I wanted to write this book for very personal reasons. One of them, of course, was the craft of writing. The other reason was to understand myself, to figure out who I was. A lot of writers use writing as a way of finding their own personal history, which does not seem like a weird family that was unique to us. To think that they would apply to other people in similar circumstances, you are part of their lives for that moment. You inhabit their lives as you go through these things. I think that every lonely kid loves to escape. It provided me with the notion that I could find an ending that was different, and difficult times. It provided me with the notion of Chinese and English, but they didn't force me to speak Mandarin. Instead, they wanted me to do well in the new country. They didn't want us to be starving artists. Going into the arts was considered a luxury—that was something you did if you couldn't possibly lead to anything. I didn't know what to do with it. I just continued to make more money, to take care of my mother in her old age, because I always knew she was going to be a writer, because she had a wild imagination.

The Joy Luck Club is a book of enormous importance, because it brought the complex history of Chinese immigration into the main stream. The American audience was fascinated. The book did have any sense that we were opening up a whole new territory?
Here is a story, one of the shortest ever written and one of the most difficult to forget:

A woman is sitting in her old, shuttered house. She knows that she is alone in the whole world; every other thing is dead.

The doorbell rings.

In a brief space this small tale of terror, credited to Thomas Bailey Aldrich, makes itself memorable. It sets a promising scene—is this a haunted house?—introduces a character, and places her in a strange and intriguing situation. Although in reading a story that is over so quickly we don’t come to know the character well, for a moment we enter her thoughts and begin to share her feelings. Then something amazing happens. The story leaves us to wonder: who or what rang that bell?

Like many richer, longer, more complicated stories, this one, in its few words, engages the imagination. Evidently, how much a story contains and suggests doesn’t depend on its size. In the opening chapter of this text, we will look first at other brief stories—examples of three ancient kinds of fiction, a fable, a parable, and a tale—then at a contemporary short story. We will consider the elements of fiction one after another. By seeing a few short stories broken into their parts, you will come to a keener sense of how a story is put together. Not all stories are short, of course; later in the text, you will find a chapter on reading long stories and novels.

All in all, here are eighty-four stories. Among them, may you find at least a few you’ll enjoy and care to remember.
When I read a good book ... I wish that life were three thousand years long.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

After the shipwreck that marooned him on his desert island, Robinson Crusoe, in the novel by Daniel Defoe, stood gazing over the water where pieces of cargo from his ship were floating by. Along came “two shoes, not mates.” It is the qualification not mates that makes the detail memorable. We could well believe that a thing so striking and odd must have been seen, and not invented. But in truth Defoe, like other masters of the art of fiction, had the power to make us believe his imaginings. Borne along by the art of the storyteller, we trust what we are told, even though the story may be sheer fantasy.

THE ART OF FICTION

Fiction (from the Latin fictio, “a shaping, a counterfeiting”) is a name for stories not entirely factual, but at least partially shaped, made up, imagined. It is true that in some fiction, such as a historical novel, a writer draws on factual information in presenting scenes, events, and characters. But the factual information in a historical novel, unlike that in a history book, is of secondary importance.

Many firsthand accounts of the American Civil War were written by men who had fought in it, but few eyewitnesses give us so keen a sense of actual life on the battlefront as the author of The Red Badge of Courage, Stephen Crane, who was born after the war was over. In fiction, the “facts” may or may not be true, and a story is none the worse for their being entirely imaginary. We expect from fiction a sense of how people act, not an authentic chronicle of how, at some past time, a few people acted.

Human beings love stories. We put them everywhere—not only in books, films, and plays, but also in songs, news articles, cartoons, and video games. There seems to be a general human curiosity about how other lives, both real and imaginary, take shape and unfold. Some stories provide simple and predictable pleasures according to a conventional plan. Each episode of Law & Order or The Simpsons, for instance, follows a roughly similar structure, so that regular viewers feel comfortably engaged and entertained. But other stories may seek to challenge rather than comfort us, by finding new and exciting ways to tell a tale, or delving deeper into the mysteries of human nature, or both.

LITERARY FICTION

Literary fiction calls for close attention. Reading a short story by Ernest Hemingway instead of watching an episode of Grey’s Anatomy is a little like playing chess rather than checkers. It isn’t that Hemingway isn’t entertaining. Great literature provides deep and genuine pleasures. But it also requires great attention and skilled engagement from the reader. We are not necessarily led on by the promise of thrills; we do not keep reading mainly to find out what happens next. Indeed, a literary story might even disclose in its opening lines everything that happened, then spend the rest of its length revealing what that happening meant.

Reading literary fiction is not merely a passive activity, but is one that demands both attention and insight-lending participation. In return, it offers rewards. In some works of literary fiction, such as Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat” and Flannery O’Connor’s “Revelation,” we see more deeply into the minds and hearts of the characters than we ever see into those of our families, our close friends, our lovers—or even ourselves.
TYPES OF SHORT FICTION

Modern literary fiction in English has been dominated by two forms: the novel and the short story. The two have many elements in common. Perhaps we will be able to define the short story more meaningfully—for it has traits more essential than just a particular length—if first, for comparison, we consider some related varieties of fiction: the fable, the parable, and the tale. Ancient forms whose origins date back to the time of word-of-mouth storytelling, the fable and the tale are relatively simple in structure; in them we can plainly see elements also found in the short story (and in the novel).

FABLE

The fable is a brief, often humorous narrative told to illustrate a moral. You are probably acquainted with some of the fables credited to the Greek slave Aesop (about 620–560 B.C.), whose stories seem designed to teach lessons about human life. Such is the fable of “The Goose That Laid the Golden Eggs,” in which the owner of this marvelous creature slaughters her to get at the great treasure that he thinks is inside her, but finds nothing (implied moral: “Be content with what you have”). Another is the fable of “The Tortoise and the Hare” (implied moral: “Slow, steady plodding wins the race”). We are so accustomed to the phrase Aesop's fables that we might almost start to think the two words inseparable, but in fact there have been fabulists (creators or writers of fables) in virtually every culture throughout recorded history.

ELEMENTS OF A FABLE

The characters in a fable are often animals who represent specific human qualities. An ant, for example, may represent a hard-working type of person, or a lion nobility. But fables can also present human characters. Whoever they may be, these characters are merely sketched, not greatly developed. Elaborate description would strike us as unnecessary and distracting. By its very bareness and simplicity, a fable fixes itself—and its message—in memory. For in a fable everything leads directly to the moral, or message, sometimes stated at the end (moral: “Haste makes waste”).
Death speaks: There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.
Aesop

THE FOX AND THE GRAPES 6th century B.C.

Translated by V. S. Vernon Jones

A hungry fox saw some fine bunches of grapes hanging from a vine that was trained along a high trellis, and did his best to reach them by jumping as high as he could into the air. But it was all in vain, for they were just out of reach; so he gave up trying, and walked away with an air of dignity and unconcern, remarking, "I thought those grapes were ripe, but I see now they are quite sour."

*Moral: It is easy to despise what you cannot get.*

Aesop’s fox and the grapes.
Bidpai

THE CAMEL AND HIS FRIENDS  c. 4th century

Retold in English by Arundhati Khanwalkar

Once a merchant was leading a caravan of heavily-laden camels through a jungle when one of them, overcome by fatigue, collapsed. The merchant decided to leave the camel in the jungle and go on his way. Later, when the camel recovered his strength, he realized that he was alone in a strange jungle. Fortunately there was plenty of grass, and he survived.

One day the king of the jungle, a lion, arrived along with his three friends—a leopard, a fox, and a crow. The king lion wondered what the camel was doing in the jungle! He came near the camel and asked how he, a creature of the desert, had ended up in the hostile jungle. The camel tearfully explained what happened. The lion took pity on him and said, “You have nothing to fear now. Henceforth, you are under my protection and can stay with us.” The camel began to live happily in the jungle.

Then one day the lion was wounded in a fight with an elephant. He retired to his cave and stayed there for several days. His friends came to offer their sympathy. They tried to catch prey for the hungry lion but failed. The camel had no problem as he lived on grass while the others were starving.

The fox came up with a plan. He secretly went to the lion and suggested that the camel be sacrificed for the good of the others. The lion got furious, “I can never kill an animal who is under my protection.”

The fox humbly said, “But Lord, you have provided us food all the time. If any one of us voluntarily offered himself to save your life, I hope you won’t mind!” The hungry lion did not object to that and agreed to take the offer.

The fox went back to his companions and said, “Friends, our king is dying of starvation. Let us go and beg him to eat one of us. It is the least we can do for such a noble soul.”

So they went to the king and the crow offered his life. The fox interrupted, and said, “You are a small creature, the master’s hunger will hardly be appeased by eating you. May I humbly offer my life to satisfy my master’s hunger.”

The leopard stepped forward and said, “You are no bigger than the crow, it is me whom our master should eat.”

The foolish camel thought, “Everyone has offered to lay down their lives for the king, but he has not hurt any one. It is now my turn to offer myself.” So he stepped forward and said, “Stand aside friend leopard, the king and you have close family ties. It is me whom the master must eat.”

An ominous silence greeted the camel’s offer. Then the king gladly said, “I accept your offer, O noble camel.” And in no time he was killed by the three rogues, the false friends.

Moral: Be careful in choosing your friends.

Bidpai: “The Camel and His Friends” by Bidpai, retold in English by Arundhati Khanwalkar from THE PANCHATANTRA. (The Association of Grandparents of Indian Immigrants).
Another traditional form of storytelling is the parable. Like the fable, a parable is a brief narrative that teaches a moral, but unlike the fable, its plot is plausibly realistic, and the main characters are human rather than anthropomorphized animals or natural forces. The other key difference is that parables usually possess a more mysterious and suggestive tone. A fable customarily ends by explicitly stating its moral, but parables often present their morals implicitly, and their meanings can be open to several interpretations.

In the Western tradition, the literary conventions of the parable are largely based on the brief stories told by Jesus in his preaching. The forty-three parables recounted in the four Gospels reveal how frequently he used the form to teach. Jesus designed his parables to have two levels of meaning—a literal story that could immediately be understood by the crowds he addressed and a deeper meaning fully comprehended only by his disciples, an inner circle who understood the nature of his ministry. (You can see the richness of interpretations suggested by Jesus’s parables by reading and analyzing “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” from St. Luke’s Gospel.) The parable was also widely used by Eastern philosophers. The Taoist sage Chuang Tzu often portrayed the principles of Tao—which he called the “Way of Nature”—in witty parables such as the following one, traditionally titled “Independence.”
Chuang Tzu was one day fishing, when the Prince of Ch’u sent two high officials to interview him, saying that his Highness would be glad of Chuang Tzu’s assistance in the administration of his government. The latter quietly fished on, and without looking round, replied, “I have heard that in the State of Ch’u there is a sacred tortoise, which has been dead three thousand years, and which the prince keeps packed up in a box on the altar in his ancestral shrine. Now do you think that tortoise would rather be dead and have its remains thus honoured, or be alive and wagging its tail in the mud?” The two officials answered that no doubt it would rather be alive and wagging its tail in the mud; whereupon Chuang Tzu cried out “Begone! I too elect to remain wagging my tail in the mud.”
TALE
The name tale (from the Old English talu, “speech”) is sometimes applied to any story, whether short or long, true or fictitious. Tale being a more evocative name than story, writers sometimes call their stories “tales” as if to imply something handed down from the past. But defined in a more limited sense, a tale is a story, usually short, that sets forth strange and wonderful events in more or less bare summary, without detailed character-drawing. “Tale” is pretty much synonymous with “yarn,” for it implies a story in which the goal is revelation of the marvelous rather than revelation of character. In the English folktale “Jack and the Beanstalk,” we take away a more vivid impression of the miraculous beanstalk and the giant who dwells at its top than of Jack’s mind or personality. Because such venerable stories were told aloud before someone set them down in writing, the storytellers had to limit themselves to brief descriptions. Probably spoken around a fire or hearth, such a tale tends to be less complicated and less closely detailed than a story written for the printed page, whose reader can linger over it. Still, such tales can be complicated. It is not merely greater length that makes a short story different from a tale or a fable: one mark of a short story is a fully delineated character.

TYPES OF TALES
Even modern tales favor supernatural or fantastic events: for instance, the tall tale, a variety of folk story that recounts the deeds of a superhero (Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Sally Ann Thunder) or of the storyteller. If the storyteller is describing his or her own imaginary experience, the bragging yarn is usually told with a straight face to listeners who take pleasure in scoffing at it. Although the fairy tale, set in a world of magic and enchantment, is sometimes the work of a modern author (notably Hans Christian Andersen), well-known examples are those German folktales that probably originated in the Middle Ages, collected by the Brothers Grimm. The label fairy tale is something of an English misnomer, for in the Grimm stories, though witches and goblins abound, fairies are a minority.
A poor man had twelve children and had to work day and night just to give them bread. Now when the thirteenth came into the world, he did not know what to do, so he ran out onto the main highway intending to ask the first one he met to be the child's godfather.

The first person he met was the good Lord God, who knew very well what was weighing on the man's heart. And He said to him, "Poor man, I am sorry for you. I will hold your child at the baptismal font. I will take care of him and fill his days with happiness."

The man asked, "Who are you?"

"I am the good Lord." 'Then I don't want you as godfather. You give to the rich and let the poor starve."

The man spoke thus because he did not know how wisely God portions out wealth and poverty. So he turned away from the Lord and went on.

Then the Devil came up to him and said, "What are you looking for? If you take me as your child's sponsor, I will give him gold heaped high and wide and all the joys of this world."

The man asked, "Who are you?"

"I am the Devil." Then the doctor, "You trick men and lead them astray."

He went on, and bone-thin Death strode up to him and said, "Choose me as godfather.

The man asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Death, who makes all men equal."

Then the man said, "You are the right one. You take the rich and the poor without distinction. You will be the godfather."

Death answered, "I will make your child rich and famous. Whoever has me as a friend shall lack for nothing."

The man said, "The baptism is next Sunday. Be there on time."

Death appeared just as he had promised and stood there as a proper godfather.

When the boy had grown up, his godfather walked in one day and said to come along with him. Death led him out into the woods, showed him an herb, and said, "Now you are going to get your christening present. I am making you a famous doctor. When you are called to a patient, I will always appear to you. If I stand next to the sick person's head, you may speak boldly that you will make him healthy again. Give him some of this herb, and he will recover. But if you see me standing by the sick person's feet, then he is mine. You must say that nothing can be done and that no doctor in the world can save him. But beware of using the herb against my will, or it will turn out badly for you."

It was not long before the young man was the most famous doctor in the whole world. "He needs only to look at the sick person," everyone said, "and then he knows how things stand—whether the patient will get well again or whether he must die."

People came from far and wide to bring their sick and gave him so much gold that he quickly became quite rich.

Now it soon happened that the king grew ill, and the doctor was summoned to say whether a recovery was possible. But when he came to the bed, Death was standing at the sick man's feet, and no herb could save him.

"If I cheat Death this one time," thought the doctor, "he will be angry, but since I am his godson, he will turn a blind eye, so I will risk it."

He took up the sick man and turned him around so that his head was now where Death stood. Then he gave him some of this herb, and he will recover. But if you see me standing by the sick person's feet, then he is mine. You must say that nothing can be done and that no doctor in the world can save him. But beware of using the herb against my will, or it will turn out badly for you."

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PLAT
Like a fable, the Grimm brothers’ tale seems stark in its lack of detail and in the swiftness of its telling. Compared with the fully portrayed characters of many modern stories, the characters of father, son, king, princess, and even Death himself seem hardly more than stick figures. It may have been that to draw ample characters would not have contributed to the storytellers’ design; that, indeed, to have done so would have been inartistic. Yet “Godfather Death” is a compelling story. By what methods does it arouse and sustain our interest?

ELEMENTS OF PLOT
Plot sometimes refers simply to the events in a story. In this text, though, a plot will mean the artistic arrangement of those events. From the opening sentence of “Godfather Death,” we watch the unfolding of a dramatic situation: a person is involved in some conflict. First, this character is a poor man with children to feed, in conflict with the world; very soon, we find him in conflict with God and with the Devil besides. Drama in fiction occurs in any clash of wills, desires, or powers—whether it be a conflict of character against character, character against society, character against some natural force, or, as in “Godfather Death,” character against some supernatural entity.

Like any shapely tale, “Godfather Death” has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In fact, it is unusual to find a story so clearly displaying the elements of structure that critics have found in many classic works of fiction and drama. The tale begins with an exposition: the opening portion that sets the scene (if any), introduces the main characters, tells us what happened before the story opened, and provides any other background information that we need in order to understand and care about the events to follow. In “Godfather Death,” the exposition is brief—all in the opening paragraph. The middle section of the story begins with Death’s giving the herb to the boy and his warning not to defy him. This moment introduces a new conflict (a complication), and by this time it is clear that the son and not the father is to be the central human character of the story.

PROTAGONIST VERSUS ANTAGONIST
Death’s godson is the principal person who strives: the protagonist (a better term than hero, for it may apply equally well to a central character who is not especially brave or virtuous). The suspense, the pleasurable anxiety we feel that heightens our attention to the story, resides in our wondering how it will all turn out. Will the doctor triumph over Death? Even though we suspect, early in the story, that the doctor stands no chance against such a superhuman antagonist, we want to see for ourselves the outcome of his defiance.

CRISIS AND CLIMAX
When the doctor defies his godfather for the first time—when he saves the king—we have a crisis, a moment of high tension. The tension is momentarily resolved when Death lets him off. Then an even greater crisis—the turning point in the action—occurs with the doctor’s second defiance in restoring the princess to life. In the last section of the story, with the doctor in the underworld, events come to a climax, the moment of greatest tension at which the outcome is to be decided, when the terrified doctor begs for a new candle. Will Death grant him one? Will he live, become king, and marry the princess? The outcome or conclusion—also called the resolution or dénouement (French for “the untying of the knot”)—quickly follows as Death allows the little candle to go out.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES
The treatment of plot is one aspect of an author’s artistry. Different arrangements of the same material are possible. A writer might decide to tell of the events in chronological order, beginning with the earliest; or he or she might open the story with the last event, then tell what led up to it. Sometimes a writer chooses to skip rapidly over the exposition and begin in medias res (Latin for “in the midst of things”), first presenting some exciting or significant moment, then filling in what happened earlier. This method is by no means a modern invention: Homer begins the Odyssey with his hero mysteriously late in returning from war and his son searching for him; John Milton’s Paradise Lost opens with Satan already defeated in his revolt against the Lord. A device useful to writers for filling in what happened earlier is the flashback (or retrospect), a scene relived in a character’s memory. Alternatively, a storyteller can try to incite our anticipation by giving us some foreshadowing or indication of events to come. In “Godfather Death” the foreshadowings are apparent in Death’s warnings (“But if you try such a thing again, it will be your neck”).
THE SHORT STORY

The teller of tales relies heavily on the method of summary: terse, general narration. In a short story, a form more realistic than the tale and of modern origin, the writer usually presents the main events in greater fullness. Fine writers of short stories, although they may use summary at times (often to give some portion of a story less emphasis), are skilled in rendering a scene: a vivid or dramatic moment described in enough detail to create the illusion that the reader is practically there. Avoiding long summary, they try to show rather than simply to tell, as if following Mark Twain’s advice to authors: “Don’t say, ‘The old lady screamed.’ Bring her on and let her scream.”

A short story is more than just a sequence of happenings. A finely wrought short story has the richness and conciseness of an excellent lyric poem. Spontaneous and natural as the finished story may seem, the writer has crafted it so artfully that there is meaning in even seemingly casual speeches and apparently trivial details. If we skim it hastily, skipping the descriptive passages, we miss significant parts.

Some literary short stories, unlike commercial fiction in which the main interest is in physical action or conflict, tell of an epiphany: some moment of insight, discovery, or revelation by which a character’s life, or view of life, is greatly altered. The term, which means “showing forth” in Greek, was first used in Christian theology to signify the manifestation of God’s presence in the world. This theological idea was adapted by James Joyce to refer to a heightened moment of secular revelation. (For such moments in fiction, see the stories in this text by Joyce, John Steinbeck, and Joyce Carol Oates.) Other short stories tell of a character initiated into experience or maturity: one such story of initiation is John Updike’s “A & P,” which appears on the next page. Less obviously dramatic, perhaps, than “Godfather Death,” such a story may be no less powerful.

The fable and the tale are ancient forms; the short story is of more recent origin. In the nineteenth century, writers of fiction were encouraged by a large, literate audience of middle-class readers who wanted to see their lives reflected in faithful mirrors. Skillfully representing ordinary life, many writers perfected the art of the short story: in Russia, Anton Chekhov; in France, Honoré de Balzac and Guy de Maupassant; and in America, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe (although the Americans seem less fond of everyday life than of dream and fantasy). It would be false to claim that, in passing from the fable and the tale to the short story, fiction has made a triumphant progress; or to claim that, because short stories are modern, they are superior to fables and tales. Fable, tale, and short story are distinct forms, each achieving its own effects. Far from being extinct, fable and tale have enjoyed a resurgence in recent years. Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, and Gabriel García Márquez have all used fable and folktale to create memorable and very modern fiction. All forms of fiction are powerful in the right authorial hands.

Let’s begin with a contemporary short story whose protagonist undergoes an initiation into maturity. To notice the difference between a short story and a tale, you may find it helpful to compare John Updike’s “A & P” with “Godfather Death.” Although Updike’s short story is centuries distant from the Grimm tale in its method of telling and in its setting, you may be reminded of “Godfather Death” in the main character’s dramatic situation. To defend a young woman, a young man has to defy his mentor—here, the boss of a supermarket! In so doing, he places himself in jeopardy. Updike has the protagonist tell his own story, amply and with humor. How does it differ from a tale?
the Reading

the Video

renewed 1990 by John Updike. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

by John Updike, copyright © 1962, and

Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories

punches, 4, 9,

feel in the silence everybody getting nervous, most of all Lengel, who asks me,

A & P must look pretty crummy. Fancy Herring Snacks flashed in her very blue

eyes.

"pick up" and "snacks." All of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living

"party in baggy gray pants who stumbles up with four giant cans of pineapple juice

The girls had reached the meat counter and were asking McMahon something.

because the sewer broke again. It's not as if we're on the Cape; we're north of

the street. And anyway these are usually women with six children and varicose

gerades, with her feet padding along naked over our checkerboard green-and-cream

橡胶-tile floor.

in the cool of the A & P, under the fluorescent lights, against all those stacked pack-

of the top of her chest down from the shoulder bones like a dented sheet of

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Most people sensibly assume that writing is propaganda. Of course, they admit, there is bad propaganda, like the boy-meets-tractor novels of socialist realism, and old-fashioned propaganda, like Christian melodrama and the capitalist success stories of Horatio Alger or Samuel Smiles. But that some message is intended, wrapped in the story like a piece of crystal carefully mailed in cardboard and excelsior, is not doubted. Scarcely a day passes in my native land that I don’t receive some letter from a student or teacher asking me what I meant to say in such a book, asking me to elaborate more fully on some sentence I deliberately whittled into minimal shape, or inviting me to speak on some topic, usually theological or sexual, on which it is pleasantly assumed I am an expert. The writer as hero, as Hemingway or Saint-Exupéry or D’Annunzio, a tradition of which Camus was perhaps the last example, has been replaced in America by the writer as educationist. Most writers teach, a great many teach writing; writing is furiously taught in the colleges even as the death knell of the book and the written word is monotonously tolled; any writer, it is assumed, can give a lecture, and the purer products of his academic mind, the “writings” themselves, are sifted and, if found of sufficient quality, installed in their places on the assembly belt of study, as objects of educational contemplation.

How dare one confess, to the politely but firmly inquiring letter-writer who takes for granted that as a remote but functioning element of his education you are duty-bound to provide the information and elucidating essay that will enable him to complete his term paper, or his Ph.D. thesis, or his critical opus—how dare one confess that the absence of a swiftly expressible message is, often, the message; that reticence is as important a tool to the writer as expression; that the hasty filling out of a questionnaire is not merely irrelevant but inimical to the writer’s proper activity; that this activity is rather curiously private and finicking, a matter of exorcism and manufacture rather than of toplofty proclamation; that what he makes is ideally as ambiguous and opaque as life itself.

From “Why Write?”
THINKING ABOUT PLOT

A day without conflict is pleasant, but a story without conflict is boring. The plot of every short story, novel, or movie derives its energy from conflict. A character desperately wants something he or she can’t have, or is frantic to avoid an unpleasant (or deadly) event. In most stories, conflict is established and tension builds, leading to a crisis and, finally, a resolution of some sort. When analyzing a story, be sure to remember these points:

- **Plotting isn’t superficial.** Although plot might seem like the most obvious and superficial part of a story, it is an important expressive device. Plot combines with the other elements of fiction—imagery, style, and symbolism, for example—to create an emotional response in the reader: suspense, humor, sadness, excitement, terror.

- **Small events can have large consequences.** In most short stories, plot depends less on large external events than on small occurrences that set off large internal changes in the main character.

- **Action reveals character.** Good stories are a lot like life: the protagonist’s true nature is usually revealed not just by what he or she says but also by what he or she does. Stories often show how the protagonist comes to a personal turning point, or how his or her character is tested or revealed by events.

- **Plot is about cause and effect.** Plot is more than just a sequence of events (“First A happens, and then B, and then C . . . ”). The actions, events, and situations described in most stories are related to each other by more than just accident (“First A happens, which causes B to happen, which makes C all the more surprising, or inevitable, or ironic . . . ”).