Writing Literary Fiction: Plot and Story

The idea of plot versus story is an important distinction in thinking about what happens in a piece of fiction. Like many aspects of fiction, the answer is not crystal clear. In fact, many famous quotes about the two concepts contradict each other. However, understanding that the two terms are different and distinct from each other will help you distinguish what writer choices you must make, and the effects these will have on your stories.

**Story:**

“The king died and then the queen died.” E.M. Forester’s definition of story.

“A story is a series of events recorded in their chronological order.” Janet Burroway

“Ask your six-year-old what happened at school today and you’ll get story.” John Dufresne

A story is a narrative of events arranged in their chronological sequence — it simply tells us what happened and in what order. It is the chronological sequence that turns a random collection of episodes into a story. But chronological sequence is a very primitive feature and it can have only one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. The skill of a storyteller is their ability to wield the weapon of suspense, making the audience eager to discover the next event in the sequence.

(adapted from www.storyinsight.com /techniques/media/forster.html)

**Plot:**

“The king died and then the queen died of grief.” E.M. Forester’s definition of plot.

“Plot is the writer’s arrangement of events to achieve a desired effect.” John Dufresne

“Drama must move forward and upward, or the seats on which the audience is sitting will become very hard and uncomfortable.” Anne Lamott

In traditional patterns of fiction, readers are introduced to characters and then something occurs that challenges the main character(s). This complication is usually a conflict or crisis the characters must face, deal with, and/or overcome. The conflict can be internal: a character's battle with her depression. Or the problem can be external: the protagonist dealing with her enemy, the antagonist. Or the conflict can encompass both internal and external elements: the protagonist must first deal with her depression in order to overcome the conflict with the antagonist. In order to overcome the crisis, the protagonist must make some sort of important decision or take some kind of action; this is called the penultimate part of the plot. The protagonist's decision to deal with the crisis then leads to the climax of the story, which shows the reader the results of the protagonist's choice.

Following the climax, the crisis is usually resolved (this part of the plot is called the denouement), and then the story concludes. During the conclusion, readers learn how the protagonist has changed (grown, learned, remained the same, become more evil, etc.) as a result of the crisis.

[From Purdue Owl’s Fiction Basics: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/754/1/]