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Achieving Symmetry in Short Fiction

Achieving symmetry, or the single-effect of a story, is often the goal of fiction writers as they craft their works using each traditional element of fiction in their own unique styles. This paper will detail the distinctive manners in which three popular writers of fiction--Anton Chekhov, Ernest Hemingway, and Eudora Welty--uniquely establish characters, setting, a resolution, point of view, a storyline, tone, dialogue, themes, imagery, and symbolism to bring about symmetry in their compositions.

"The Lady With the Pet Dog" is a short story written by Russian playwright and author Anton Chekhov in the late 19th century (Hingley para 1). Chekhov's style of writing is very direct, which can be seen in his characterization of the various personas he creates in his stories. Regarding this tale's protagonist Gurov, Chekhov wrote, "In the company of men he was bored and ill at ease, he was chilly and uncommunicative with them; but when he was among women he felt free, and knew what to speak to them about and how to comport himself; and even to be silent with them was no strain on him" (Chekhov 11). Throughout the story, every aspect of his love for Anna and his personal metamorphosis is revealed through similar utilizations of direct characterization. The double setting of "The Lady with the Pet Dog" is essential to the plotline of Chekhov's narrative. When Gurov and Anna depart Yalta, the mood changes. At the onset of the story, Gurov has already "spent a fortnight in Yalta" (Chekhov 10) and so has "begun to take an

interest in new arrivals” (Chekhov 10). Alternatively, In Moscow, Gurov is lonely and finds himself missing Anna. He becomes increasingly unhappy with his life, and Chekhov maintains settings which complement the character’s dreary mood during this portion of the narrative. The author’s plot structure defies elements of the traditional construction of storylines in fiction. Instead of creating a story with a background, conflicts, a climax, and a resolution, Chekhov creates characters that develop before the beginning of the story, and continue with their conflicts for a long time after the story terminates. Sex and love are major themes in this narrative. The majority of the information provided by the writer about Gurov at the start of the story has to do with his love life and sexual affairs. Similarly, most of the writer’s characterization of Anna comes after her first sexual encounter with Gurov, as he describes her melancholy and shameful reaction to the event. Chekhov tells this story from the third person omniscient point of view. The end of the story especially shows the omniscience of Chekhov’s voice as the narrator. First, he explores Anna’s innermost feelings: "She was crying out of sheer agitation, in the sorrowful consciousness that their life was so sad; that they could only see each other in secret and had to hide from people like thieves! Was it not a broken life?" (Chekhov 20). Then, he provides access to the workings of Gurov's mind: "It was plain to him that this love of theirs would not be over soon, that the end of it was not in sight” (Chekhov 20). The reader learns early on that Gurov is "eager for life" (Chekhov 11). The reader also learns that Anna is just as eager: "I was tormented by curiosity," she says, "I wanted something better. 'There must be a different sort of life,' I said to myself. I wanted to live! To live, to live!" (Chekhov 13). Although symbolism is not used extensively in Chekhov’s piece, Anna is symbolically trapped by the fence which lies just outside of her husband's house (Chekhov 16), just as she is really

confined by her marriage. "The Lady with the Pet Dog" is the realistic story of two people having an affair. Rather than rely on an overuse of figurative language or symbolism, this tale is told in a direct manner that is meant to show life as it realistically is. The story perfectly achieves symmetry, despite lacking a very clear plotline or resolution. The lack of resolution is a statement made by Chekhov regarding the reality of many people's unsolvable conflicts. Because of this, the single effect of the story is still achieved through strong characterization, rich settings, shifting tones, a consistent point of view, limited but effective symbolism, and well-written dialogue.

"A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is a short story written by Ernest Hemingway and published in 1933 ("A Clean, Well-Lighted Place: Story by Hemingway," para 1). Most of what the reader knows about the characters in Hemingway's narrative comes from the dialogue. The reader immediately becomes familiar with the differences between the younger waiter and the older waiter. The younger waiter's self-centered nature shows itself in his speech. He does not show concern for the isolated old man, and only thinks about his desperation to leave work and go home to his wife (Hemingway 136). Alternatively, the older waiter feels for the lonely old man, and through this sympathy, a connection is drawn between the two elderly characters. The café in which the events of the story take place is made to be a sort of consummate inner world in which even the most depressed and stressed individuals can rediscover contentment and relaxation. Through the use of a single setting and a limited plotline, the story explores the minds and views of three men who symbolize three different stages of life. Mortality is a prominent theme in this story. Hemingway creates personas that possess varying points of view surrounding the meaning and the value of time in an attempt to emphasize that everyone will grow old, die,

and stop valuing things that one meant something to them someday; no matter how young and confident they once were. Hemingway's decision to tell this story from the third person omniscient point of view invites his readers to explore both the internal and external conflicts of the story. The café itself is arguably the most important image in the tale. The clean, well-lighted place is lit in a certain manner and cleaned to perfect due to demands from the older waiter: he needs the café to be quiet, tidy, and lit brightly, most likely because the light chases away the mental darkness that is enveloping his being (Hemingway 137). The emotionless tone of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" allows the reader to more fully absorb what the characters are saying. Hemingway does not place obvious judgment on his characters, but instead leaves his writing plain and unapologetic; for example, when the young waiter tells the old man, "You should have killed yourself last week" (Hemingway 135). Hemingway lets his readers place judgments on characters rather than placing judgments himself and indirectly telling his readers how to feel. This story, mostly through its usage of highly disconnected characters, explores themes of isolation, age, and death in a devastating yet subdued manner. These same subjects work to reflect the cultural depression of post-World War I Western life.

"A Worn Path" is a short story written by Eudora Welty and published in 1941 ("Eudora Welty: American Author," para 3). Throughout the narrative, the writer develops her characters by allowing her readers a look into their personalities through the manners in which they talk, what they say, and even their names, such as Phoenix--Welty's protagonist in "A Worn Path." Phoenix shares several qualities with the bird of the same name. The in-depth description of the Natchez Trace provides an imagery-rich setting in which the reader can mentally place the story's characters. Phoenix's voice is continually attendant in these imagistic descriptions,

assisting the reader in picturing various features of the environment at each part of the protagonist's long path. Welty emphasizes the lengthiness of Phoenix's journey in the way she slowly describes the main character's every movement: "she lifted her free hand, gave a little nod, turned around, and walked out of the doctor's office" (Welty 114). These detailed descriptions also help to characterize Phoenix's persistent belief in her journey despite what others think; Phoenix is on an arduous endeavour to relieve a loved one from suffering, and nothing will stop her. Perseverance, age, and race are three of the major themes that present themselves throughout the storyline. 'Old' is by far the most common adjective used in the story, and Phoenix absolutely displays signs of aging, both in the physical limitations of her body, but also in her possession of immense wisdom and carelessness with regards to what others think. The tale is told from the third person omniscient point of view: while Phoenix is making her way along the Trace, the narration follows her thoughts closely, keeping the reader updated on every thought that crosses the woman's mind. The author's use of rich imagery further helps to connect the reader to the protagonist, such as when Phoenix approaches the wagon track: "She followed the track, swaying through the quiet bare fields, through the little strings of trees silver in their dead leaves, past cabins silver from weather, with the doors and windows boarded shut, all like old women under a spell sitting there. 'I walking in their sleep,' she said, nodding her head vigorously" (Welty 111). In this particular setting, Phoenix acts as a symbol herself: she represents black women who struggled to find a way out of poverty following slavery in America, while also dealing with discrimination for being female and African-American. There is a certain admiration and respect for the main character in Welty's tone; for example, her opening descriptions of Phoenix are told in a very fond and tender manner: "She was very old

and small and she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock” (Welty 109). The tale takes place in Mississippi, and the distinctive dialect used by Phoenix and all whom she encounters further solidifies the Southern setting. Through the extensive utilization of imagery, the strong characterization of Phoenix and the setting, the admiring tone, the detailed plot, and the unique Southern dialect, Welty perfectly achieves symmetry in a fashion that is particular to her style.

Though Chekhov, Hemingway, and Welty all bring about symmetry in their short stories, every author does so uniquely, and in a way that may not only represent their individual styles, but also the styles of the time period in which they were writing. Though some elements may be valued more than others by a specific author, each writer effectively uses characters, setting, a resolution, point of view, a storyline, tone, dialogue, themes, imagery, and symbolism to achieve the single-effect of each of their fictional narratives.

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