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P O S I T I O N

Stern, Jerome . *Making Shapely Fiction*. New York, Dell, 1991.

○ This is not a traditional literary term, but it gives you a useful way to think about character and plot. Your character's *position* in the work at any time is a complex of internal and external factors. His internal position means, for example, what he knows and how he feels. His external position means his relationship to other people and to social institutions, such as his marriage or job.

For example, your character is Derwig, a depressed, anxious, twenty-eight-year-old man. Derwig is unmarried and lonely; he is a kitchen appliance salesman and a heavy drinker. That complex of internal and external forces makes up your character's position.

Once readers understand a character's position, they're waiting to see that position change. Since we know Derwig is a lonely kitchen appliance salesman and a heavy drinker, having him careen from bar to bar may change his level of intoxication, but it might not change his position. Whatever happens to Derwig, whatever situations he's in—rude to the bartender, argumentative with other customers, kicked out

of the bar, staggering back to his apartment to find some more beer in the fridge—he is still a lonely guy and a heavy drinker. In a certain way, though interesting events have taken place, nothing has happened in the story. His position has been demonstrated and dramatized through various situations, but it remains basically the same.

Now if Derwig gets a phone call at the apartment and is told that he's fired, that is a change in his position. He's now an unemployed lonely guy and a heavy drinker. Readers feel something has happened. As they learn that Derwig has about eighty dollars in his checking account, that he will not be able to cover his rent which is due in a week, and that he doesn't have friends or relatives to help him, they understand more about his position, but that position doesn't change until he gets a salesman's job on a used-car lot. It changes again when he realizes it is a chop shop dealing in stolen parts and reconstituted vehicles.

Position is a concept that helps you understand plot. It helps you understand why some novels can have a lot of incident but move slowly and seem flat, while other novels move quickly and keep readers' interest high. Plot and position work together. Plot is the mechanism that changes your character's position.

You control the pace of the story by the rate at which you change the positions of the characters. A story in which positions change every few pages moves rapidly. The rate of change makes stories accelerate or decelerate. This control allows you to create a structural rhythm for the narrative as a whole.

Derwig's rise in the stolen-car business changes his position. He meets people. He gains confidence. He gives up drinking. A young woman who owns a donut 'n' coffee truck

is attracted to him. He starts to make deals on his own. His position keeps changing. Then Derwig gets a tip that the police are watching the business.

Readers see changes in position as either good or bad for the character. But once readers see a trend—all is now going well for Derwig—they redefine Derwig’s position as *improving*. That might put him into interesting situations but readers won’t feel a drastic change until something threatens him. Then he might be put in new positions, as a threatened man, a chased man, a man on the run. Readers tend to be impatient. They look forward to changes of position, especially when the reverses of good and bad fortune occur rapidly. The faster the changes occur, the more tension is created.

Suspense novels devote themselves to these sensations to the exclusion of almost everything else. You’ll hear people say, “It’s great. Really exciting. The plot’s so convoluted you can’t understand it but it doesn’t make any difference.” This might be fine for suspense fiction, but serious novels also need movement, plot, and a continual dynamic of situations and positions. Serious novels are more subtle. The changes in these novels might have to do with growing awarenesses and changing relationships rather than car chases and triple agents, but they’re based on the same structural principles. In Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* the central character doesn’t do much more than talk, listen, watch, and think. But his position is constantly changing. Each new observation, each new idea, puts him closer to or further from his goal.

Your character’s position may change in short fiction, too. But it isn’t as crucial as it is in a novel. Many short stories are explorations, not transformations, of character. You can write a story about a situation or a moment, and render it so that

you give your readers insight into a network of tensions. The movement in a story might not take your character from position A to position B but, inward, from surface to depth. Your readers move to an understanding, an enlightenment. The scale of a novel, however, demands significant movement right from the start. As soon as readers understand the positions of the various characters, they want to see those positions begin to change. That's when the book starts happening.

See *Character, Epiphany, Plot, Suspense, Tension, Zigzag*.