Reading for the Plot:
Strategies for Reading Literature Critically

What is plot? On the most basic level, we all know what plot is; it is “what happens” in the story. However, there is more to plot than this. Plot refers to what happens, how and why it happens, and what order we are told about what happens. The arrangement of incidents is as important as the incidents themselves. In order to be able to talk critically about plot, you have to pay attention to all three elements.

The classic structure of a plot includes three parts: rising action, climax, and falling action. Rising action refers to that part of the story that establishes some sort of conflict or complication for the main character(s). The climax is the moment of great emotional or dramatic tension, and marks some form of turning point in the narrative. The falling action details the resolution of the plot’s central conflicts or tensions.

Within this basic framework, however, there is great range. The questions below will help you start thinking critically about plot. We will return to some of these issues in much greater depth when we analyze narrative structure.

1. What is the primary conflict in this story? What kinds of tensions are there? Are they rooted in a single character, a set of characters, or in the events themselves? What is the ‘hook’ that keeps us reading?

2. Where is the climax of the story? What ‘happens’ in this part of the story, and what kind of turning point does it describe?

3. Evaluate how the story is told. Are events related in chronological order (the order in which they occurred)? If not, what is the sequence of events? How might a reader’s reaction be effected by this sequence? Would the story change if it was told in a different order?

4. Can you find examples of flashback (a narrated scene that jumps back in time to relate events that took place before the opening of the story)? Or foreshadowing (elements that hint at or predict later events in the story)?

5. To what extent is the conflict resolved at the end of the story? What effect did the ending have on you? What sort of ‘affect’ do you think the story’s resolution creates? (Is it a happy, tragic, or comic end? Is it somewhere between these terms? Or all at once?)

http://othello.alma.edu/~vonwallmenich/Home/Reading.html