



Learning Centre

## Elements for Analyzing Fiction

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Authors use various literary devices to develop ideas in their work. These devices are analyzed by academics in order to understand fiction. This handout explains some of the most commonly used literary elements and suggests strategies for using them to analyze fiction.

The devices explored in this handout are: plot, point of view, setting, character, imagery, symbolism, irony, and foreshadowing. As you read literature, watch for how these various elements are used.

### Plot

Plot is the sequence of events and ideas that occur in the story and how the ways those events relate to one another. These events are presented to the reader to show relationships and meanings.

Stories often follow a pattern something like this:

1. An opening introduces the situation.
2. Complications occur usually based on some kind of conflict – a struggle between two or more people, ideas or forces. Conflicts can be:
  - a. a struggle between a person and another person
  - b. a struggle between a person and the environment (society or nature)
  - c. a struggle within a person

The development of these complications is often called rising action.

3. The conflict or conflicts reach a height of tension called the climax.
4. Things then settle down to a stable situation. This stage can be called the denouement, resolution or falling action. It is usually quite short.

A typical plot follows time order. However, many plots have less predictable structure. For example, some plots start with falling action and then jump to the introduction; others jump around in time. The author's choice of structure can affect the meaning of the story and the impact it has on the reader.

To analyze plot and story structure, it can be helpful to take note of the main series of events in the story including any conflicts that occur. After recording the bare bones of the sequence of events, you can look over these events and reflect on why these key

elements occur as they do in the story. This can help you to get a deeper understanding of the story's meanings.

Questions to consider:

- Can you divide the story into an opening, complications, climax and denouement?
- What is the series of events in the plot?
- Why do you think the author chose these events?
- Is the plot told in time order or does it follow a less predictable order? How does the choice of order affect the impact and meaning of the story?
- How would the impact of the story change if you changed the order of events?
- How would the impact of the story change if an event was left out or changed?
- What kinds of conflicts can you see in the story?
- What conflicts, if any, occur within the main character?

## Point of View

Point of view refers to the narrator or teller of the story. Two main types of narrator are the first person narrator and the third person narrator.

### First Person Narrator

Also called a participant narrator, the first person narrator is a character in the story. You can identify a story told in the first person if the narrator uses "I" in telling the story. The story is told from that person's point of view and only shows the reader what that character sees, hears and thinks. So, first person narrators cannot generally tell about thoughts and actions that are out of sight of their character. The character of the narrator influences what is told and how it is told.

### Third Person Narrator

The third person narrator is not a character in the story. In some ways, this type of narrator is invisible. However, a third person narrator can be used to create a tone. For example, the way the narrator tells the story may create an ominous, matter-of-fact, dreamy, preachy or suspenseful tone.

There are various kinds of third person narrator:

- The omniscient (or all knowing) narrator.
  - This narrator knows the thoughts and feelings of all the characters in the story.
- The limited omniscient narrator.
  - This narrator only knows the thoughts and feelings of one or a few characters.
- The self-effaced narrator.

- This narrator does not seem to exist and does not report on the thoughts or feelings of any characters. The story is told from an objective point of view where the narrator simply reports the series of events.

To explore the point of view of a story, consider:

- Who is telling the story? Is the narrator a character in the story?
- What does the narrator know about the characters in the story?
- Why do you think the author chose this point of view? How does the choice of point of view affect the meaning of the story?
- Think about how the story might be different if the author had chosen a different narrator. Try rewriting a piece of the story to see how the story could change if told from a different point of view.

## Setting

The setting refers to where and when a story takes place. The setting includes:

Physical environment

- This includes the geographic location (e.g. country, city), the natural environment (e.g. a forest, mountain top or desert), buildings, furniture, clothes, sounds, smells and weather.

Social environment

- This includes manners, customs, social class and atmosphere or mood.

Time

- This includes time of day, season, year and historical era.

The setting is very important to the story. Authors use setting to develop themes, character and plot. Thinking about the setting/s can help you to get more insight into the underlying meanings of the story.

To analyze setting, consider:

- What is the significance of the place and time for the ideas in the story?
- Does the author create a strong sense of place? How?
- How do the settings in the story relate to the characters and the plot of the story? (For example, does a character's home give you insights into the character?)
- How would the story be different if you removed descriptions of time and place?
- How would the story be different if you changed the time and place?

## Character

Characters are the actors in stories. Characters may also include people and animals or objects that are given human traits. A character is defined by appearance, behaviour, emotions, intellect, values and morals.

Authors can show these aspects of a character through:

- what the character says
- what the character thinks
- what the character does
- how the character reacts to other characters
- how other characters react to the character
- what other characters say about the character
- what the character looks like
- the setting in which the character is found

Most stories have at least one central character. A central character can be referred to as a main or major character, a hero or heroine, or the protagonist. Another type of character is the antagonist. The antagonist is in some kind of conflict with the main character. Stories also often have minor characters. Minor characters are not the focus of the story but they are often important to the story's development.

To analyze character in a story, first consider who are the central and minor characters. Is there an antagonist? To analyze a specific character, consider:

- What does the person say and do? What kinds of language does the character use? What does this tell you about their attitudes, values and motivation?
- What do other characters say or think about the character?
- How do other characters react to the character?
- What does the character look like? Consider face, body and clothing.
- What choices does the character make?
- How does the character change?
- What conflicts does the character experience?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the character?
- How is the character different from and similar to other characters?

## Imagery

Imagery is the way authors create pictures, or images, in readers' minds. Through the creation of these images, the author often gives clues to deeper meanings of the story.

The passage below by Jane Urquhart, from her novel A Map of Glass, shows examples of several kinds of imagery:

In order to reach the front door she had to pass through the dining room, and as she did so she recalled that in the late afternoon, while the rest of the house darkened, the low light entering the room from the west window always caused the large oval of the table to shine like a lake, a lake with two silver candlesticks floating on its surface. She had watched this happen almost every day of her life, as long as she could remember, and it would continue to happen when she was not there: an

abandoned table gathering light and her far away, not witnessing the ceremony. (36)

Strategies used to create imagery include:

Appeals to the senses (sight, sound, smell, touch and taste).

In the excerpt above, Urquhart uses the sense of sight, discussing both the light and the look of the table – she paints a picture with her words.

Use of figurative language

- a. Simile – a comparison of two quite different things using *like* or *as*.  
In the excerpt, Urquhart uses a simile to compare the appearance of the table with the appearance of a lake: “the west window always caused the large oval of the table to shine like a lake”.
- b. Metaphor – an implied comparison of two quite different things (no *like* or *as*).
- c. Personification – giving human qualities to something that’s not human.  
In the excerpt, Urquhart personifies the table by describing the way it gathers light as “a ceremony”. A ceremony is generally conducted by humans.

As you read a story, watch for uses of the senses and figurative language that create vivid images in your mind. Mark those passages for later analysis.

To analyze imagery, consider:

- What especially strong images does the author use?
- Why does the author emphasize those particular images?
- Are there patterns in the use of imagery in the story such as repetition of similar images or contrasting images? What do those patterns suggest about deeper meanings of the story?
- How does the imagery affect the mood of the story?
- What issues does the imagery raise or emphasize in the story?
- Are there changes in kinds of imagery as the story progresses? What does this tell you about other changes that take place in the story?

## Symbolism

Symbolism is when the author uses something (often a concrete object) to represent something else (often an abstract idea or emotion). Writers generally use symbols to express multiple meanings.

Symbolism can be based on:

Literal meanings – based on the dictionary definition/s of a word

Cultural meanings – based on shared understandings of people in one or more cultures  
– e.g. a rose stands for beauty

Context-specific meanings –the context of the story gives the object symbolic meaning

It can be useful to think about symbolism as a series of layers. In the following excerpt from A Map of Glass, Jane Urquhart uses a “cloak” as a symbol:

As she emerged into the light and descended the stone stairs she was aware of two things: the sound of Malcolm’s footsteps beside her and the dependency descending on her like a familiar cloak over her spirit. There was warmth in the cloak, but it felt wrong for this season. She knew that from now on there would be moments when she would want to remove it from her shoulders. (306-307)

A variety of meanings can be included in the reader’s understanding of Urquhart’s “cloak”:

A cloak is like a coat, it keeps you warm, but sometimes too warm. A cloak can also hide what is underneath and even restrict the wearer’s movement. In this context, it is a cloak of “dependency”. This cloak is hiding her spirit but also possibly restricting it. It seems that this cloak can be a burden and that she may be outgrowing it.

Symbolism can create rich meanings with many layers for readers who take the time to explore the depths of possible meanings included in a symbol.

To analyze symbolism, watch out for interesting choices of words or imagery that you think could imply deeper meanings. Then, consider:

- What is the literal meaning of the word or object?
- What characteristics does that object have?
- What other meanings does the word have? Look it up in a dictionary.
- Does the object have symbolic meaning in the culture of the author or the culture of the setting?
- Is this symbol used repeatedly through the story, or does it just occur once?
- What ideas does the story give you about possible meanings the author may include in the use of the symbol? Notice above in the Urquhart example that, even in this short segment, the author gives indications that a cloak is not necessarily a good thing, that it can relate to dependency and that she doesn’t always want it anymore.
- Are other related symbols used? For example, are various foods used to symbolize different things or are objects in nature used as symbols repeatedly?

## Irony

Irony is when there is a surprising or meaningful difference between what seems to be true and what is really true or between what is expected to happen and what actually

happens. Sometimes the irony is clear to characters; other times the irony is only clear to the reader.

An example of irony can be found in Margaret Laurence's book *A Jest of God*. In the story, the main character thinks she is pregnant. Ironically, she discovers that her suspected pregnancy is actually a tumour. This creates an especially strong irony because pregnancy can symbolize life and a tumour can symbolize death. Thus, there is a large gap between what seems to be true and what is true.

There are many specific types of irony. These two are the most common:

- Verbal irony is when there is a gap between what a speaker says and what the speaker means. This can include sarcasm as well as understatement or overstatement of the truth.
- Situational irony is when there is a gap between what happens and what a reader or character hopes for or expects to happen. The Margaret Laurence example above is situational irony.

The gap created by irony needs to be significant. Mere lies or exaggeration do not necessarily indicate meaningful irony. The reader needs to interpret irony in the context of the underlying meanings of the story. In the Margaret Laurence example, the gap between truth and expectation contributes to a broader theme related to life and death. Thus, the gap is a significant one that helps the reader to understand underlying meanings of the story.

To analyze irony:

- Identify any differences between what is expected to happen and what actually happens.
- Identify any differences between what a speaker says and what the speaker means.
- Who is aware of these differences? The reader only? Any of the characters? All of the characters?
- Consider what the author might have intended by including these differences. Do they suggest underlying meanings?
- Do the differences form a pattern? For example, are there repeated uses of similar types of gaps? Are some characters repeatedly aware of the gaps while others are unaware? What do such patterns suggest about underlying meanings of the story?

## **Foreshadowing**

Foreshadowing is when an author gives hints earlier in a story about what is going to happen later in the story. Hints can be in things people say, think or do, or they can be in the setting, characters, events, descriptions or even titles, chapter headings or graphics.

Readers sometimes recognize foreshadowing when they first read a story but often the foreshadowing is not fully apparent until the reader gets to the part of the story that has been foreshadowed. Then readers often remember things from earlier in the story that hinted at what was to come. Frequently, when a reader gets to the foreshadowed part, it is not entirely a surprise. The foreshadowing has prepared the reader for what happens.

Foreshadowing can create suspense, tension, excitement or fear. It can add importance to events. It can also subtly introduce underlying meanings or establish key aspects of character and setting.

An example of foreshadowing occurs in the first chapter of The Stone Diaries by Carol Shields, titled “Birth, 1905”. The narrator tells about an obese woman and relates how lately the woman has always been hungry and has experienced indigestion. The woman takes various home remedies to try to cure her indigestion. Then the narrator tells about how one day the woman begins to experience strong abdominal pains. The woman does not know what is wrong with her. The narrator also mentions that this day is the day of the narrator’s “own birth” (9). As the chapter progresses, the reader realizes that the woman is actually giving birth to the narrator. The foreshadowing in this chapter not only creates suspense; it also gives the reader insight into the character of the mother and her situation in life.

To explore foreshadowing, once you have finished the book, think about events that you feel were foreshadowed. Make note of any foreshadowing you can remember. Re-read the book and note any further foreshadowing that you did not remember after the first reading. Then consider these questions:

- Why do you think the author chose to foreshadow the event?
- What kinds of hints did the author give of the event that was to come? Do the hints form patterns?
- Why do you think the author used those elements to foreshadow the event?
- What deeper meanings did the author show you through the foreshadowing?
- How did the foreshadowing make you feel?
- How would the impact of the story change if the foreshadowing were deleted?

#### Works Cited

Laurence, Margaret. A Jest of God. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970.

Shields, Carol. The Stone Diaries. Toronto: Vintage Books, 1993.

Urquhart, Jane. A Map of Glass. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2005.

#### Other Sources of Information about Analyzing Literature

If you want more information about elements for analyzing literature, consult the XE section on the book shelf in the Learning Centre.