



EXPLORING FICTION:

STORY, PLOT AND NARRATIVE

Traditional stories are a good way of explaining the differences between story, plot and narrative:

A **story** is a sequence of linked events

Let's take the example of Cinderella:

This is the story of a young girl who loses her mother. Her father re-marries, her stepmother and stepsisters resent her and treat her badly. When her father dies too, her situation deteriorates further, and she is insulted and treated like a slave in her own home. When the Prince organises a ball, she is only able to attend because a fairy godmother transforms her ragged clothes into a beautiful ballgown, a pumpkin into a coach, and mice into horses. At the ball she dances with the prince and they fall in love, but her transformation only lasts until midnight, when she dashes away, losing one of her glass slippers. The Prince organises a search to find the owner of the slipper and eventually the Prince and Cinderella are re-united and marry.

The **plot** of a story is the selection, emphasis and ordering of events

The Cinderella story often starts with Cinderella's birth, but we are shown little or nothing of her life growing up. The majority of the narrative is taken up 'in media res', with her life after both her parents have died. There is a particular focus on her mistreatment, on the role of the fairy godmother and on the events around the ball and the glass slipper. The fictional time slows up to allow the writer to tell this part of the story in more detail. We usually don't find out much about Cinderella's life beyond this.

However, if the writer wished, there is no reason why the story couldn't focus, for example, on what happens to Cinderella and the Prince when they are older.

Also, the story is usually plotted in a linear way, following the timeline of fictional events. However, we know that writers can choose a different path. When telling a story, they may include flashbacks to earlier events, or skip backwards and forwards in fictional time. Two or more events may be described one after the other, but the writer makes it clear that, in the fictional world, they are happening simultaneously (the stepmother and stepsisters are at the ball; meanwhile, back at the house, the fairy godmother appears). In some experimental fiction, events even happen in a random order and the writer leaves the reader to make the links; others might even tell a story backwards (think of the film *Memento* or the novel *Time's Arrow*).

Narrative is about how the story is told

Narrative includes plot, but plot is only one element. We also need to think about who is going to tell the story and how it is presented. If we take Cinderella, again we have choices:

- It could be told using a third-person, past tense narrative, with an omniscient narrator in a fairly neutral style (this, I guess is the traditional way of telling the story).
- However, it could also be told as a first-person past-tense narrative by the stepmother. We may discover in her telling of the story, that she was tricked into marriage by Cinderella's father and that Cinderella is a lazy spoilt brat who always moaned about having to pull her weight with the household chores.
- It could be told as first-person present-tense narrative by the fairy godmother, a hapless trainee who has been given the job by her superiors of helping Cinderella in order to become a Fairy Godmother First Class.