



Structuring Short Stories

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INTRODUCTION

Most novelists utilize the Hero’s Journey structure to craft a compelling, organized plot for characters to follow. However, the Hero’s Journey plot structure almost never can be used to build a short story because it requires more words and character development than a short story can hold. This is seen by some readers as grounds enough to discredit short stories as inferior forms of literature relative to novels. To determine the structure of a typical short story would disprove this assumption.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Bader’s “The Structure of the Modern Short Story” argues that the plot of a short story has three basic characteristics. At the beginning of the story, an immediate conflict between characters must introduce to the reader a broad, less explicit thematic conflict to the reader. There must be a turning point or a moment of revelation, and then, at the end of the story, the characters often resign themselves to the repetition of the past. His research on the basic plot of short stories is significant because it proves that short stories hold literary merit in that they can powerfully delve into difficult thematic topics.

Bader’s research was very limited in that he only analyzed a few short stories of the same genre. I intend to read and explore short stories of multiple different genres in order to create a more accurate, well-rounded structure of the short story.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

I read one to two short stories per week for ten weeks. I read each story two or three times depending on the difficulty and length of the text. The first read is for comprehension of the story, the second for observing and taking notes on important plot points, and the third is for further understanding and analysis of the story and its plot.

1. Selecting a short story

I randomly selected stories from americanliterature.com, a database of short stories. Only the title of each story appears on the database, so I arbitrarily chose two titles every week in order to read stories from random genres and authors.

2. Reading a short story

During my second and third read-through of a story, I annotated the text and took notes on important plot points, making sure to keep my notes in order.

3. Determining general plot points

From my notes on all of the stories I read, I had to group certain specific plot points under more general terms. I did this in order to create a Hero’s Journey-esque general structure of the plot of typical short story.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

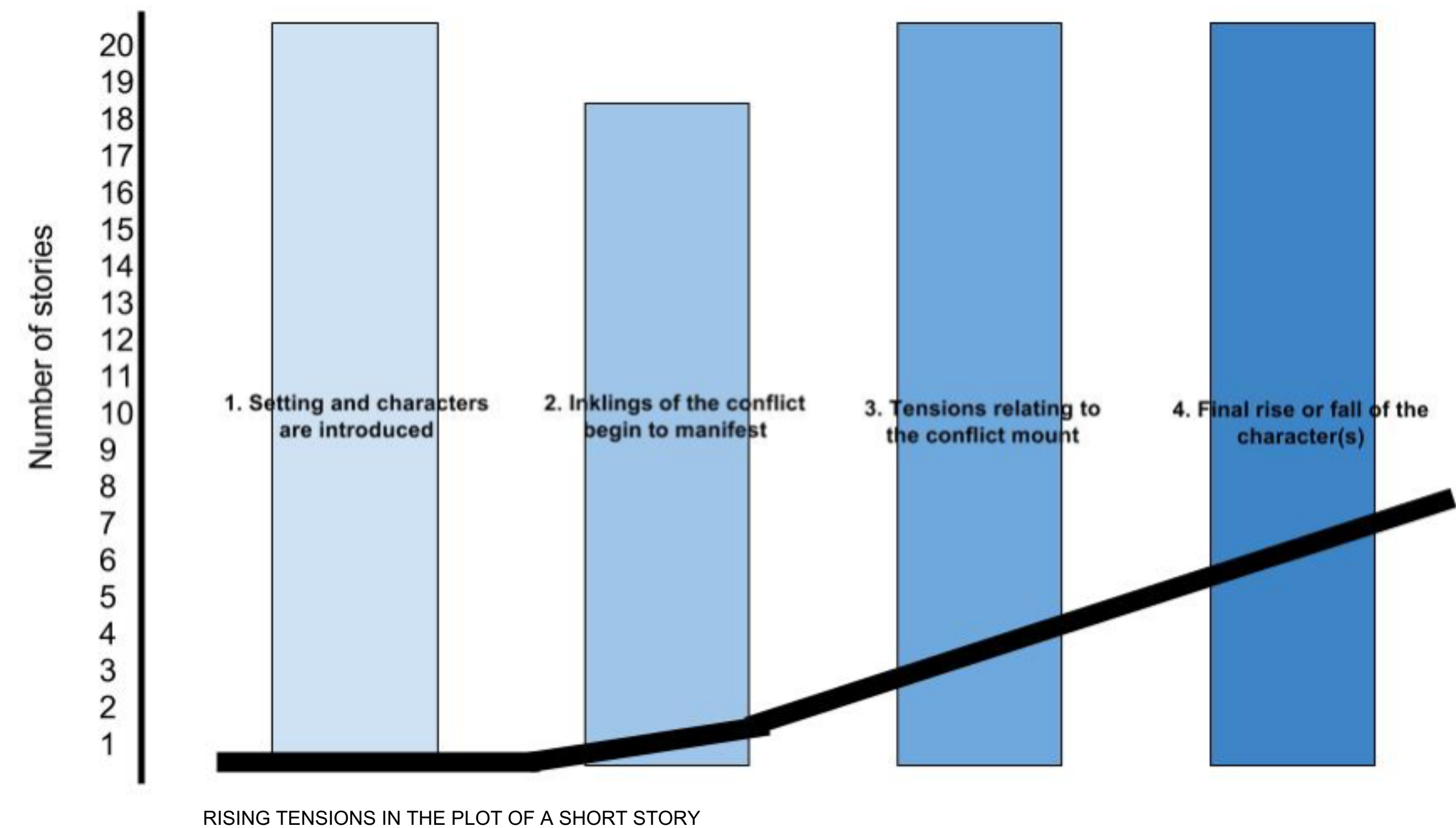
Nearly every short story that I read had four distinct plot points. These points were always in the same order.

1. Setting and characters are introduced. Very subtle foreshadowing of the central conflict is often included in this introductory portion of the story.
2. Inklings of the conflict begin to manifest.
3. Tensions relating to the conflict begin to mount. Usually illustrated through an argument between characters.
4. Final rise or fall of the characters. This can be the peak of the tension/conflict, or it can be the resolution of the conflict. More often than not, the story ends when the tensions come to a head, leaving the reader unbalanced or shocked.

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Bader, A. L. "The Structure of the Modern Short Story." *College English* 7.2 (1945): 86-92. *JSTOR* [JSTOR]. Web.



The structure of Hans Christian Anderson’s *The Little Match Girl* exactly followed my hypothesized structure of a typical short story.

1. Setting, characters are introduced.

The story opens with a description of the cold, wintry setting. Later in the introduction paragraph, the little match girl is introduced, and her physical appearance is described.

2.. Inklings of the conflict begin to manifest.

The girl’s box of matches is mentioned for the first time. The cold begins to seep into the story, and the little match girl begins to shiver and tremble.

3. Tensions relating to the conflict mount.

The LMG lights a match and feels warm, but after the match dies out, she feels even colder. So, she lights another match, but after that match dies out, she feels even colder. The tension between heat and cold (with the LMG at the center of this conflict) heightens.

4. Final rise/fall of the character (OFF-KEY ENDING)

The LMG dies of hypothermia, which is illustrated by her grandmother lifting her soul up to heaven.