

***Spinning Silver* Lesson Plan 4**
 Plot Structure and Narrative Closure
 Created by Tom Daniel and Erin McNulty

Overview: This lesson asks students to consider plot structure and narrative closure via Freytag's Pyramid and discussions of place and belonging in *Spinning Silver*. Students will discuss characters' connection to their surroundings in the novel, thus emphasizing the ways in which place and characters change as the plot progresses. The goal of this specific class period will be to use these connections of place to discuss the ways in which characters find narrative closure in the text. In what ways do Miryem, Wanda, and Irina find their own sense of belonging at the end of the novel? And how does this connect to conversations we have had about diaspora throughout our work on *Spinning Silver*? This lesson covers material from the end of the novel and is best suited for the final days of discussing *Spinning Silver*.

This lesson includes an activity that has been adapted from the "Mapmaker" exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason's *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom*.

Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Define plot and narrative closure
- Identify Freytag's pyramid and discuss how *Spinning Silver* complicates this concept of plot structure
- Map the plot structure and settings of *Spinning Silver*

Class Structure:

5 minutes: Recap previous lesson

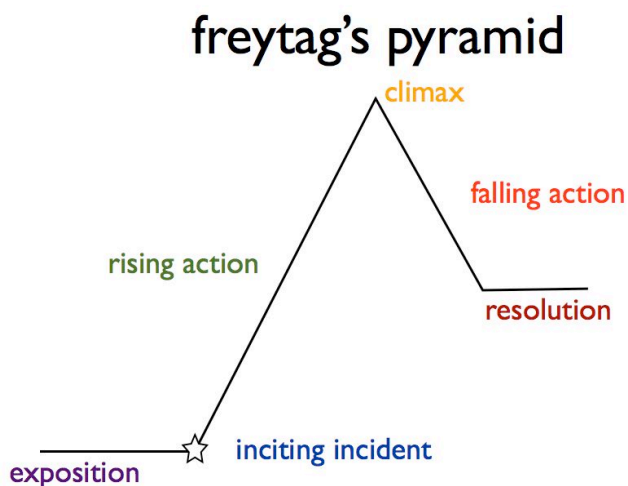
- In our last class, we discussed language, specifically the power of names in *Spinning Silver*. We spent time discussing the ways in which names can both bind people together and create a community and how they can bind--as in prevent from going beyond an established boundary. We directly connected this kind of binding to the Antisemitism in *Spinning Silver* and much of our discussion revolved around the idea of Jewish diaspora and how Miryem feels disconnected from her community.
- However, today I would like to transition to start thinking about the ways in which the text resolves our protagonists' feelings of disconnection. In what ways are our character's stories resolved? Do we feel closure with the ending that Novik gives us? How are our characters connected to place and to their community at the end of the novel?

10 minutes: Lecture on plot structure

- Our discussions of *Spinning Silver* so far have looked a lot at how cultural and historical context shapes how we read the text. Today we are going to look at how the narrative structure or form of the novel can help us develop new readings as well--particularly when we consider some of the terms you may be more familiar with when you think of analyzing a story.
- I am thinking of those terms that may have haunted you in past literature courses: setting, plot, climax, rising action...So, first we will go over a common plot structure, then we'll

investigate how it applies to *Spinning Silver*, and how *Spinning Silver* complicates our understanding of plot in some valuable ways.

- Ask students to offer a 1 or 2 sentence definition of plot. Keep a track of student answers on a slide or on the board.
 - Once students have generated a working definition, offer this formal definition of plot: “The arrangement and interrelation of events in a narrative work, chosen and designed to engage the reader’s attention and interest (or even to arouse suspense or anxiety) while also providing a framework for the exposition of the author’s message or theme, and for other elements such as characterization, symbol, and conflict” (Murfin & Ray 330).
 - Simply put, plot is a narrative’s sequence of events, in the order they appear in the text
 - Back in 1863, a German guy named Gustav Freytag came up with a way of visualizing and describing the typical progression of these events, and while he was specifically talking about dramatic plays, his system works really well with a lot of different genres of narrative. He proposed that a plot typically begins by introducing the protagonist, followed by what he termed the “rising action” which culminates in a climax followed by a turning point. After the turning point, the plot follows what is called the “falling action,” which culminates in a “denouement,” which is a fancy French word that means “unknotting,” but can otherwise be referred to as the resolution of the plot. When you put it all together it looks like this [*draw this on the blackboard or present on a slide*]:



- This formula of a plot is known as “Freytag’s Pyramid,” and it gives us a good general way of categorizing the different parts of a novel.
- But *Spinning Silver* complicates this structure in a pretty interesting way, anyone have any ideas about how?
 - So FT’s Pyramid works pretty well when there’s only one plot in a story, but that doesn’t seem to be the case with *Spinning Silver*, does it?

- A plot is typically organized around a central character, called the *protagonist*, but *Spinning Silver* seems to have multiple protagonists and multiple plots going on all at the same time.
- So it seems like we need a visualization that can handle a little more complexity than FT's Pyramid. Given the multiple moving parts of this novel, perhaps it will be helpful if we recreate a geographic map of the story, and see what the physical movements of the characters tell us about the narrative movement.

15 minutes: Mapmaking Exercise

- Ask students to create a list of key locations in *Spinning Silver*?
 - As students provide locations, ask them to briefly justify their answer. Why is that location significant? What events happened there? As students list significant places, the instructor will draw a visual for the entire class. The map will be big, leaving room for annotations, lines showing movements, and markers for pivotal events, etc.
 - After students name most of the main locations in *Spinning Silver*, transition into small groups, focusing on three locations: **Vysnia, Miryem's Village, and The Ice Mountain.**
 - Note: These locations have been selected for the activity due to how each character's perception of the place varies, how these locations affect character development, and how they fit into our theme of connections and narrative closure. But other key locations we would expect students to name include: The Forest Cottage, Tsar's Palace, and the Saryk road.
- Split the class into groups of 3-5 students to talk about the plot of *Spinning Silver* through these locations. Each group will be asked to focus on how our protagonists experience place differently throughout the narrative. Assign a third of the class to focus on the Ice Castle, one third on Vysnia, and the last third on Miryem's village.
 - Ask each group to consider the following questions:
 - What kind of language does the author use to depict this place?
 - What sort of things typically happen here?
 - How do the characters feel about this place, and how do they feel about their place in it?
 - Does this place change as the plot progresses?
 - For example, how does the Ice Castle change after the battle with Chernobog?
 - What is the difference between Miryem's perception of the village at the beginning of the text versus the end?
 - How does Miryem's perception of the Ice Mountain change?
 - Could this place be considered a character in the narrative? If so, how?
 - What other places on the map is this place connected to?
 - *Note for instructors: students may find the following passages helpful for the activity*
 - **Ice Castle Group:** pp. 151, 176-178, 459-462

- **Vysnia Group:** pp. 69-72, 313-317
- **Miryem's Village Group:** pp. 6-7, 102-103, 465-466

20 minutes: Class discussion

- Ask each group to briefly share what they discussed.
- Invite students to consider the ways in which the concept of place helps the main characters find a sense of community. How do these places work together to form a narrative experience? How are place and plot related? What kind of journey are these characters on? Are we happy with the way their journey has ended?
- One of the first things we tend to notice at the end of a story is whether or not we liked the ending. That's a term called **narrative closure**--it is that feeling we get when our characters get the ending that we think they deserve or when the author answers all of our questions. We know who the murder was in our who-done-it. Or we figure out where the missing person ended up. Sometimes, we don't get complete narrative closure, and the author leaves us hanging, with questions still left up in the air.
 - What do you think of the ending of *Spinning Silver*?
 - Would you change any part of our map?
 - Are there characters you wish you would have heard more or less from?
 - Based on our conversations of place, do you think the characters are where they belong?
 - If we take this novel as being about disparate characters all trying to find a home, are we satisfied with the resolution of the plot? Are these characters home?
- *Note to instructors:*
 - Within this final discussion, we want our students to consider the ways in which the novel resolves itself, focusing primarily on the resolution and narrative closure. Do they like that we never get the Saryk king's name? Or would a name "bind" in a way that we discussed in last class? In a novel that we have focused so much on characters being unable to find a home and diaspora--do they find a community and home? Are we satisfied with their home of choice? While Miryem's marriage certainly still seems hetero-patriarchal, we want to focus on the ways in which she seems to have more agency and a sense of belonging with the ending that Novik gives the audience. This might be the "positive, happily ever after" interpretation.
 - On the other hand, another part of our goal is to flesh out whether the audience should feel good about how our protagonists have 'escaped' the social organizations that they have suffered in, knowing that nothing has fundamentally changed in Vysnia or the Ice Castle. We want to guide them into think through the complexities of "the happily ever after" considering the gendered and classed constructions that we have already discussed in previous classes.
- If we try to visualize the plot of *Spinning Silver* according to this model, what problems

do we encounter? What writing strategies is the author using that makes this novel not too easily defined by Freytag's Pyramid, and what could we do to modify this theory to make it fit?

Sources:

Fuss, Diana, and William A. Gleason, editors. *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. Princeton UP, 2016.

Murfin, Ross, and Supryia M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. 4th ed., Bedford/St.Martin's, 2018.

Novik, Noami. *Spinning Silver*. Del Ray. 2018.

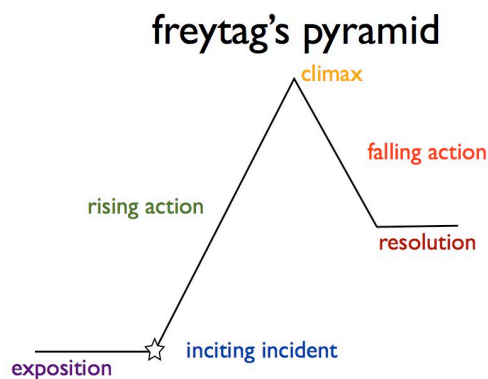
Plot Structure Handout

- A **plot** is the series of events and actions that takes place in a narrative work. These events and actions are organized in such a way so as to create a particular response in the reader, such as suspense, sympathy, surprise, etc. These effects are the product of the *relations between* events and actions, such that ‘the plot’ is distinguishable from ‘the story.’ The story is a simple retelling of things that happened (A happened, then B happened, then C happened...), while a synopsis of plot will include why they happened, to what end, and to what reader response.

Story = the timeline of the events that occur in a text

Plot = specific events (and the order in which they appear)
in a text

- The events of the plot are centered around a key figure or character, who is referred to as the **protagonist**. The protagonist of the story is frequently set against two other types of characters: the **antagonist** and the **foil**. The **antagonist** works against the protagonist’s ends (think Captain Hook to Peter Pan), while the **foil** is used to highlight particular characteristics of the protagonist (think how Obi Wan Kenobi’s calm rationalism accentuates Han Solo’s impulsive bravado).
- While there are many plots, and there are theories of plots going back to Ancient Greece, in 1863 Gustav Freytag invented a way of visualizing the typical trajectory of a plot in what is now referred to as **Freytag’s Pyramid**:



- Many resolutions feature what is called either a “**reversal**” or “peripety,” in which the protagonist either overcomes the challenges set before them and experiences a windfall of good fortune, or succumbs to dangers and experiences terrible loss. These reversals are often predicated on a “**discovery**” or “anagnorisis,” where the protagonist experiences a certain epiphanic realization that leads to their great happiness and the successful resolution of their conflict or to their eventual demise.