Literary Elements

Character   Style, Tone, and Irony
Plot   Theme
Point of View (P.O.V.)   Symbolism
Setting

Character

Characters are the "people" in texts, and characterization is the author's presentation and development of characters. Authors have two main methods of presenting us with character. **Direct characterization** usually consists of the narrator telling the reader about the characters. In addition, direct characterization can also involve other external details, such as names or other overt commentary. For example, The Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor tells the reader directly that his name is significant and then reflects upon his life experiences. Other methods of direct characterization include having the narrator or author passing direct judgement on or even analyzing a character, or having other characters in the story give the reader information about the one being characterized. Direct characterization, in other words, tells the reader about the character.

Indirect characterization involves the author letting the character reveal himself by what he says, does, or thinks within the story. It often involves the use of external details, such as dress, mannerisms, movements, speech and speech patterns, appearances, and so forth. In other instances, indirect characterization uses more internal details such as conveying the thoughts and feelings of a character; this is common in first-person stories. Such works often rely on diction, or the choice of language, and employ the voice or expressive style of the character — if not dialogue — in developing characterization. An example of voice would be Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," which depends on the choice of words, cadences, and repetition in the instructions to convey a sense of the characters involved.

Characters can be flat, stock (or typed), or round. A **flat character** is psychologically simple and easy to understand. If you can sum up characters with a phrase or two, they are probably a flat character. Authors often make minor characters relatively flat because they primarily serve to advance the plot. Flat characters may be described in detail and be present throughout a story, but the reader tends to learn little about them beyond their function in advancing the plot. Such is the case with fairy tales, where flat characters serve the plot and didactic interests of the tale. Works, especially postmodern fiction, may also use flat characters to draw attention to the text as text, to the constructed nature of the work. In any case, flat characters tend to be subordinate to other elements of fiction and particularly plot.

Stock characters are similar to flat characters in operation, although they may not occupy as much space. It may be useful to think of stock characters as assisting both the plot and setting of a text, or contributing to the background. The stock or typed character is a familiar stereotype often serving to aid the plot (the cub reporter, the silent cowboy, a waiter, a secretary, and so forth). Rather than viewing stock characters negatively, the reader should recognize that stock characters will often contribute to the setting/environment of the story. Sometimes, however, stock characters deliberately comment upon their stereotypical depictions, as in the extreme case of Robert Coover's *Ghost Town*, so reading such a character in context is necessary. **Round characters**, on the other hand, have psychological depth and

complexity. They are more like real people — often difficult to predict and figure out; therefore, they tend to interest us and command our attention more than flat characters.

Characters can be either static or dynamic, depending on whether or not they change over the course of the story. A **static character** is one who remains essentially the same from beginning to end; a **dynamic character** undergoes change. In general, flat characters tend to be static and round characters tend to be dynamic. Be careful of this assumption in postmodern fiction, however, where the binary between static and movement is often at the core of the text.

One type of character with a particular function is the **foil character** — one who is similar in some ways to a main character, but is different enough so that the contrast reveals qualities about the main character.

Plot

Plot is composed of the key ingredients and actions in a narrative arranged in a pattern. There are many different plots, but detailed below are three "categories": traditional, scenic, and oblique.

Traditional: Many authors choose a traditional plot, often arranged in chronological order. Some authors choose to tell the entire story in flashback (informing us of what happened before opening scene of story). When a story begins and ends at roughly the same point in time, it is a framed story. A framed story might also construct a "story-within-a-story," often to draw attention to a text's constructedness; this use tends to complicate the notion of a traditional plot. Many authors also choose to use foreshadowing (hints about what will happen later in a story). Stories can also begin *in medias res* — seemingly "in the middle" of some important action, without much exposition. The background information usually placed at the beginning of the story.

While almost all plots involve conflict of some sort, the conflict need not involve a physical struggle. A **conflict** can be any clash of actions, ideas, desires or wills. A conflict can be external or internal, or both; a conflict may be physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, or moral, or a combination. Most conflicts fall into one of these broad categories:

> person against person
> person against society (culture)
> person against the environment (nature, technology)
> person against fate (god, spirit)
> person against himself or herself

A story's **climax** is the moment of the conflict's outcome. When the outcome is predictable or telegraphed, it is often referred to as anticlimactic. The resolution or denouement (which means the untangling of a knot; unraveling) is the conclusion of a story. Both terms indicate the ending of the story, although denouement also implies a surprising twist (but not one that adds new information).

Conflict always involves a story's protagonist (the central character of a work). A protagonist is not necessarily a hero, since many protagonists are not at all heroic or admirable; many protagonists are antiheroes. The protagonist in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (the grandmother) or Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a good example of a protagonist who is not only non-heroic, but whom most readers don't even like very much. Any force (not necessarily a character) that works against the protagonist functions as an antagonist.

In evaluating a traditional plot, one can say that it has artistic unity when the author includes nothing in the story which does not advance the central intention. If the story is given a turn which is unjustified by the situation or the characters, then the author can be accused of plot manipulation. When this sort of manipulation occurs near the end of a story to give it a cheap and easy resolution (like a pat happy ending, the so-called "Disney" ending), this sort of contrived ending is known as a *deus ex machina* ("god from a machine") — a term which comes from Greek dramatists' constructing resolutions that relied on the interference of the gods (a famous example is *Medea*). Unlike its accepted convention in Greek drama, however, *deus ex machina* tends to be viewed as a weak and poorly constructed conclusion in most modern and contemporary works.

Scenic Plot: This focuses on many realistically observed details and actions in a series of incidents, drawing out the plot's movement through time. Often these movements seem to operate outside of chronological order, even juxtaposing seemingly unrelated scenes.

Oblique Plot: Unlike scenic plots, oblique plots are compressed in terms of time and offer a reader a "slice of life." Oblique stories may seem to lack a plot: action and conflict, in the traditional sense, are minimal, and there may be little exposition and no clear resolution. These are sometimes referred to as "sketches." Many postmodern and/or minimalist authors use oblique plots.

Point of View

Three questions determine point of view (who tells us the story and how it is told):
- Is the one telling the story a character in the story or not?
- How much is this person allowed to know?
- To what extent does the narrator look inside the characters and report their feelings and thoughts?

Points of view (also known as P.O.V. or narrative perspectives) fall under three broad categories: first-person (a character in the story), the infrequently used second-person (addresses "you"), and third-person (not a character in the story). P.O.V. can be classified into these categories:

1) **Omniscient** (third-person omniscient): The narrator can, and usually does, report the inner feelings and thoughts of characters. The narrator is usually not an actual character in story but an invisible storyteller who can see and report anything. This narrator can include judgments into the story (editorial omniscience), or just report characters' thoughts, feelings, actions and words and let the reader come to his or her own judgments (neutral omniscience).

2) **Limited Omniscient** (third-person limited): The narrator tells the story in the third person, but tells it from the viewpoint of one (sometimes more) character(s) in the story. This unnamed narrator knows everything about the main character, but does not reveal the inner thoughts of other characters — the narrator has same limitations as the protagonist. This perspective approximates real life more closely than an omniscient point-of-view.

3) **First-Person Central**: The narrator is also the protagonist of the story and tells the story from her perspective.

4) **First-Person Observer**: The narrator is a character in the story but not necessarily the main character — he tells the protagonist's story, having witnessed most of it.

5) **Objective**: The narrator is not a character, but displays no omniscience, reports no thoughts or feelings. This narrator is like a journalist or movie camera (though these viewpoints, too, have angles and biases), strictly reporting externals and not explaining anything.

6) **Stream-of-Consciousness**: The author gives us not only the viewpoint character's relevant thoughts or feelings, but imitates the whole flow of that character's mind. Sentence structure can become unconventional and transitions illogical as the author attempts to replicate free association.

7) **Second-Person**: The narrator uses "you" to create an identification with the reader and the text, drawing the reader into the work and even implicating the reader in the story's actions and outcome. This technique is rather rare in contemporary stories written in English and often used for didactic purposes. (Don DeLillo's "Videotape" serves as an example.)

Very often, the reader can draw conclusions about a story's narrator based upon what is reported. The reader may conclude that a narrator is reliable and providing an honest and straightforward account. However, often a narrator, especially a first-person narrator, can seem to be providing an interpretation that is different from the author's or which is obviously biased, in which case the narrator is viewed as unreliable. Sometimes a narrator is unreliable because she is unsophisticated (or too young, innocent, naive) and unable to fully understand the events that she describes, although the reader can usually see the significance of the events.

One final thing to keep in mind about narrative perspective is the impact that time has upon how the reader perceives events; while some stories are told as if the events have just happened, sometimes a narrator indicates that the events of the story took place long ago, in which case the story is a retrospective one.

Setting

The concept of setting seems simple: it is the time and/or place of a story. Yet these terms can include its geography, architecture, era, season or culture. A story's setting can perform a number of functions. It can:

- provide backgrounds for the action
- act as an antagonist
- create atmospheres or moods
- reveal character(s)
- reinforce themes

Often a writer will use a setting that he knows will evoke a certain response from the reader. For example, if a story opens in a large, dark city night filled with shadows and alleys while a lone shadowy figure walks through the streets and quickly ducks into a side building, most readers will immediately associate the scene with a dark story, perhaps a crime story or action-adventure. The writer can then either reinforce that response (the next setting is a den of criminals), or subvert that response (the next setting is a bedroom, where the figure turns out to be young woman visiting the bedridden, developing a melodrama or sentimental tale).

Take note of what the writer establishes about the setting and try to consider why she either provides a lot of information about the setting or why the time or place of the story is somewhat vague and indeterminate.

Style, Tone, and Irony

When a reader discusses a writer's **style**, one refers to the particular way a writer has of using language. In terms of style, a reader considers the writer's diction (choice of words), syntax (grammar or sentence structure), and figurative language. Most good writers try to match their writing styles to their characters and/or subject matter. Think about how different a story like Shirley Jackson's "The Lesson" would have been had the style involved complex words, "proper" speech, and perfectly grammatical sentences. What would have happened had Ernest Hemingway avoided dialogue (direct speech) in "Hills Like White Elephants" or used a detailed description of the setting?

Tone can be defined as the value that style or gesture gives to words. Most often, a story's tone conveys the writer's or the character's attitude toward something. Tone can be said to be serious, sarcastic, lighthearted, angry, or any number of other terms. A good example of integrating tone and content is Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried."

Irony is the perception of incongruity or discrepancy. It can be between words and meanings, actions and reality, or appearances and reality. Irony creates a tension between what is and what is expected, desired, appears, or is hoped for. There are four types of irony:

1) **Verbal irony** is a figure of speech in which what is expressed is the opposite of the meaning implied by the speaker, and the speaker is conscious of this tension. Sarcasm is the most common example of verbal irony, but verbal irony is often more subtle and not designed to insult in the same manner as sarcasm. An example of verbal irony is the statement "We had a light snow for Michigan" after our latest blizzard, and is an example of understatement (minimizing the nature of something). Another type of verbal irony is overstatement, exaggerating the nature of something, as when people say, "In my day, I walked ten miles to school, in a blizzard, barefoot!" An example of the exaggerated use of verbal irony known as sarcasm would be telling someone, "You're such a beautiful human being!" to someone who has just treated someone else poorly; here, the tension between what is said and what is meant is intended to be explicit to the listener/reader.

2) **Situational irony** occurs when there is a discrepancy between appearance and reality, expectation and fulfillment, or between what is and what would seem appropriate. This term refers mostly to events in the story rather than words. For example, the bartender is killed in an automobile accident by the drunk she had served beyond the legal limit.

3) **Attitudinal irony** occurs when one character's expectations are disrupted, believing reality is one way when it is actually another. An example of this would be the idealistic student who believes his professor really loves the student's writing only to find that his professor never actually reads the paper and just assigns a random grade. (No truth to that, of course!).

4) **Dramatic irony** is created through the contrast between what a character believes or says and what the reader knows to be true. A famous example is in *Romeo and Juliet*. When Romeo kills himself because his love Juliet is dead, the readers/audience knows she is really alive, having faked her death to be with Romeo. In this case, his actions move the

play not only to irony but tragedy. Another example would be the famous (although totally false) story of Marie Antoinette who, in response to her citizens' demands for food, was to have said, "Let them eat cake." This story demonstrates dramatic and not verbal irony because Marie Antoinette was not aware that people starved, so she was not being sarcastic in her comment but instead revealing her own innocence/ignorance.

Theme

Theme is a central idea to a work, and is usually presented indirectly through the elements or strategies of fiction. A "thematic statement" is something the reader creates after the story, like a thesis statement in an essay. Themes are interpretive in nature; although an author may introduce a thematic element into a work, the response of the reader also contributes. Any given work will have multiple meanings. For example, Margaret Atwood's "Happy Endings" is a treatise about how one should savor the development of one's life, and move beyond its structure to focus on its meaning, or a treatise on how to write, or both — all depending upon one's reading of the work.

In working with theme, be aware of the following. Be careful to distinguish subjects from themes, a necessary skill much like the need to distinguish between topics and theses. A theme tells how the subject is developed within the work (in Atwood, not all of life, but savoring the development…). A theme is applicable outside the written work, not only with the world created by the narrative; it is a generalization. A work may contain several themes, or none that may be determined. The author's claim is not definitive and neither is the reader's: there may be many potential themes in a work. Finally, some themes may be descriptive rather than prescriptive, exposing problems rather than offering solutions.

Symbolism

A symbol is a person, object or event that suggests more than its literal meaning. In other words, it is something that has two levels of meaning: on the literal level, it is what it is (the actual necklace in "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant); on the non-literal level, it would represent a more "hidden" meaning (the wife's vanity, the sacrifices the couple made, deceit, the life they could have been). Determining the meaning of a symbol (or if something is a symbol at all) is often a matter of close reading and interpretation — the reader must pick up on the contextual clues supplied by the writer.

Sometimes, of course, there is not much ambiguity involved, since we are surrounded by conventional symbols and natural symbols whose meanings are already basically predetermined. A conventional symbol is one that is very widely recognized by a society as a symbol; for example, a country's flag is a symbol of that country itself as well as the characteristics associated with that symbol. (Our flag not only represents the United States but, to some, also represents "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.") A natural symbol, as its name implies, is a generally recognized symbol that is connected to nature itself; for example, the season of fall and the sunset are generally associated with dying, while spring and sunrise often are associated with birth or new life. However, many difficulties in reading symbols exist with literary symbols, where the author determines what the symbol will stand for.

When a story revolves around or focuses on a single symbolic object, as in the case of "The Necklace," the object operates as a central symbol. Unlike allegory, where the reader encounters universal symbols with traditional meanings, it is not possible to reduce the necklace to a single meaning. In some stories, symbolism comes from symbolic gesture (a repeated

gesture or act) as in D.H. Lawrence's "The Rocking Horse Winner." In other works, the symbol is a place or environment, as in Frank Baum's *Oz* books (symbolic environments). If there does not seem to be a literal level for a story's symbol — if it seems to be one extended set of symbols, a universal meaning, or represents general truths or abstract concepts about the human condition — the story is termed an allegory (found in Kafka's or Marquez's works).

Why do authors use symbols? Usually because they are subtle, non-intrusive ways of getting meaning across — most readers hate being whacked over the head with obvious "messages," and symbols are ways of telling a reader something without having to come right out and state it directly. Symbols work in conveying meaning because our unconscious minds are used to dealing with them — when we dream, we dream in symbols, according to modern psychology. Symbols also pervade our spiritual lives, so most of us grow accustomed to seeing them from an early age.