

Short story

The following text, 'Sitting' by H.E. Francis, is presented here as a starting point for understanding fiction. While this short story contains many of the common elements of fiction, it also has a few unconventional twists. Read the story and try to identify all of the defining characteristics of fiction that you see below.

Defining characteristics: Short fiction

Exposition - How does the story begin? How are the characters introduced? Who is the narrator?	In <i>Sitting</i> we quickly establish that the story is told from 'his' perspective, that is to say from the third-person limited perspective (though it shifts later). 'They', the people who are sitting on his front steps, are the problem.
Characterization - Characters are usually brought to life by describing what they do, what they say, what think or how they interact with their setting.	This story is rather unique because it is so short, and yet some characterization is established. 'He' is frustrated by the sitters. 'They' are stubborn, determined and mysterious.
Setting - Setting is more than a backdrop. How do the characters interact with their environment?	The strength of this story is that the setting is very undefined. If the author had named a country or town, we might ask irrelevant questions such as: 'Does a house always go to the city, when one dies in that country?' The setting of this story is one that alienates the man and the woman at first and welcomes them later. One could even argue that the setting is main character, as the society all around the couple goes through a significant change.
Conflict - Conflict is what makes a story interesting. We have a natural tendency to want to see conflicts resolve, and so we keep turning the pages of a novel. Conflict comes at the heart of plot. There tend to be several kinds of recognizable conflicts, which we usually label: 1) Man vs. Man, 2) Man vs. Nature, 3) Man vs. Society, 4) Man vs. Ideas, and 5) Man vs. Himself. But this is not an exhaustive or prescriptive list.	One could argue that <i>Sitting</i> starts out as man vs. man, as the couple sits on the man's steps. However it shifts quite radically after the man dies. The story turns into a people vs. state conflict, as the society organizes itself to protect the couple from the 'city'. In all actuality this conflict is not resolved by the end of the story.
Rising action - As the plot thickens, we see rising action. This is to say that the characters struggle with the conflict situation more and more until it reaches a climax.	Here we see the couple sitting and sitting miraculously.

Climax - The climax represents a kind of point-of-no-return for the characters of a story.	One could argue that there are two climaxes. We expect there to be a conflict between the home owner and the couple but this does not happen. Instead the man dies. Thus just when we think the conflict has been resolved we learn that there is really a different underlying tension between the citizens and the city. And so a lawsuit is introduced as another conflict, which reaches its climax when the citizens all sit on their front steps.
Falling action - This usually happens when there is no more suspense or anticipation of a climax.	This story lacks what is very common in stories, falling action.
Conclusion - When the conflict is over in a work of fiction, and we feel that life can go back to a new normalcy, then we see a resolution.	<i>Sitting</i> is, strangely enough, not resolved. We do not know if the city will give the house to the couple. We do see that the people are resolved to support each other.

Sample short story

Sitting

H.E. Francis

1983

In the morning the man and woman were sitting on his front steps. They sat all day. They would not move. With metronomic regularity he peered at them through the pane in the front door. They did not leave at dark. He wondered when they ate or slept or did their duties. At dawn they were still there. They sat through sun and rain.

At first only the immediate neighbours called: Who are they? What are they doing there? He did not know. Then neighbours from farther down the street called. People who passed and saw the couple called. He never heard the man or woman talk. When he started getting calls from all over the city, from strangers and city fathers, professionals and clerks, garbage and utilities men, and the postman, who had to walk around them to deliver letters, he had to do something. He asked them to leave. They said nothing. They sat. They sat. They stared, indifferent. He said he would call the police. The police gave them a talking to, explained the limits of their rights, and took them away in the police car. In the morning they were back. The next time the police said they would put them in jail if the jails were not so full, though they would have to find a place for them somewhere, if he insisted. That is your problem, he said. No, it is really yours, the police told him, but they removed the pair.

When he looked out the next morning, the man and the woman were sitting on the steps. They sat there every day for years. Winters he expected them to die from the cold.

But he died.

He had no relative, so the house went to the city.

The man and woman went on sitting there.

When the city threatened to remove the man and the woman, neighbors and citizens brought a suit against the city: after sitting there so long, the man and the woman deserved the house.

In the morning strange men and women were sitting on front steps all over the city.

Discussion questions

1. To what extent does this story adhere to the conventions of storytelling and plot, as seen here in Freytag's pyramid?
2. Try writing an ending to this story in 200 words or less.
3. Apply these terms to a literary work that you are reading. Can you identify all of the 'Defining Characteristics' of the plot of your work?

