
The Use of Plot and Structure in “Shiloh”

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When examining the plot of a story, it is important to realize that the author controls the plot. This seemingly obvious statement has a deep meaning. A story almost never “writes itself,” an author must design its plot in order to send the message or give the impression that she or he wants. The author also has freedom when the structure of the story is being designed. These elements can be combined to, for instance, elicit suspense from the reader by placing the climax and resolution of a story near the end and making the events leading up to it ambiguous with regard to some mystery.

Bobbie Ann Mason, in her short story “Shiloh,” designed a plot with certain specific goals in mind. It is impossible to pry into her mind, but some of those goals might have been a feeling of helplessness and inevitability, or an awareness of the fact that a marriage cannot weather every change that can be thrown at it.

The feeling of Leroy’s helplessness that is conveyed by the end of the story is carefully laid out by Mason. In the second section of the story, we find that he can’t hold his own in a conversation with a teenager, albeit a drug-dealing and rich teenager (64¹) Soon after,

¹Page references refer to Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, and Drama, 5th ed., pub. by McGraw Hill.

we learn that his child was killed by sudden infant death syndrome. “‘It just happens sometimes,’ says the doctor.” The theme of helplessness is also conveyed by Leroy’s futile search for something to do after his accident. The story would not be the same without these events and characteristics: they are part of the plot, part of the design of the story, rather than details.

Mason also uses structure to give the story’s impression. Using an extra line space between sections, she divides her story into six parts: an expository section, three sections of rising action, the climax (which is about 1/8th as long as the other sections), and the resolution. The form she chooses is unbalanced, in that the climax takes place in the fifth section, rather than in the middle of the story. She may have chosen this form in order to add to the suspense of the reader: what will happen? Will Norma Jean use her surprisingly strong feet to walk out the door?

There is also an element of balance to the story: at the beginning of the narrative, Leroy and Norma Jean are just beginning to spend most of their time together. At the end, they are ending their time together. This gives the story a feeling that they have gotten nowhere by spending time together, and by restarting their marriage from the beginning. The structure, as well as the plot, helps to convey the feeling of helplessness.

Mason deftly uses plot and structure among her other ways to convey meaning in a story, as any good writer will. Who would read a story without a plot? And who would read a story with no structure, with events strewn about randomly (by accident; “disorganized” is certainly a valid structure when used intentionally)? Plot and structure are essential to a story.