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The three billy goats gruff story elements

Almost all stories have some of the same building blocks that can be identified and understood. Knowing what these are gives you a new way to enjoy what you read. It is rather like being able to go “backstage” at a play – not only do you have the enjoyment of the performance itself, but you get to see how it has been put together, how the special effects were arranged, how characters may be interpreted by the actors, why events take place in a certain order, and so on. After all, when you read a novel or a short story you are your own producer, cast and crew. In your mind’s eye you set the show going. But it is the author who is the director and the playwright, giving you the instructions for the performance you stage in your imagination. And how is this done? How does an author tell you what you need to know? What kinds of choices has the author had to make? How do these affect the way the story unfolds in your mind? The following “tool kit” of terms will help you answer questions like these. They will help you to identify the various ways in which the author constructs the story and leads you into it, as well as help you to identify what thoughts the author may wish to convey to you. All this is called making a literary analysis. Terms of literary analysisWe will be working with the following terms: setting, plot, character, point of view, and theme. Rather than just talk about these terms in the abstract, however, we are going to use them “hands-on” to analyze that classic piece of literature “The Three Billy Goats Gruff” (we’ll just call it “Gruff”) or, as you know it in Norwegian, “De tre Bukkene Bruse”. This is, admittedly, not the most intellectually challenging piece of literature we might have picked, but it is a piece of fiction that tells a story, like any other; and like any other, we can use our tool kit on it. Term One: SettingAuthors generally have to tell their readers where they are at the start of a story. Often it is also necessary to give the time of the story. This allows the readers to get their bearings and imagine the scene. This is called giving the setting of the story or setting the scene of the story. In “The Three Billy Goats Gruff” this is accomplished in the first paragraph: Once upon a time there were three Billy Goats named Gruff who lived together on a mountainside. On their mountainside there was little to eat, but just across the way was a beautiful pasture of green grass. On the way to this pasture they had to pass over a bridge, and under the bridge lived a big bad troll. The setting is a mountainside, a “grass-less” mountainside near a grassy pasture on the other side of a bridge. Since this is a fairy tale it is not necessary to give us the time. “Once upon a time” will do just fine. As far as settings go, this is a very simple one, of course, but it gets the job done. Note that the first paragraph above has also introduced us to our major characters, three billy goats and one big bad troll. This is also part of setting the scene of a story. And once both scene and characters have been presented to us, then the action of the story usually is set in motion, which brings us to our next term. Term Two: Plot Usually when the term “plot” is used in literary discussions it refers to a pattern of actions involving a conflict of some kind. The key word here is “conflict”. Most stories revolve around some struggle between two or more parts. In “Gruff” the conflict is introduced and the action is set in motion in the story’s second paragraph – the billy goats want to cross the bridge (to get to the grass) and the troll wants to stop them (to eat them): One day, trip-trap, the youngest Billy Goat Gruff started to cross the bridge. “Who trips over my bridge?” roared the troll. “Only the Littlest Billy Goat Gruff,” said the little goat in his soft, small voice. “Aha! I am going to come up and eat you,” said the troll. “Oh, don’t eat me,” cried the Littlest Billy Goat Gruff. “My brother is coming after me, and he is much bigger than I.”So the troll grumbled and rumbled but he let the Littlest Billy Goat Gruff cross the bridge. After this hair-raising escape by the quick-witted Littlest Billy Goat Gruff, the literary critic might say that “the plot thickens.” The reader now knows that the troll is waiting for the next goat. This provides the next meeting with what is referred to in literary analysis as “rising tension” – that is, the conflict is getting more intense and the question is raised in the reader’s mind. “What will happen now?” This gives the story excitement. Soon TRIP-TRAP, TRIP-TRAP, the second Billy Goat Gruff started across the bridge. “Who trips over my bridge?” roared the troll. “ONLY THE MIDDLE-SIZED BILLY GOAT GRUFF,” said the second goat, in his middle-sized voice. “Aha! I am going to come up and eat you,” said the troll. “OH, DON’T EAT ME,” cried the Middle-Sized Billy Goat Gruff. “MY BROTHER IS COMING AFTER ME, AND HE IS MUCH BIGGER THAN I.”So the troll grumbled and rumbled, but he let the Middle-Sized Billy Goat Gruff cross the bridge. Thank heavens! Once again the billy goat has made a thrilling escape by the use of his quick wit, just like his smaller brother (fairy tales love repetition). But now the tension in the story has been raised to an unbearably high level because the reader knows that the next billy goat doesn’t have a bigger brother! This is what is known as a complication in the plot. The question raised in the reader’s mind is, “How will this end?” Clearly, the plot is coming to what is called in literary terms its climax – that is, the high point of excitement in the story at which the conflict it revolves around comes to a head. Soon, TRIP-TRAP, TRIP-TRAP, TRIP-TRAP, the biggest Billy Goat Gruff started across the bridge. “Who tramps over my bridge?” roared the troll. “IT IS I, GREAT BIG BILLY GOAT GRUFF,” shouted the biggest goat, in his great big voice. “Aha! I am going to come up and eat you,” said the troll. “COME ALONG, THEN,” cried the Great Big Billy Goat Gruff. Here we have an unexpected “turn in the plot” or further “complication”. Up to now all the billy goats have used their wits to escape from the troll. But isn’t this last one actually inviting the troll to come and eat him? The question raised in the reader’s mind is “What is this last billy goat up to?” So up came the old troll. But the Great Big Billy Goat Gruff put down his head and bounded forward and hurled that troll right off the bridge, and never was he seen again. This is the climax of the plot. The Great Big Billy Goat did the unexpected. He fought the troll and won. The bridge was not big enough for both of them. In literary terms the basic conflict has now been resolved – that is, a solution to it has been found. In this case, the troll has been sent packing and the billy goats can now cross the bridge in peace and safety to get to the grass. The remainder of the story returns the reader to the lower level of tension found at the beginning. This is often called the resolution of the plot. Then, the Great Big Billy Goat Gruff joined his two brothers in the pasture. And the grass was so delicious that all three goats grew round and plump before they walked home again. Now, all this might seem a bit obvious to you, but think it over for a moment. What was the last action film you saw? Wasn’t it built up in almost precisely the same way as the fairy tale above – that is, a conflict was introduced that set the action going, the plot becoming more complicated resulting in rising tension, the tension rising to a climax, the conflict being resolved and the plot winding down to something like the level of tension it began with? It’s at the heart of all story telling. But a good plot is not enough in itself. Good fiction needs more, much more, which brings us to our next term. Term Three: Character If an author is going to make a reader interested in the story being told, the characters in the story ought to fit the action – that is, in terms of what happens in the tale, the characters should be believable. In addition, the characters may of course be interesting in and of themselves. In a fairy tale like “Gruff”, terms like “believable” and “interesting” are perhaps not the best ones to use. Nonetheless, “Gruff” does fit its characters to the plot of the story. This is referred to in literary terms as characterization. Looking back over “Gruff” it is clear that we are told important things about each of the billy goats, things that determine the course of the plot. Their most important characteristic is that they are of different sizes and we are informed about this in several ways: 1 By their names – Littlest, Middle-Sized and Great Big. 2 By their voices – soft, MIDDLE-SIZED, GREAT BIG. 3 By their steps – trip-trap, trip-trap, TRIP-TRAP, TRIP-TRAP, TRIP-TRAP. 4 By the fact that the first two billy goats say a bigger one is coming after them. These are absolutely necessary characteristics if the plot is going to work. Imagine what would happen if they all were the same size. There could be no story. In the same sense, we are also told necessary information about the characteristics of the troll; i.e. that it is a “big bad” troll. If it had been a “small nice” troll, little would have happened in this fairy tale. But we not only get information about characterization because we are told it. We also get information because we are shown it. This is an important method of characterization in all fiction. Take the troll, for example. Sure, it’s “big” and “bad” and “old”, but it is pretty certainly also a noticeably dumb troll. We are not told this. The actions of the troll show it to us. After all, it could have eaten the goats one by one, but it let itself be talked into waiting for the next one – not once, but twice. Similarly, it is clear that the Great Big Billy Goat Gruff is not just “Great Big”. It is also fearless. This, too, is a necessary characteristic for the story. In sum, there are many ways in which an author can inform the reader about the qualities of characters in a piece of fiction – by their own speech, by their reactions to others, by their own actions, by directly telling the readers, and so on. The important thing is that the readers get a believable impression of the character in relation to what happens in the story. There are, however, many ways by which an author can decide to approach a reader with such information. Which brings us to our next term. Term Four: Point of View An author must decide what point of view or “voice” is desirable when sitting down to write. Another way to put this is the following – who is telling the story to the reader? If it is the person to whom the story is happening, the point of view is called First Person – that is, the “I” voice. If “Gruff” had been told by the troll under the bridge in first person, it would have begun something like this: I was sitting under my bridge one afternoon when suddenly I heard a goat trip-trap across it above me. Dinner time! Another possibility is the Omniscient point of view, or the “All-Knowing” voice. From this perspective the author can enter the minds of any of the characters, reveal all thoughts and plans in any time and place and show these to the reader in any order the author wishes. If “Gruff” had used this voice it might have sounded like this when the first goat passed over the bridge and was stopped by the troll: The Littlest Billy Goat Gruff was terrified. But it quickly remembered that trolls are greedy and stupid. It decided to outsmart the troll and said, “Oh, don’t eat me ...” In fact, the point of view used in this fairy tale is the Limited Omniscient, or the “Third Person Limited” voice. From this point of view the author is the third person telling the tale to the reader – that is, the author is not one of the characters and stands outside the story. However, the author does not have the ability to reveal everything about the characters – their minds, feelings, plans, etc. Nor can the author jump around in time. Rather than being “All-Knowing” the author is like a reporter giving the reader the facts available. Each of these points of view has advantages and disadvantages according to the kind of story being told and the way that the author wants to tell it. Making a choice among them can be the most important choice an author makes when starting on a piece of fiction. Often this choice depends in turn on the intention the author has in writing the story, which brings us to our last term. Term Five: Theme Often an author has an underlying intention when writing a piece of fiction – especially what is sometimes called “serious fiction”. This intention is often expressed in one or more “themes” of the story – that is, a unifying idea or set of ideas around which the content of the story is constructed. For example, an author might have the intention of furthering basic human rights. To do this the author might decide to write a story with the “theme” of the destructiveness of racial prejudice, how racism destroys the human dignity of both those who are prejudiced and those who are victims of prejudice. Once having decided on that theme, the author might then go on to pick a setting (perhaps South Africa or the United States or Oslo), a time (perhaps today or ten or a hundred years ago), a set of characters (perhaps a black man and a white woman), a conflict and plot and a resolution. The possibilities are endless – but the theme is the same. It can be difficult to find “the” theme(s) for a piece of fiction. There may be many and readers may disagree which is the most important. Or the readers may see quite different things in a story and come up with quite different ideas of the theme or themes of the story. In fact, some might argue that there are no really “correct” or “incorrect” opinions at all about what theme(s) a story has – that this is a subjective, individual decision. Perhaps, but there are most definitely “good” and “bad” opinions about what the theme(s) of a story might be. Let us illustrate this with “Gruff”. Does “Gruff” have a theme? Of course. All fairy tales do. Perhaps the theme of “Gruff” is that if you fight a bully, the bully will stop bothering you (especially if you have a big brother). Or perhaps it is that the small and weak can survive by using their wits. These are possible “good” suggestions for themes. A “bad” suggestion would be, for example, that the theme of this story is that bridges sound different when different size goats walk over them. Or perhaps that the theme is that smart goats live where the grass grows – that is, in pastures and not on mountainsides. The latter themes sound silly and irrelevant to the plot and characters in the tale. ConclusionThe terms we have been through above can be used to analyze virtually any piece of fiction you read – as well as much of what you see in films and on TV. We hope you will begin to use them to make your reading more enjoyable. Tasks 1 Focus on the text!Let us use a few terms on one the stories you may have already read in this book. The term we shall use is setting. Answer the following questions as best you can and then compare your answers with a fellow pupil. a) How many settings does this story have? b) How do these settings differ from one another? c) How does the author convey these differences; that is, what details does he choose to put in his descriptions so that the settings stand in contrast with one another? d) Why are these settings important to the development and the end of the story? e) Would it be possible to tell this story without using these settings? 2 Playing it out Form groups of four. Each person takes one role as one of the goats or the troll. However, instead of playing out the story as it is told in the text, you are going to change the character of one of the four parts and see what happens. Choose two of the following changes, decide what will happen and then play out the story once for each change made. a) Make the Littlest Billy Goat Gruff a coward who runs back without crossing the bridge. What happens then? b) Make the Middle-Sized Billy Goat Gruff too dumb to suggest that his brother is bigger. What happens then? c) Make the Great Big Billy Goat Gruff into a peacemaker who decides to have a sit-down strike on the bridge until the Troll stops threatening the other goats. What happens then? d) Make the Troll into an ecological activist who wants to stop the goats from eating all the grass on the mountainside because it will cause soil erosion and flooding. What happens then? 3 Writing Choose one of these assignments: a) Re-write the story of the Billy Goats Gruff from the Troll’s point of view, using the First Person voice. b) Re-write the story of the Billy Goats Gruff in the style used for horror stories by Stephen King. c) Re-write the story of the Billy Goats Gruff as a report to be given at the annual meeting of The International Brotherhood of Trolls.

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