

IDENTIFYING PLOT TECHNIQUES: FLASHBACK, FLASH-FORWARD AND FORESHADOWING IN A NARRATIVE

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Abstract. This study focuses on plot techniques – flashback, flash-forward and foreshadowing. Flashback provides a backstory to explain what caused the surprise outcome. On the other hand, a flash-forward is the presentation of a future event before its proper time. Foreshadowing provides an implicit hint about the surprise. Then, examples and types of these plot techniques are presented. Lastly, tips for identifying these plot techniques are specified.

Keywords: narrative, flashback, foreshadowing, flash-forward, plot, chronological order, suspense.

A typical plot follows time order. From fairy tales, with their "once upon a time" beginnings and "happily ever after" endings, to modern classics, many great stories feature chronological order. The events follow a linear structure - that is, they take place one after the other.

Sometimes, a writer plays with time by interrupting the chronological order of events. He or she may suddenly focus on an event from the past or hint at future events. Thus, many plots have less predictable structure. For example, some plots start with falling action and then jump to the introduction; others jump around in time. A writer may manipulate time for a variety of reasons - for example, to give you a deeper sense of the characters and conflicts or to keep you wondering what will happen next because the choice of structure can affect the meaning of the story and the impact it has on the reader [1].

Thus, narrative events may be related in different orders: for example, chronological/ linear (natural order), *in medias res* (in the middle of things) or begin in the present and return to the past and in such cases we are dealing with different forms of 'anachronies'.

The two main types of anachrony are flashbacks and flash-forwards [3]. *Flashback* is an account of a conversation or action that happened before the beginning of a story, or at an earlier point, flashbacks interrupt the chronological order of events [1]. It focuses more on *why* things happen, rather than on *what* happens [5].

The following excerpt is an example of flashback. Little Red Riding Hood is thinking back to something that happened earlier in the story.

The wolf went up to Little Red Riding Hood and told her that he knew a shortcut. Little Red Riding Hood thought back to what her mother told her. "Don't talk to any strangers and watch out for the wolf in the woods!" But it was too late, she had already listened to the wolf's directions [2].

Flashbacks are interruptions of the story to show the reader an incident that occurred in the past. Writers use flashbacks to "jazz up" the chronology of the plot - it makes the revelation of events more interesting. In Louis Sachar's *Holes*, for example, flashbacks are used to foreshadow events that will take place in the present. N.A. Nelson uses flashbacks extensively throughout this novel. [7]

Narratologists distinguish different types of flashback (retrospection or analepsis): an *external flashback* presents an event occurring before the beginning of the primary story line (i.e., in the pre-history) [3]. Thus, a flashback that reaches outside of the limits of the narrative's extreme ends and stays there - say a flashback that returns to the 1800s in a story where the dominant timeline is 1960 to 1965 - is called an *external analepsis*. One that remains within the bounds of the narrative is called an *internal analepsis* (or homodiegetic) [13].

On the other hand, a flash-forward is the presentation of a future event before its proper time. An example of flashforward is Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol*, in which the protagonist Ebenezer

Scrooge is visited by the “Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come” who shows him his future. Scrooge sees himself dead, and people finding comfort and happiness in his death [8].

Similarly, there are different types of flash-forward (anticipation or prolepsis): an *external flashforward* involves an event happening after the end of the primary story line [3]. *External prolepses*, Gerard Genette says, “function most often as epilogues, serving to continue one or another line of action to its logical conclusion” [13]. An *objective flash-forward* or *certain anticipation* presents an event that will actually occur; a *subjective flash-forward* or *uncertain anticipation* is just a character's vision of a likely future event [3]. *Internal prolepses*, like internal analepses, become entangle with the first narrative, and Gerard Genette sees them as serving at least two functions, to provide *advance notice* and *advance mention*. Thus they may result, and often do, in *repeating prolepses*, that give advanced notice of what will be narrated later. *Advance notice*, is distinguished from more subtle analepses that Gerard Genette calls *advanced mention*, and what I think most American’s would refer to as foreshadowing. Advance notice then might be called a flash-forward - a more explicit hint at what’s to come [13].

Alongside flashback and flash-forward, foreshadowing is worth mentioning, as it is the literary term we give to the author’s subtle clues left to give us a hint about what will happen later in the story. In Lemony Snicket's books, *A series of unfortunate events*, the last picture of each book contains a sign that foreshadows the next book in the series. For example, in the last picture of the second book (*The Reptile Room*), one man is wearing a shirt that says 'Lake Lacrymose', the setting of the third book. In the movies, today’s best examples of foreshadowing can be found in the films of M. Night Shyamalan (*The Sixth Sense*, *Signs*, *The Lady in the Water*, etc.), where symbols and character traits are sprinkled throughout the story before they become crucial parts of the ending [7].

Thus, *foreshadowing* is the technique of hinting about something that will occur later in a story. The outcome of a conflict is often hinted at or “foreshadowed” before the climax and resolution. These clues are usually very subtle; you don't realize they are foreshadowing clues until you've finished the story [4]. *Once upon a time, there was a little girl who lived with her mother. Her mother asked her to take her old and lonely grandmother some food one day. "Don't stop along the way. Go straight to your Grandma's house and back. Don't talk to any strangers and watch out for the wolf in the woods! Now get along!"*

This excerpt is an example of foreshadowing. Little Red Riding Hood’s mother is warning her about the wolf in the woods, which hints at what may happen next [2].

Thus, foreshadowing helps to create *suspense*, which is the uncertainty or anxiety that a reader feels about what will happen next in a story. Suspense is the feeling of anxious curiosity [9].

When she arrives she notices Granny looking rather strange, and we experience a higher level of tension. “My, what big teeth you have!”, Red eventually says *after a suspenseful conversation, to which the wolf, who is disguised as Granny, replies, “The better to eat you with,” and swallows her whole* [2].

Flash-forward is similar to foreshadowing. However, foreshadowing hints at the possible outcome in future without any interruption and using events or dialogues of characters in the current time. It may also be present in the titles of narratives or chapter titles. Flash-forward, on the other hand, is an interjected scene in a narrative that takes the narrative forward in time. The events presented in a flash-forward are bound to happen in the story. Foreshadowing predicts the future events, but the events do not necessarily take place in the future – as in “red-herring” (a kind of fallacy that is an irrelevant topic introduced in an argument to divert the attention of listeners or readers from the original issue; in literature it is often used in detective or suspense novels to mislead readers or characters or to induce them to make false conclusions [7, 14].

Ask your students to follow the following directions in order to find a flashback in a piece of literature:

- ✓ **Identify events that hint of things to come.** Look for events that suggest key story conflicts arc about to develop or change direction. Ask yourself:
 - Why is this section tense?
 - How does the writer make the story suspenseful?
 - Are the events troubling or mysterious in some way?
- ✓ **Look for dialogue or descriptions that hint at change.** Look for clues in the characters’ dialogue or behaviour, as well as descriptions that seem to hint at change.

- ✓ **Predict what will happen next in the story.** Use the clues in action, description, and dialogue, plus what you already know from prior story events or your own experience to predict what lies ahead for the characters.
- ✓ **Keep track of the chronological order.** Look for a place where the writer breaks into the chronological order of events to tell about something that took place earlier—a flashback. Also, look for places where the forward progression of events is disturbed. This may indicate foreshadowing.
- ✓ **Locate starting and stopping points.** To identify flashbacks, look for words and phrases that show time, such as *several years ago, in the past, yesterday, then* etc. Examples: *I thought about what had happened earlier.... Images from years ago flooded my brain.... A memory from the distant past surged up...*[10]
- ✓ **Look for dates and the characters' ages and words about youth or old age.** Examples: *When Carla was nine, her father taught her to swim... Before I became the old man you see before you...*

In some cases, the flashback may appear in a different typeface, or it may be written in a different tense. Writers often use details of sight or sound to connect a flashback to the story.

EXAMPLE: Back in fifty-two.

I thought about what had happened earlier . . .

Years ago, when I was barely able to reach the doorknob

- ✓ **Look for time words such as now, today, and these days.** Such phrases can indicate the stopping point of a flashback. Examples: *Now I am a grownup.... These days I live more slowly than when I was in the army...* [11]

Ask your students to follow the following directions when analysing foreshadowing:

- * Think about plot events
- * Look for clues in dialogue or description
- * Predict what will happen next [6].

In literature, foreshadowing usually consists of only one or two sentences, and is especially effective when ending a scene or chapter. An example of foreshadowing: *Sam wished he could rid himself of the sick feeling in his gut that told him something terrible was going to happen, and happen soon* [6].

- ✓ **Think about purpose.** Think about why the writer included a flashback or foreshadowing. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How does a flashback help me understand a character's behaviour or conflict?
- How has the mood shifted?
- How have my feelings as a reader changed? [10]

Draw the attention of your students to the fact that *foreshadowing* frequently serves two purposes.

1. It builds suspense in literature by raising questions that encourage the reader to go on and find out more about the event that is being foreshadowed.
2. Foreshadowing is also a means of making a narrative more believable by partially preparing the reader for events which are to follow.

Also, it is necessary to be mentioned that not all foreshadowing is obvious. Frequently, future events are merely hinted at through dialogue, description, or the attitudes and reactions of the characters [5].

Ask your students to take into account the following directions when analysing suspense:

- Examine their feelings as they read;
- Identify the rising action of the plot;
- Focus on the main questions they have about the story's outcome [12].

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that flashbacks are often used to recount events that happened before the story's primary sequence of events, a flash-forward (or prolepsis) reveals events that will occur in the future. Both flashback and flash-forward are used to create suspense in a story, develop a character, or add structure to the narrative. Thus, it is important to find plot techniques in a narrative as it is easier to understand the elements of plot and to understand the order of events in a narrative.

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