we say character it means why things happen to people and or other words who acts in a story should necessarily have an event. So, someone who is a part of that event or who acts. So, in order for an incident to take place, it should happen to somebody, who are those peoples that give you characters. Now, look at what Henry James another important modernist writer says about a short story. Especially in the context of a short story, he says about the character. "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of the character?" That talks about how integral character is, the element of character is to the incident and illustration of the character. Of course, there is a pun on the word character here, because the character is a person that appears in the story it is also the characteristic feature, it is also the characteristic feature characteristic trait of that person right. So, it is a pun. Now, when we say character. So, what we need to focus on is a few

questions, what is the person saying here that reveals something about the character right; what is the person saying. And then what is the person doing, because what a person does also defines a person there. What others say about the character, in order for us to understand the whole character we need to know it in the context of other characters what other characters say. And what others do may be as a response to the chief character or on their own what do they do and what does this character look like. If you answer all that in a very convincing and proper way then you will have created an extraordinary character or a set of characters in your short story.

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**Setting**

It is the location and time of the story; the setting could be imaginary or real  
Ex: Joyce's Dublin & R K Narayan's Malgudi Days

Descriptions of landscape, scenery, buildings, seasons, or weather provides a strong sense of setting

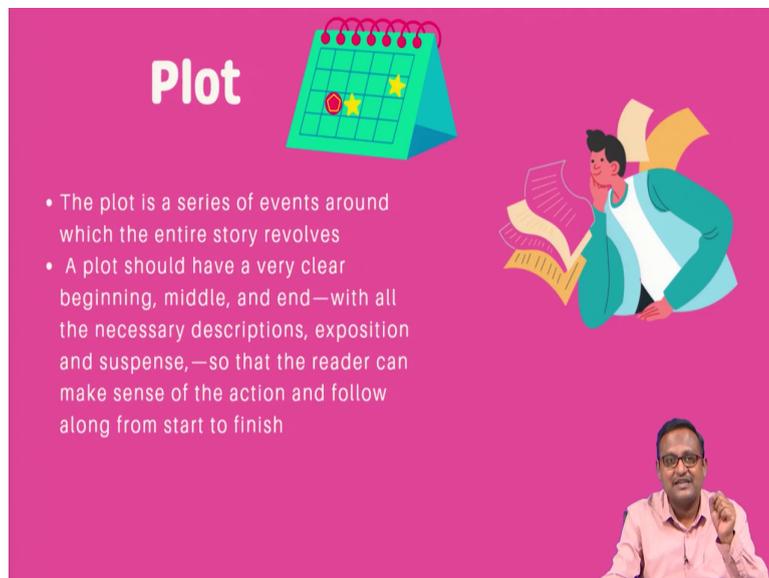
Settings can help a reader to better visualize the story and feel connected to the plot!"

The slide features a central title 'Setting' in bold black font. To the left is a pink box with a red location pin icon. In the center is an orange box with a red grid icon. To the right is a yellow box with an illustration of a church. A small photo of a man in a pink shirt is in the bottom right corner.

Now, from character let us go to the setting. As we have already identified setting can be a physical location or it can be a time in the story, it could even be an imaginary setting or anything like that. Let us say for instance if you have read R. K. Narayan's novels or short stories. Malgudi appears to be an important place. It is not a physical space, it is an imaginary space. It is an imaginary place constructed by the writer. So, something like that. So, it talks about either a location which corresponds to the geographical location or it could as well be an imaginary place. It could be a description of a landscape, buildings, seasons, scenery, even the weather. Because if a particular story takes place in a rainy season, then that becomes the setting right and it can as well. Why does the writer have to give the settings? Because settings have the capacity to give you the feeling of authenticity. Because when a reader visualizes an event taking place in a particular locality or time horizon or in space or in particular weather, it helps the reader visualize that plot in a better way. In order for the writer

to help the reader visualize, what is narrated better you can a writer make use of the setting. That is something that we can keep in mind.

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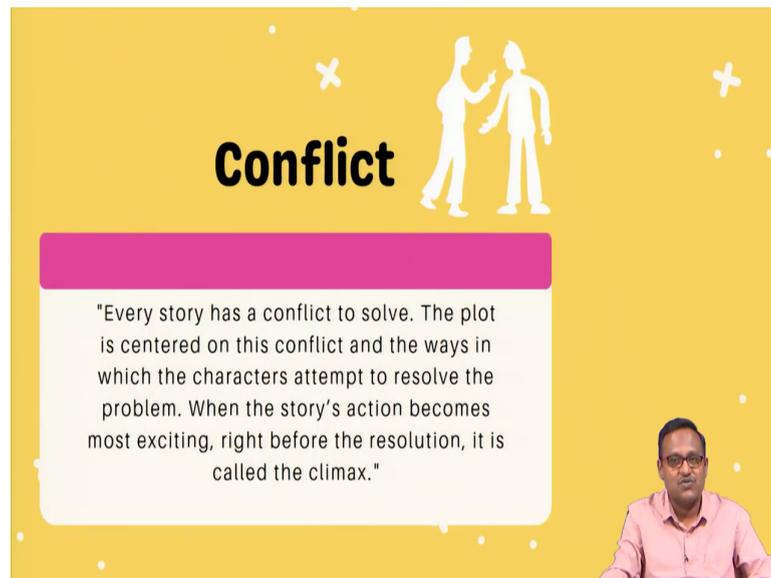
**Plot**

- The plot is a series of events around which the entire story revolves
- A plot should have a very clear beginning, middle, and end—with all the necessary descriptions, exposition and suspense,—so that the reader can make sense of the action and follow along from start to finish

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From the setting let us go to the plot. Another important component, the plot is an important component we have defined. A plot is a series of events around which an entire story revolves right, of course, the story is an integral part of the plot. So, not just story and story is a sequence of events chronology and plot means it also it adding the cause and the result effect cause and result in effect. So, generally speaking, a good plot should have a neat beginning, it should have a clear middle, where it is developed whereas a plot that has begun is properly developed and should have a thorough ending. This is something that Aristotle also talks of when it comes to a play, which is another form of a distinct form of literature; which we take up next week probably ok. So, it should have a proper beginning middle, and the end. And with all necessary descriptions, exposition, suspense, and all of them. In fact, the free talk model that we discussed can as well be applied to a short story here. These are some things that we can keep in mind while understanding the plot.

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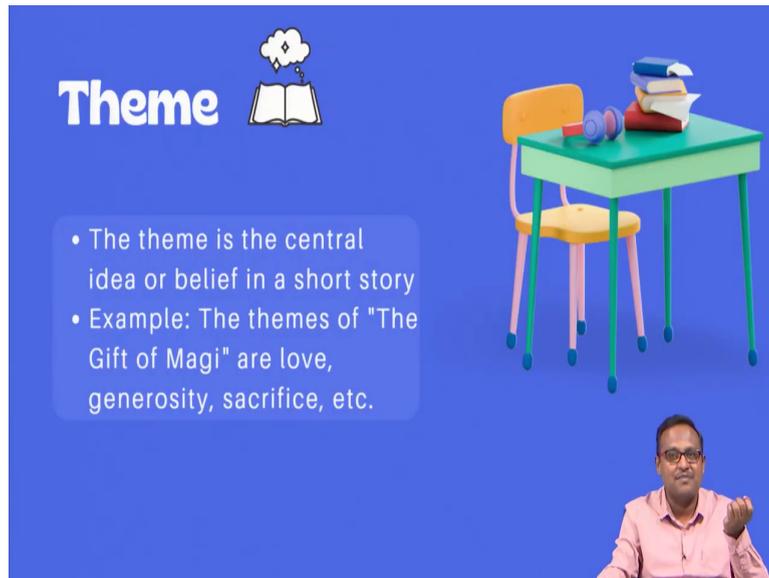
**Conflict**

"Every story has a conflict to solve. The plot is centered on this conflict and the ways in which the characters attempt to resolve the problem. When the story's action becomes most exciting, right before the resolution, it is called the climax."

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From here let us go to another element the 4th element conflict. Conflict is a very important thing because every story should necessarily have an element of conflict to solve, otherwise the story may become quite boring right. So, the plot is centered around this conflict and the characters try to resolve this conflict in one way or the other. If they resolve it becomes a success story and it becomes a successful character. If the character is unable to resolve this conflict then it becomes a tragic ending or a failure. Either way, it's absolutely alright. If you can arrive at a resolution - a positive one or a negative one or even your inability to resolve can as well be a good story. That is why conflict is very very important. In fact, out of the conflict you, I mean you take it the rising action, climax, the falling act action all of them hinge around the component of conflict in fiction as well as short fiction ok.

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**Theme**

- The theme is the central idea or belief in a short story
- Example: The themes of "The Gift of Magi" are love, generosity, sacrifice, etc.

Finally, we come to the theme; This is a very important thing again as we discussed in the context of fiction; there is no summary. the theme is not a summary, the theme is about the central vision. The overall vision of this particular short story or the hidden motive. Sometimes it can as well be explicit sometimes it may be implicit or what is the percept of life what is the experience of the life. So, all these things can revolve around, they give you an idea about the theme in a particular short story. For instance, if you have read *The gift of magi* where love, generosity, and sacrifice of them can be the theme. So, in any story that you read generally, there is a theme even in the story that we read in the very beginning, there is the tragic tale of the mother is the theme. The death of the child the stillborn baby is the theme, and the tragedy that follows it becomes the theme. Or in the second one that we read vixen how the proud lioness responds that more than the quantity, quality matters. That is a kind of an inherent theme that is there. So, these are various things that we can think of when it comes to elements of a short story alright. I hope you enjoy this class. In the next class, we begin with different types of short fiction and the origins of short fiction. Until let us say though it is modern manifestations, we will take it up in a little more detailed manner alright.

Thank you.