

Part V An Overview of Literature

Basic Elements of Literature

Plot

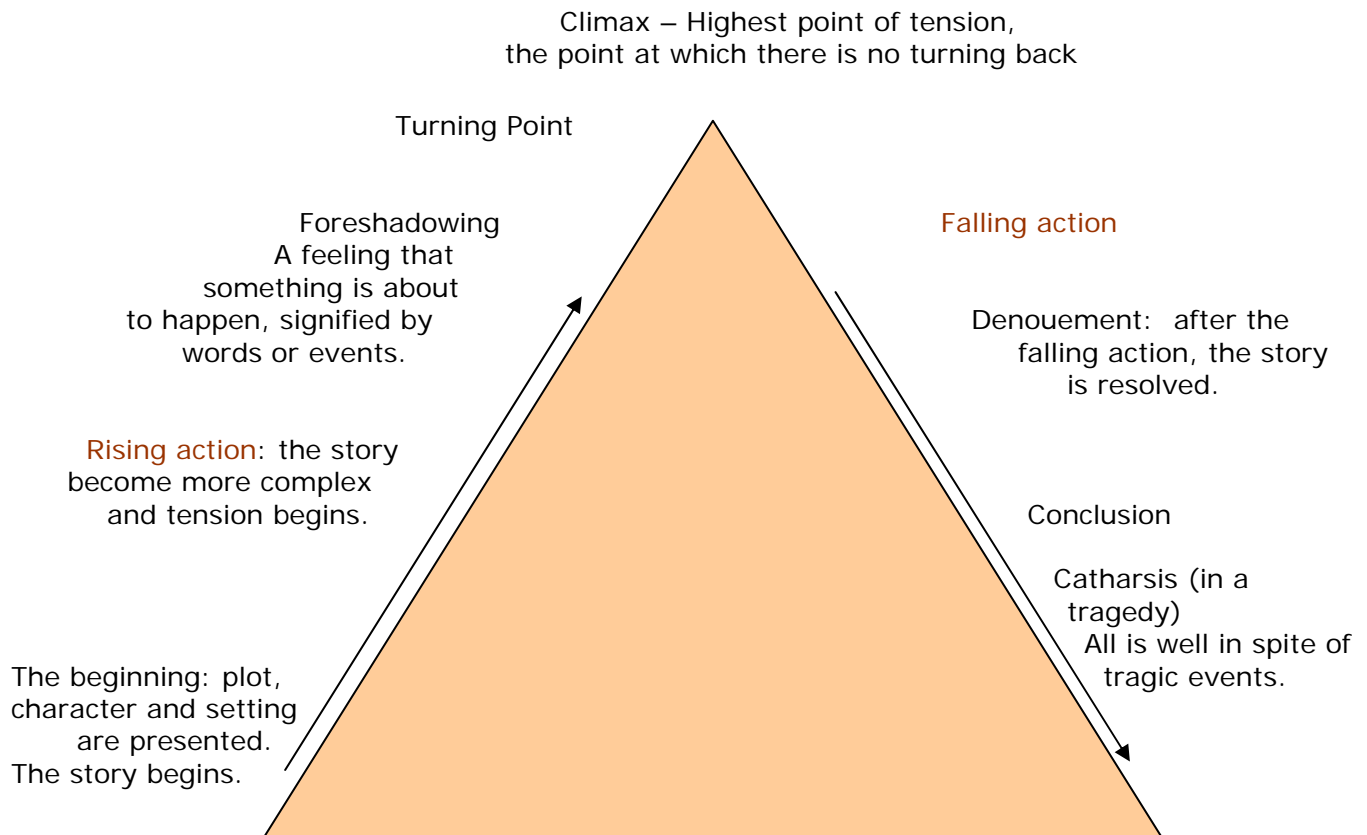
The plot in literature is the sequence of events, the storyline.

Setting

The setting is the background, the place where the action occurs, the time frame, the environment. To discover the setting, think about the scenery or pictures you might use on a stage as a backdrop to the story. Included in the setting would be descriptions of the senses: sight, taste, touch, sound, and smell.

Character

The characters may be rounded (thoroughly and clearly developed) or flat, (not well-developed, unexamined). The protagonist is the main character, and an antagonist crosses or challenges the protagonist.



Literature usually involves a moral, emotional and/or physical conflict:

| | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| humans vs. humans | humans vs. god | humans vs. fate |
| humans vs. society | humans vs. nature | humans vs. self |

The fictional characters we learn to love or hate are similar to the ones in our own real life scenarios.

A developing character changes morally and personally as the story unfolds, just as our lifelong friends (and indeed our own selves) change as time goes by.

A flat character contains only a few moral and/or personal traits; we know little about our temporary acquaintances because we don't interact with them very often, only occasionally. They are not central to our personal lives.

A round character is a complex mix of personal and moral qualities, a person we get to know intimately on a short-term or long-term basis. We will never forget these people, even if we eventually lead separate lives. They make an indelible impact upon us.

A static character doesn't change from the beginning to the ending; he/she is just there, like a policeman on the corner or an electrician on a telephone pole.

A stock character is a stereotypical prototype, a standard character, the fool, the village idiot, the wise man or woman, the athlete, the over-achiever.

The protagonist is the main character in a story.

The antagonist is a person (or thing or circumstance) that acts in opposition to the protagonist.

Understanding the point of view of the narrator is essential

One of the characters may tell the story in the first-person point of view. We as readers are subject to his/her opinion, credibility and integrity.

The omniscient point of view is used by an author who tells the story in the third-person. He/she lets us know everything about all of the characters, what they think and feel and why they do things they do.

An author using the omniscient third-person limited point of view tells us everything about one character only, how that character feels, thinks and acts.

The objective, or dramatic, point of view is used by the author to tell the story in the third person, but there is no interpretation or discussion of the characters' thoughts and motives as in the omniscient point of view. It is merely a presentation of events and dialogue, an unbiased report.

Definitions

Simile:

When we compare one thing (situation, person) to another, and these two things are unlike, or dissimilar, we create a SIMILE using the words "like" or "as."

Maya Angelou uses many similes in her book, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings:

"My dress fitted perfectly and everyone said that I looked like a sunbeam in it."

"The man's dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium . . ."

George Orwell's essay, "Shooting an Elephant," also contains many similes:

"The thick blood welled out of him like red velvet, but still he did not die."

Metaphor:

A metaphor also compares two unlike persons, places or situations, but it does not use the words "like" or "as." Note the following example from Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "Letter From Birmingham Jail."

"In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society."

Here is a metaphor from Shakespeare's As You Like It:

"Men are April when they woo, December when they wed; maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives."

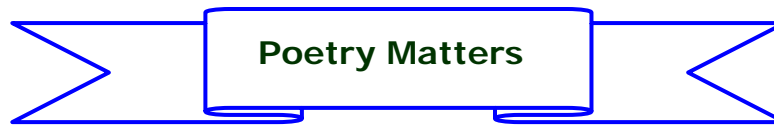
and one from King Richard II,

"Eating the bitter bread of banishment."

Synthesis:

A synthesis is a joining or combining of parts of different elements or concepts in order to make a new whole. Here is an example of a synthesis from Martin Luther King's book, Stride Toward Freedom that combines the positive aspects of violence and the positive aspects of acquiescence to create a new philosophy, a synthesis of non-violent resistance.

"Like the synthesis in Hegelian philosophy, the principle of nonviolent resistance seeks to reconcile the truths of two opposites-the acquiescence and violence-while avoiding the extremes and immoralities of both."



A Stanza is a group of lines in a poem.

A Verse is a single poetic line or a group of lines.

A Rhyme occurs when words have the same sounds. Rhyme Scheme is the pattern or arrangement of sound-alike words, and a letter of the alphabet can be given to each rhyming word: aabb, abab, aaabbb.

In Milton's "When I Consider My Light is Spent," the pattern is abba
abba cde cde.

His poem is a Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet with two sets of four lines
and two sets of three lines.

Rhythm: poetry has a certain amount of Rhythm, a pattern or movement with varying speeds, sounds and pitch. Edgar Allan Poe uses rhythm:

"It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;"

A Meter is a beat, a pattern of accents, a way to measure rhythm.

The Foot is the number of stressed words.
Here is a variety of numbers of feet:

monometer (one)
dimeter (two)
trimeter (three)
tetrameter (four)
pentameter (five)
hexameter (six "Alexandrine")
heptameter (seven)

The Poetic Foot gives poetry its rhythm, and the meter (rhythmic pattern) depends on the number of feet in a poem. Let's look at the various patterns created by the use of foot and meter. (The symbol – stands for an unaccented syllable and / stands for an accented one.)

1. iambic pentameter - / - / - / - / - /
2. trochaic / - / - / - / - /
3. anapestic - - / - - / - - / - - /
4. dactylic / - - / - - / - - / - -
5. spondaic // // // //

One of the more common poetic foot patterns is the iambic pentameter: five stressed words starting with the soft stress, alternating with a stronger stress:

"The curfew tolls the knell of parting day," (Gray) - / - / - / - / - /
- / - / - / - / - /

But the iambic tetrameter (a verse which contains only four feet) is also popular:

"The woods are lovely, dark, and deep" (Frost) - / - / - / - /
- / - / - / - /

"I felt a funeral in my brain" (Dickinson) - / - / - / - /
- / - / - / - /

Sometimes the way a word is stressed can make all the difference in meaning:

You took a train to Greece? (You never travel! Why did you go?)

You took a **train** to Greece? (I didn't know you could get to Greece by train.)

You took a train to **Greece**? (Of all places, I never thought you would go to Greece.)



Here are some basic rules for writing about literature

1) Avoid unclear references when introducing the work under discussion:

Incorrect: "In the story it starts by saying, 'The bowl was perfect,' and you know that the bowl will be a symbol in it."

Correct: Author Ann Beattie opens her short story, "Janus," with the words, "The bowl was perfect," and with this beginning, the reader assumes that the bowl is a symbol.

2) Maintain a consistent tense. Avoid switching from past to present:

Incorrect: *Othello was jealous of his wife because Iago tricks him into believing that Desdomona is unfaithful and was in love with Cassio.*

Correct: *Othello is jealous of his wife because Iago tricks him into believing that Desdomona is unfaithful and is in love with Cassio.*



Not only do we want to stick with a consistent tense, but it is also a standard practice to use the present tense for literature.

3) Summarize a section of a story, play or poem only if asked to.

Usually, insightful analytical/evaluative discussions are what instructors are looking for. If asked to summarize the work do so. But if you are asked to evaluate the author's use of characterization, do so; don't simply summarize the characters personalities and what they do.

4) Use brief, direct quotes to illustrate your points.

But avoid using lengthy quotes as fillers; they waste valuable space in an essay that needs your input and reflection.

5) BE SPECIFIC. Avoid generalities and vague references to the topic.

For instance, avoid making empty statements as given in the following example:

"There is a lot of symbolism in 'The Story of an Hour.' It is really effective, and it is crucial to the story line and theme."

Don't stop there. Present specific examples:

"The symbolism in 'The Story of an Hour' is very effective and also crucial to the story line and theme. The sky that Mrs. Mallard looks at through the open window speaks volumes, and it symbolizes her new lease on life. The 'patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds' indicate new opportunities and experiences and feelings she will have now that the chains of nineteenth century wedlock are lifted."