

WHAT IS SUBPLOT

Today we are going to discuss subplot. A subplot is the supporting story for the main plot in a work of literature. It can involve characters, other than the main protagonist and antagonist, and may not intersect much with the main narrative. However, there is usually some important connection between a subplot and the main plot, either thematically, in setting, through characters, or because the action in the subplot affects some aspect of the main plot.

The definition of subplot can be distinguished from the main plot for many reasons: subplots take up less of the story, they happen to, and because of, supporting characters, they are often quicker and easier to resolve, and they have less impact. In screen writing, subplots are sometimes referred to as “Story B,” “Story C,” and so on.

We see numerous examples of subplots in movies and television shows. Some shows, such as the comedies depend on several subplots appearing at once, all affecting each other and coming together in an unexpected and humorous way. Even the BBC1’s drama *In the Dark* has an intriguing sub-plot that is actually quite gripping. Helen has secrets of her own, making us more interested in her dubious past, than the murders themselves. Strange flashbacks to her childhood hint at a darker story.

Here are some other examples of subplots in television episodes and films:

In *Seinfeld*, “The Marine Biologist”: George is caught up in a lie to an old college friend about being a marine biologist. In a subplot, Kramer enjoys hitting golf balls into the ocean. George’s lie is about to be exposed as he walks along the beach with the old college friend and finds a beached whale; someone calls out for a marine biologist. George decides to try to help so as to preserve the lie, and is only able to save the whale when he realises there is a golf ball stuck in its blowhole.

In *Friends*, “The One with the Blackout”: Five of the six friends are stuck in an apartment when the power goes out in New York City; Ross tries to tell Rachel that he is interested in her, while later, they try to find out who a stray cat belongs to. In a subplot example, Chandler is stuck in an ATM vestibule with a model until the power comes back on.

In the film *Forrest Gump*: The film tracks the fantastical life story of a man named Forrest Gump who is not an intelligent man, but somehow happens to be in the right place at the right time, many times over. He loves Jenny, a girl from his youth, and as we see the improbable events of Forrest’s life unfold, we also get glimpses from the life that Jenny is leading at the same time.

So what is the significance of having Subplot in Literature

Not all works of literature contain an example of a subplot. Usually short stories and novellas do not contain a subplot, mainly because there is only space for the main plot itself. On the other hand, many novels contain a multitude of subplots; so many in fact, that the main plot might be difficult to articulate. In the recent series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (more commonly known as *Game of Thrones*) by George R. R. Martin, it is nearly impossible to say who is the

chief protagonist, and which of the other many dozens of narratives is a subplot. In this kind of book, the concept of a subplot is less meaningful.

However, subplots can be very important to the overall structure of a work of fiction, especially in a novel or play. Subplots can serve any number of the following important functions as they introduce new characters, develop the main theme, heighten or release tension, increase the protagonist's conflict, provide twists in the action, challenge or teach a moral lesson, create mood, and so on. For a novel-length plot, it is usually considered necessary to have at least a few subplots in order to keep the action moving forward, thus keeping the attention of the reader.

Here is an example of Subplot in Classical Literature

In HAMLET - The play is the thing

Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

Trumpets sound. The dumb show begins.

Enter a King and a Queen very lovingly, the Queen embracing him, and he her. She kneels and makes show of protestation unto him. He takes her up and declines his head upon her neck, she lays him down upon a bank of flowers. She, seeing him asleep, leaves him. Anon comes in a fellow, takes off his crown, kisses it, pours poison in the King's ears, and exits. The Queen returns, finds the King dead, and makes a passionate action. The Poisoner, with some two or three Mutes, comes in again, seeming to lament with her. The dead body is carried away. The Poisoner woos the Queen with gifts. She seems loath and unwilling awhile, but in the end accepts his love.

There are many different subplots in William Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet. One of the most interesting is the 'play within the play' concept, which we see above. Hamlet decides to use a group of players to enact what happened with his father, and Claudius. Though it's Hamlet's idea, the enactment of this second play onstage is an example of subplot.

And here is an example of modern literature - Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban by J. K. Rowling

Hermione's immense workload finally seemed to be getting to her. Every night, without fail, Hermione was to be seen in a corner of the common room, several tables spread with books, Arithmancy charts, rune dictionaries, diagrams of Muggles lifting heavy objects, and file upon file of extensive notes; she barely spoke to anybody and snapped when she was interrupted.

Though the world of Harry Potter contains hundreds of characters, there is no question that Harry himself is the protagonist. Even his best friends Ron and Hermione are supporting characters. In a very important subplot from the third instalment in the series, the hardworking Hermione seems to be surprisingly overwhelmed with her schoolwork. It's revealed late in the book that she has been using a time traveling device to attend double the number of classes. This necessary tool leads to Harry and Hermione freeing two falsely accused prisoners.

Now you have some idea of subplot let us Test Your Knowledge of what you think is a Subplot?

Q1. Which of the following statements is the best subplot definition? Is it...

- A. A piece of a story which follows the protagonist, and his or her actions, closely.
- B. A fragment of a narrative which has absolutely nothing to do with the main story.
- C. A supporting story to the main plot.

If you guessed C - A supporting story to the main plot then you are correct.

Q2. Which of the following is not a possible function of a subplot?

- A. Release tension or change pace.
- B. Provide the main climax.
- C. Introduce characters and aid their development.

The answer is B. Provide the main climax. Remember the main climax of a narrative always has to do with the main plot line.

And finally Q3. Which of the following plots from the Harry Potter series would qualify as a subplot example?

- A. Hermione organizes a group called SPEW (Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare) which Harry Potter has no interest in.
- B. Hermione and Harry travel to Godric's Hollow to find out information about the town he was born in and continue their quest toward defeating Lord Voldemort.
- C. Hermione, Harry, and Ron travel into a guarded part of Hogwarts together to retrieve the important 'sorcerer's stone,' using difficult magic along the way at which one of them in particular excels.

The answer is of course A as this subplot does not involve Harry Potter, the main protagonist.

Hopefully we have given you some useful tips of how a subplot is the supporting story for the main plot in a work of literature. When writing, always try to involve your lesser characters, not just the main protagonist and antagonist, but make sure they do not intersect too much with the main narrative.

Copyright © 2022 Ann Brady, Mentoring Writers. All rights reserved.