

# The importance of single stories and simplification in literature

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Literature and movies often receive criticism on the charges of inaccurately portraying reality. Unrealistic characters, plot devices, and dialogue come under frequent condemnation because we, as a society, want the truth.

Enough with the soft soap and corny fantasies, we demand real life!

Important questions arise as a result of this demand.

How exactly do we define “ reality” and “ realistic” situations and people? A cursory glance at the subject may not reveal the inherent flaws in the “ reality” argument, but closer inspection unearths the simple fact: all of our media bends the truth. First-person narration never encompasses the countless individual thoughts of the narrator; movies skip the dull interim of sleep or traveling and transition from one intense scene to another; we summarize the vast battle of Waterloo and its innumerable actions to one simple conclusion: Wellington defeated Napoleon. Reality, in its immense, confusing entirety, never appears for one simple reason: it cannot fit. A quote from *The Heart of Darkness* may best capture the essence of this concept. When trying to relate the story of his journey to friends, the main character muses, “ It seems I am trying to tell you a dream-making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream” (Conrad 94-95).

As we observe the world, we also reach his eventual conclusion, that “ it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence” (Conrad). Life’s complexity remains imprisoned in the minds of those who experience it, and the transfer of this knowledge invariably leads to the corruption of the truth. The distortion of reality, as well as being unavoidable, is also a valuable tool in the arsenal of the idealist, novelist, or <https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-single-stories-and-simplification-in-literature/>

debater. In the chaos of life, ideas and emotions float in a murky fog, difficult to pierce with the naked eye. Many mediums, fiction in particular, function by extracting certain elements of life while ignoring others, in order to paint a clear picture of one part of an enormous world.

While the distortion of reality by fiction creates a simplified version of the world, in return it delivers to the audience the full import of one aspect of reality, and in combination with other "single stories" allows us to create the most correct version of reality we can attain. I. Simplicity in Characters The idea of simplifying reality often defies comprehension, but examples provide a useful base to aid in understanding this abstract idea. Characters in literature who either do not possess or do not exhibit typical human weaknesses, emotions, or thoughts constitute an ideal example of one technique of simplification. These figures do not serve as full characters in the story, but instead draw out themes, ideas, or the characteristics of other figures in the book.

For example, *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens, contains a significant simplified character in the form of Lucie Manette. A young lady "as delicate and fine as it was possible to be" (Dickens 26), she serves as the idol and guiding light for other characters, including her father, who "lost himself" (Dickens 96), then "recovered himself" (Dickens 96) due to his angelic daughter's influence. She also motivates the sarcastic and incurably apathetic Sydney Carton to heroism. When the man Lucie loves faces wrongful execution in France, Carton changes places with him and dies in his stead, proclaiming, "[i]t is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever

done" (Dickens 351). Her unmatched goodness, untainted by the weaknesses which haunt the other characters, allows her to rally others to greatness. In this situation, the author sacrifices one character's complexity and development in order to focus on other characters, while still utilizing the less complex character as an important facet of the plot.

Sibyl Vane, a character in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is "a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little, flowerlike face...[and] lips that were like the petals of a rose" (Wilde). She occupies a position in the storyline similar to Lucie in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Her beauty and acting talent inspire Dorian Gray to become infatuated with her.

Like Lucie Manette, she serves as an iconic symbol of innocence, a "caged bird...free in her prison of passion" (Wilde), representing all naive, lovestruck girls whose love blinds them, as hers blinds her until Dorian's love disappears and he abandons her. The characters of Sibyl Vane and Lucie Manette do not lack all human qualities, but their principal role in the story is to evoke an ideal.

As a result, the structure of their characters differs from other characters whose complex conflicts and developments form the main focus of the plot.

II. Simplicity in Life The monotonous pace and simple events of ordinary life often disappear from novels in another form of simplification: the editing of life in order to emphasize one moment which would otherwise appear insignificant in a soup of events. This technique appears in *Fahrenheit 451*, by Ray Bradbury, when the main character, Montag, relates his meetings

and conversations with a girl, Clarisse. For “[o]ne two three four five six seven days..

. he came out of the house and Clarisse was there somewhere in the world” (Bradbury 28). His simple phrase emphasizes only one facet of a week of his life because for one week this facet dominated his thoughts and emotions, and only this facet merits the attention of the reader. If the entirety of Montag’s week was included, Clarisse’s appearances would lose their significance. Joseph Conrad also takes advantage of this technique in *The Heart of Darkness*.

Marlow, the main character, needs rivets to repair a steamboat and states, “ They’ll come in three weeks,” but the narration continues to say, “ But they didn’t. Instead of rivets there came an invasion...in sections during the next three weeks” (Conrad 98).

Conrad edits out the specifics of the period between the prediction of rivets and the next important event. As well as condensing the story and eliminating pointless narrative, the edits provide a change of pace. Narration alternates between rich, detailed scenes and brief summaries, giving variety to the storyline. III. Single Stories The simplification of events and characters functions effectively and unobtrusively in literature, but simplification also appears as a more obtrusive device which openly flouts reality, while still functioning in the story to emphasize ideas. This particular device may be described most accurately as “ the single story.

” According to Chimamanda Adichie, single stories consist of recognizing only one aspect of a person, culture, or nation, and allowing it to block out all other qualities, but seeking out and listening to many stories brings true understanding (Adichie). Although single stories present a real danger, they also possess the potential to aid our search for the truth of the human condition. For example, *The Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart* present different viewpoints, which may be called single stories, of the European colonization of Africa. In particular, their portrayals of the Africans and the Europeans differ immensely. The Africans in Conrad’s tale function as symbols, representing the incomprehensibility of the dark center of an unfamiliar continent. Marlow describes the natives in his first encounter as “[b]lack shapes.

.. half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair” (Conrad 82). As a European travelling to Africa he views these strange figures as inhuman and “ nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation” (Conrad 82) because of the unfamiliarity and horror associated with them. None of the Africans exhibits a specific personality or sign of true individuality because the book only shows the viewpoint of the Europeans. The book communicates the “ truth” of the European settlers; their perception of and emotional response to the natives dominates the plot.

In the process of focusing on the main character and his world the author ignores the African “ truth.” On the other hand, *Things Fall Apart* presents the story of Africans and their culture before and during European colonization. The Africans in this story “ have heard stories about white men

who make the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas, but no one thought the stories were true" (Achebe 141). When the white man does appear, his thoughts and emotions do not enter the narrative to the same extent of those of the African characters. The life of the tribe exhibits complexity and life, with endearing and vivacious characters.

In contrast, the Europeans showcase their narrow-mindedness and cruelty, like the District Commissioner, whose reaction to the main character's death is that it will " make interesting reading" in his book (Achebe 209). The deeper human nature of these characters never appears because the tribe and its journey toward destruction is a higher priority. Both books fall guilty to the charge of omitting some complexities, but when read together with a mind open to the truth of both viewpoints, these " single stories" cooperate and combine to produce a more complete story. In conclusion, simplifying and editing reality functions as a necessary literary device, either for practical reasons or as a technique to emphasize the ideas and themes of the book. Single stories, although potentially dangerous, also function as literary tools.

Some instances occur intentionally, while others occur as a result of the expectations of a time period. Whatever the motivation, these simplifications also function to highlight ideas in fiction and aid us in assembling our composite picture of the truth. Instead of critiquing the unrealistic depictions we encounter in literature, we should use the stories all around us to better understand our world, recognizing the unique and vital role they play in our

media and culture. Works Cited Adichie, Chimamanda. "The Danger of a Single Story."

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