Writing Literary Fiction: Scene

The purpose of a scene is to achieve coherence in a short story or novel. The fiction writer should have a goal to accomplish with each scene. The length of a scene can vary greatly, from one paragraph to several pages. One way to think about scenes is to begin in one mood and end in another. Maybe your scene begins with a main character having a pleasant chat with a friend, and by the end of the scene, one of the characters has revealed a secret, leaving the main character feeling uneasy.

Moving from positive to negative, sad to hopeful, overjoyed to suspicious, these are all things a scene can accomplish by showing the reader what is happening. Other ways to think about scenes are “goal, attempt, and setback” and “reaction, dilemma, decision.” Remember, sometimes it is a good writing move to not give your character what they want, or withhold what they want until later in the story.

Common purposes of a scene include:

 Advance story – The scene must move the story forward. This could mean introducing a problem or making a problem worse for the characters.
 Show conflict – The conflict could be between two characters, a character and nature, a character and time, and so on.
 Introduce character – The reader needs to meet each character at some point. A careful writer does not introduce too many characters in one scene. This could confuse the reader.
 Develop character – Along with introducing a character, a writer can use a scene to show the character’s good and bad points.
 Create suspense – Suspense keeps the reader’s interest going, perhaps more than any other element of fiction.
 Give information – The writer can weave information into a scene so the reader knows the needed background of the story.
 Create atmosphere – Using conventions such as setting, weather, and time, the writer can create a certain mood in a scene.
 Develop theme – A piece of fiction should have a theme. Each scene should bring out the theme to the reader.

Scenes that are memorable, the ones the reader remembers, will attempt to achieve as many of the previously mentioned purposes as possible. If the scene has no purpose -- or even has a purpose, but not a sufficient one to justify the space it takes up -- the writer should cut that scene out of the story.