

Handout 01: Basic Concepts for Literary Analysis

1. THE PLOT

The plot is the storyline of a literary text; it is the sequence of a series of events in a story. "The plot is the organization and emphasis that shapes the story and its reception, and the order or sequence in which the details or facts are given." "It is the logical interaction of the various thematic elements of a text that leads to a change of the original situation as presented at the outset of the narrative. An ideal traditional plot line encompasses the following four sequential levels: exposition—complication—climax or turning point—resolution" (Klarer, 2004)

PLOT ELEMENTS

- **The Exposition** is the beginning of the story where elements such as the main characters and the setting are revealed. The exposition sets the background of the story and usually introduces or hints at the major conflict.
- **The Rising Action** happens when the events in the story become complicated. It is a series of events that build up to the conflict.
- **Conflict** is any form of struggle that is presented in the text. It can be internal (within oneself), or external between the character and either (1) other characters, (2) nature, (3) society/ environment, (4) technology, (5) the supernatural, or (6) a higher power.
- **The Climax** is the turning point of the story.
- **The Falling Action:** includes events that pave the way for the conflict to be solved. This happens when complications begin to resolve.
- **The Resolution** is the conclusion or the final outcome of the story.



Example: The Lord of the Rings

Exposition

1. Bilbo goes away, leaving a magic ring for his nephew Frodo.

Rising Action

2. Gandalf reveals the ring is the One Ring.
3. Frodo and friends take the One Ring to Elrond in Rivendell.
4. It is decided there that Frodo will bear the ring to Mordor.
5. Along the way, the Fellowship faces many dangers.
6. The Fellowship parts.
7. Frodo and Sam go on to Mordor alone.
8. Aragorn, Gimli, Legolas, and Gandalf help fight Saruman.
9. Gondor and Rohan prepare for the coming war with Sauron.
10. Aragorn leads a force against Sauron as a distraction.

Climax

11. Frodo and Sam enter Mordor and travel toward Mount Doom.

Falling Action

12. The One Ring is destroyed and the Fellowship is reunited.
13. Aragorn becomes king of Gondor and marries Arwen.
14. The four hobbits return to the Shire to make it safe again.

Resolution

15. Frodo and Bilbo depart on a ship; Sam goes home to Rosie.

(adapted from www.coursehero.com)



2. THE SETTING

The term "setting" denotes the location, historical period, and social surroundings in which the action of a text develops. It includes time, place, atmosphere, social conditions, and even weather conditions. The information about the setting helps us contextualize the literary work; it can be analyzed in relation to the plot, the characters, the themes, etc.

3. THE CHARACTERS

Characters are people, animals, or figures represented in a work of fiction. Characters can be revealed through the description of their physical appearance, through action (what they do, say, think, and feel), or through what other people say about them (we call this characterization).

There are several classifications of character types.

3. 1. According to the role of each character we can classify them into:

• **A protagonist:** the main character, the center of the story; the hero.



• **An antagonist:** the opposition or enemy of the main character; the villain in the story.



• **Deuteragonist:** the closest type to the protagonist. It could be one or a group of deuteragonists. Usually, they help the protagonist in their quest.

Examples of deuteragonists are **Melmen, Gloria, and Marty in Madagascar; Legolas, Gandalf, Gimli, and Pippin in the Lord of the Rings; the team of the Avengers; Shifu, Tigress, Mantle, Viper, Crane, Monkey in Kung Fu Panda; Kirk, Jeff, Alpa Chino, Kevin in Tropic Thunder, etc.)**



• **Tertiary Characters:** Characters that appear in one or two scenes to perform some actions related to the plot. Examples of this type are, **Radagast in The Hobbit, Galadriel in The Lord of the Rings, Odin in Thor Ragnarok, and Mark Hanna in The Wolf of Wall Street.**



• **Love Interest:** Elle (Ice Age) Kristof (Frozen), Arwen (LOTR), Daisy (Great Gatsby), Nate (Devil Wears Prada)



• **Confidante:** the one whom the main character trusts.

This character helps develop the protagonist's heroic characteristics. "He reveals the central character's thoughts, intentions, and personality traits. However, a confidante need not necessarily be a person. An animal



can also be a confidante." (**Ron and Hermione in Harry Potter, Darwin in Gumball**)



• **Foil:** is "any character (sometimes the antagonist or an important supporting character) whose personal qualities contrast with another character (usually the protagonist). By providing this contrast, we get to know more about the other character." Examples of foil characters are **Anna in Frozen, Dr. Watson in Sherlock Holmes, Donkey in Shrek, Darco in Harry Potter, Tom**

Buchanan, Nick Carraway In *The Great Gatsby*, Buzz In *Toy Story*, Tigress In *Kung Fu Panda*, Huckleberry Finn In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, etc. (Huck is also the confidante of Tom)

3.2. According to the qualities of the characters, they can be classified into:

- **Dynamic:** A dynamic character changes over time, usually as a result of resolving a central conflict or facing a major crisis. Most dynamic characters tend to be central.
- **Round:** Is a "fully developed personality that is affected by the story's events; he/she can learn, grow, or deteriorate by the end of the story. It is generally a complex character (*Gatsby In The Great Gatsby*, *Macbeth In Macbeth*, *Edward "Teddy" Daniels / Andrew Laeddis In Shutter Island*, etc.)
- **Flat:** A flat character is the opposite of a round character. "This literary personality is notable for one kind of personality trait or characteristic." It is rare when we find a flat protagonist, still, there are some examples, such as *Rip In Rip Van Winkle*.



- **Anti-Hero:** a major character, usually the protagonist, who lacks the conventional traits of a hero. Instead, he/she/ it is characterized by imperfections (selfishness, ignorance, bigotry, etc.), a lack of positive qualities such as "courage, physical prowess, and fortitude", and "generally feels helpless in a world over which they have no control" (Gale 2012)(*Jack Sparrow In The Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Walter White In Breaking Bad*, *Deadpool*, *Jay Gatsby In the Great Gatsby*, *Hannibal Lecter In The Silence of the Lambs*, *Michael Corleone In the Godfather*, *John McClane In Die Hard*, etc.)



- **Symbolic:** A symbolic character is any major or minor character whose very existence represents some major idea or aspect of society and reflects the main themes of the story (*Gollum from LOTR*, *the Fig Tree from The Island of the Missing Trees*, *two-face In the Dark Knight*, *Aslan In The Chronicles of Narnia*, etc.)



Narnia, etc.)

- ★ **Crossover:** In literature, some authors include characters from different novels they have written in one. The first popular crossover in literature was the 1885 Mark Twain novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which had an important guest appearance by Tom Sawyer.
- ★ **Trans-narrative Characters:** a character that appears in more than one story linking the stories' worlds together.

Give examples of this type.

4. POINT OF VIEW (POV)

It is the angle from which the story is told (who is the narrator of the story). We can distinguish the following types of POV:

4.1. First Person POV: when the main character (the protagonist), or another character who interacts with the main character is the teller of the story. (*Gulliver's Travels* by Swift, *Moby Dick* by Melville, *Jane Eyre* by C. Bronte, *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ, etc.)

4.2. Second Person POV: when the story is told by a narrator who addresses the reader as 'you'. It is the least POV used, found in some postmodern works (*Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin)

4.3. Third Person POV: when the narrator is unknown and we see the story through his/her eyes. There are variations of this POV:

a. Limited: readers see only what the narrator sees. The narrator sees only what is in front of him/her but is unable to tell what characters are thinking or explain future possibilities. (*1984* by Orwell, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Hemingway)

b. Omniscient: the narrator seems to know everything about the characters, the places, and events (all-knowing). He/ she can see inside the minds of the characters. (*Hard Times* by Dickens, *Pride and Prejudice* by Austen, *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky, *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o)

• Sometimes writers shift between types of POV, for example, Toni Morrison in *Beloved*.

• In *My Name Is Red*, Pamuk narrates the story from 21 different voices of POV.

• In *40 Rules of Love*, Elif Shafak shifts between first person (various narrators) and third person limited.

4.4. Innocent Eye where the story is told through the eyes of a child (his/her judgment being different from that of an adult). *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain

4.5 Stream of Consciousness: a narrative technique where the thoughts and emotions of a narrator or character are written out such that a reader can track the fluid mental state of these characters. *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *Notes from the Underground* by Dostoevsky.

5. THEMES

The theme is the main message of the story; it is the topic or the idea discussed by the author. Themes vary from one work to another according to the writer, the movement, the genre, etc. (love, power, death, survival, good vs evil, justice, faith, hope, betrayal, communication, escape, illusion, identity, knowledge, etc.)

6. TONE

Tone refers to the attitude of the writer towards the topic and the audience of his work. It refers to the manner in which the writer approaches the central theme of his/her work. It guides the readers and stimulates their feelings while going through the events of the story. The tone is mainly linked to diction (cautious, humorous, serious, personal, violent, critical, affectionate, hostile, objective, pleading, indifferent, desperate, sarcastic, etc.)

7. MOOD

This refers to "the emotional feeling that the reader gets from the writing. Usually, the mood is related to the tone, for the tone of the author creates the mood of the reader. The mood is also affected by figurative language, sentence structure, and diction.

DISTANCE IN POINT OF VIEW

One way to think of point of view is in terms of the distance between the narrator and the reader.



The White Practice

8. Symbolism

Writers can use an object, a person, a thing, or an animal as a symbol to represent an idea or a quality. Symbols change their meanings according to context, culture, society, etc. It also depends on the reader and his knowledge. Symbolism is clearer in allegory.

9. Motif

A motif can be easily confused with a symbol. It is a reoccurring image, sound, action, or other figure that has a symbolic significance and contributes toward the development of a certain theme (through its repetition in the literary work).

10. Style

Style refers to the techniques the writer uses to write. It includes syntax (sentence structure), grammar, point of view, diction, tone and mood, figurative language, rhetoric, symbolism, allegory, etc. It describes **how** the writer presents events, characters, themes, and the story as a whole in terms of language.

Practice

1. Choose a novel, a short story, a manga you have read; a movie, or an animation you have watched, and then try identifying the following:

- Plot Elements
- Main Characters (try finding the type of 3 characters)
- Three Main themes (explain them).
- A motif and a symbol (explain them).

2. Write a paragraph in which you summarize and explain your favorite book or movie in 6 lines only, or record a video where you do the same in 60 seconds. If you choose to record a video send it to the email: balqissmahammed@gmail.com (due after our first session).

3. Choose up to 3 books you think every English Major should read. Say why.

4. What are the character types of Eren from Attack on Titans, Hinata from Naruto, Luffy from One Piece, and Arletty from the Secret World of Arletty

If you don't know these works, think about your favorite ones and identify the types of your favorite characters in them.



"You see, unlike in the movies, there is no THE END sign flashing at the end of books. When I've read a book, I don't feel like I've finished anything. So I start a new one." – Elif Shafak, The Bastard of Istanbul