PLOT

Adapted from:
### Key Terms and Concepts: Plot

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PLOT

ACTION, SEQUENCE, AND SUBPLOT

- **PLOT** is sometimes used to refer to the events recounted in a fictional work; however, Booth and Mays use the term **ACTION** in this way, reserving the term **PLOT** for the way the author sequences and paces the events so as to shape our response and interpretation (59).

- Though we often talk about the plot of a fictional work, keep in mind that some works, especially longer ones, have two or more; a plot that receives significantly less time and attention than another is called a **SUBPLOT** (Booth and Mays 60).
SEQUENCE
The precise order in which events are related in a work of fiction

• Many fictional works relate event in CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER, starting with the earlier and ending with the latest (e.g., folktales)

• Some may open the story with the most recent event and then move backward to show us all that led up to it

• IN MEDIA RES—a Latin term used to describe stories that begin somewhere in the middle of action ("in the middle")
PACE

The duration of particular episodes—especially relative to each other and to the time they would have taken in real life.

• When an author slows down to hone in on a particular moment and scene, often introduced by a phrase such as “Later that evening . . . “ or “The day before Maggie fell down . . . ,” we call this a DISCRIMINATED OCCASION
CONFLICT
Some sort of struggle and its resolution.

- EXTERNAL CONFLICTS arise between a character and something or someone outside themselves

- INTERNAL CONFLICTS occur when a character struggles to reconcile two competing desires, needs, or duties, or two parts or aspects of himself

- Often, a conflict may be both external and internal
THE FIVE PARTS OF PLOT

Even compact and simple plots have the same five parts or phases as lengthy and complex plots:

1. EXPOSITION
2. RISING ACTION
3. CLIMAX
4. FALLING ACTION
5. CONCLUSION
Common Plot Types

• If most plots are essentially variations on the same five-part pattern, some plots have even more features in common.

• THE QUEST—a character or characters’ journey to find something or someone that seems, at least at first, of tremendous material or spiritual value.

• Traditionally, that requires a literal journey, the challenge being not only to find and acquire the object but also to return home with it.

• Such quests occur often in folktales and are a CONVENTION of chivalric romance and epic, in which the questing heroes are often men of high rank sent on their quests by someone with even greater power—a god, a wizard, a prophet, a king, etc.
GETTING META

• Many works of modern fiction depend for their full effect on our knowledge of the conventions of traditional quest plots.

• Some works of fiction, called METAFICTION, are deliberately nonrealistic works that playfully draw attention to their own status as works of fiction, and in doing so prompt us to think about how fiction works.
THE TWO MOST COMMON TYPES OF PLOT: TRAGIC AND COMEDIC

• Many fictional works both ancient and modern also (or instead) follow patterns derived from the two most important and ancient forms (or sub-genres) of drama—TRAGEDY AND COMEDY
TRAGIC PLOTS

• Trace a downward movement centering on a character’s fall from fortune into misfortune and isolation; tragic plots end unhappily, often with death
COMEDIC PLOTS

• Tend to end happily, often with marriage or some other act of social integration and celebration
QUESTIONS ABOUT PLOT

1. Read the first few paragraphs and then stop. What potential for conflict do you see? What do you expect to happen next? If you’ve already read the story through once, what clues do you see this time around that you may not have picked up on the first time around?

2. What is the inciting incident or destabilizing event? How and why does this event destabilize the initial situation?

3. How would you describe the conflict that ultimately develops? To what extent is it external, internal, or both? What, if any, complications or secondary conflicts arise?

4. Where, When, How, and Why does the story defy your expectations about what will happen next? What in this story—and in your experience of other stories—created these expectations?

5. What is the climax or turning point? Why and how so?

6. How is the conflict resolved? How and why might this resolution fulfill or defy your expectations? How and why is the situation at the end of the story different from what it was at the beginning?

7. Looking back at the story as a whole, what seems significant and effective about its plot, especially in terms of the sequence and pace?

8. Does this plot follow any common plot pattern? Is there, for example, a quest of any kind? Or does this plot follow a tragic or comedic pattern?

(Booth and Mays 68)
PLOT SUMMARY

• A PLOT SUMMARY should be a relatively brief recounting (or synopsis) of what happens in a work of fiction

• Doesn’t necessarily have to tell what happens in the same order that the work itself does

• Many plot summaries are more like ACTION summaries in the sense that Booth and Mays define ACTION and PLOT in *The Norton Introduction to Literature Portable Tenth Edition*

Plot summaries should generally address

WHAT HAPPENED?
PLOT SUMMARY: AN EXERCISE

Write a one-paragraph plot summary of “Sonny's Blues”
PLOT SUMMARY: AN EXERCISE

• Write a one-paragraph plot summary of “Sonny's Blues”

• Then, in a paragraph or two, reflect on your choices about which details to include, which to omit, and how to order them (especially if you’ve deviated from the plot)

What does your summary imply about the story’s focus, meaning, and significance?
PLOT SUMMARY: AN EXERCISE

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• Then, in a paragraph or two, reflect on your choices about which details to include, which to omit, and how to order them (especially if you’ve deviated from the plot)
• What does your summary imply about the story’s focus, meaning, and significance?

• Exchange your summary/reflection with a partner, and read your partner’s summary carefully, noting any similarities to or differences from your approach to summarizing the text

• Write a few paragraphs comparing your summaries and reflecting on the significance of the similarities and differences