

Literary Terms:

Narrative

These literary terms have been culled from two primary texts: *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed., by M.H. Abrams, and *Story and Structure*, 6th ed., by Laurence Perrine. Definitions derived from the former will be noted by “MHA” and those gleaned from the latter will be marked “LP”.

Plot

antagonist- “any force in a story that is in conflict with the protagonist. An antagonist may be another person, an aspect of the physical or social environment, or a destructive element in the protagonist’s own nature.” [LP]

chance- “the occurrence of an event that has no apparent cause in antecedent events, or in predisposition of character. In an automobile accident in which a drunk, coming home from a party, crashes into a sober driver from behind, we say that the accident was a chance event in the life of the sober driver but that it was a logical event in the life of the drunk driver.” [LP]

climax- the high point or turning point in the plot, at which the major conflict is usually resolved

coincidence- “the chance occurrence of *two or more* events that share a particular correspondence. If the two drivers in the accident that illustrates ‘chance’ had been brothers and were coming from different places, it would be coincidence.” [LP]

conflict- “a clash of actions, desires, ideas or goals in the plot of a story. Conflict may exist between the main character and some other person or persons (MAN AGAINST MAN), between the main character and some external force—physical nature, society, or ‘fate’ (MAN AGAINST ENVIRONMENT), or between the main character and some destructive element in his own nature (MAN AGAINST HIMSELF).” [LP]

denouement, or resolution- (French for “unknotting”); following the climax, “that portion of the plot that reveals the final outcome of its conflict or the solution of its mysteries.” [LP]

dilemma- “a situation in which a character must choose between two courses of action, both undesirable.” [LP]

deus ex machina- (Latin, “god from the machine”)- “the resolution of the plot by use of a highly improbable chance or coincidence (so named from the practice of some Greek dramatists of having a god descend from heaven—in the theater by means of a stage machine—to rescue the protagonist from an impossible situation at the last possible minute).” [LP]

endings:

happy- “an ending in which events turn out well for a sympathetic protagonist.” [LP]

unhappy- “an ending that turns out unhappily for a sympathetic protagonist.” [LP]

indeterminate- “an ending in which the central problem or conflict is left unresolved.” [LP]

surprise- “a completely unexpected revelation or turn of plot at the conclusion of the story.” [LP]

exposition- early in a narrative, the 1) introduction of the major characters; and 2) revelation of the setting

falling action- all of the action following the climax

flashback- “interpolated narratives or scenes (often [presented] as a memory, a reverie, or a confession by one of the characters) which represent events that happened before the time at which the work opened.” [MHA]

foreshadowing- a detail within the narrative about something that will happen later in the story. Foreshadowing may contribute to the development of suspense.

hero/heroine- outmoded literary terms for “protagonist.” These terms have fallen out of favor with the rise of protagonists who possess no character traits traditionally considered “heroic.”

mystery- “an unusual set of circumstances for which the reader craves an explanation, used to create suspense.” [LP]

plot- “in a dramatic or narrative work... the events and actions, as these are rendered and ordered toward achieving particular artistic and emotional effects.” [MHA]

plot manipulation- “a situation in which an author gives his plot a twist or turn unjustified by preceding action or by the characters involved.” [LP]

protagonist- “the chief character in a plot, in whom our interest centers.” [MHA]

rising action- all of the action preceding the climax

setting- the time and place in which the action occurs

subplot- a secondary story, complete and interesting in itself, contained within the larger plot

surprise- “an unexpected turn in the development of the plot.” [LP]

suspense- “a lack of certainty, on the part of a concerned reader, about what is going to happen, especially to characters with whom the reader has established a bond of sympathy.” [MHA]

villain- like “hero” and “heroine,” a literary term that has fallen mostly out of use, but may be used if an “antagonist is evil, or capable of cruel and criminal actions.” [MHA]

Point of View

author- “authors are individuals who, by their intellectual and imaginative powers, purposefully create from the materials of their experience and reading a literary work which is distinctively their own.” [MHA]

narrator- the character or voice that conveys the story

point of view- signifies the way a story gets told—the mode (or modes) established by an author by means of which the reader is presented with the characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and events which constitute the narrative [MHA]

There are four basic points of view and corresponding type of narrators

1. *omniscient point of view (omniscient narrator)*- usually in the third person, the narrator knows all and is free to reveal anything, including what the characters are thinking or feeling and why they act as they do

2. *limited omniscient point of view (limited omniscient narrator)*- the narrator, usually in the third person, is limited to a complete knowledge of one character in the story, revealing what that one character experiences, thinks, feels. The limited omniscient narrator generally falls into one of two types, depending on whether he possesses insight into a

- a) major character, or
- b) minor character

3. *first person point of view (first person narrator)*- the story is told by one of its characters, in the first person. The first person narrator may be either a

- a) major character, or
- b) minor character

4. *objective (or dramatic) point of view*- the third person narrator is limited to revealing the actions and dialogue of the characters, but does not interpret their behavior or reveal their thoughts [LP]

Character

action- see “character”

character- “characters are the persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as being endowed with particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their distinctive ways of saying it—the **dialogue**—and from what they do—the **action**. The grounds in the characters’ temperament, desires, and moral nature for their speech and actions are called their **motivation**.” [MHA]

characterization- the process by which the traits of characters are presented:

direct characterization (telling)- The character is revealed by descriptive portrayal or by direct comments made by the narrator. These comments may even refer to the character's thoughts. But the reader has no access to the character's mind. He remains outside; his views are shaped by the knowing narrator.

indirect characterization (showing)-

I. implicit characterization: the character is presented in terms of his or her environment, including descriptive details about the character and the words and thoughts of other characters

II. dramatic characterization: the character is revealed through his or her own words and actions.

III. introspective characterization: the reader possesses access to the character's mind. His ideas and thoughts are revealed directly.

dialogue- see “character”

dynamic character- “a character who during the course of the story undergoes a permanent change in some aspect of his personality or outlook” [LP]

flat character- a character who is limited to one or two individual traits

foil- “a minor character in a work who, by sharp contrast, serves to stress and highlight the distinctive temperament of the protagonist ('Foil' originally signified 'leaf,' and came to be applied to the thin sheet of bright metal placed under a jewel to enhance its brilliance.)” [MHA]

motivation- see “character”

round character- a complex, multifaceted character

static character- “a character who is the same...at the end of the story as he was at the beginning” [LP]

stock character- a character who is more type than individual, one whose nature is familiar to the reader from prototypes in previous narratives, e.g. the hooker with the heart of gold; the jocular sidekick to the action hero

Symbol & Irony

irony- “in Greek comedy, the character called the *eirōn* was a dissembler, who characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the *alazōn*—the self-deceiving and stupid braggart. In most of the modern critical uses of the term ‘irony,’ there remains the root sense of dissembling or hiding what is actually the case; not, however, in order to deceive, but to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects.” [MHA]

“A situation, or a use of language, involving some sort of incongruity or discrepancy:

verbal irony- a figure of speech in which what is said is the opposite of what is meant

dramatic irony- an incongruity or discrepancy between what a character says or thinks and what the reader knows to be true

irony of situation- a situation in which there is an incongruity between appearance and reality, or between expectation and fulfillment, or between the actual situation and what would seem appropriate.” [LP]

N.B. M.H. Abrams offers a clarification on **sarcasm** and verbal irony: “Sarcasm in common parlance is sometimes used as an equivalent for all forms of irony, but it is far more useful to restrict it to the crude and taunting use of apparent praise for dispraise... The difference in application of the two terms is indicated by the difference in their etymologies; whereas ‘irony’ derives from ‘eirōn,’ a ‘dissembler,’ ‘sarcasm’ derives from the Greek verb ‘sarkeizen,’ ‘to tear flesh.’” [MHA]

symbol- “something concrete that means more than what it is; an object, person, situation, or action that in addition to its literal meaning suggests other meanings as well” [LP]

Four cautions:

1. The narrative itself must provide evidence that a detail is to be taken symbolically.
2. The meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the story.
3. To be called a symbol, an item must suggest a meaning different in kind from its literal meaning; a symbol is something more than a representative of a class or type.
4. A symbol may have more than one meaning, instead suggesting a cluster of meanings.

[LP]

Theme

theme- “sometimes used interchangeably with ‘motif,’ but the term is more usefully applied to a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or explicit, which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader” [MHA]; or, the central idea or unifying generalization implied or stated by a literary work.

theme statement- Laurence Perrine's principles for stating theme:

1. Theme must be expressible in the form of a statement with a subject and a predicate.
2. The theme must be stated as a generalization about life.
3. The generalization must not be larger than is justified by the terms of the story.
4. Theme is the central and unifying concept of a story. Therefore
 - a) it must account for all the major details of the story;
 - b) it must not be contradicted by any detail of the story;
 - c) it must not rely upon supposed facts, facts not actually stated or clearly implied by the story.

The theme must exist inside, not outside the story.

5. There is no one way of stating the theme of a story.
6. Theme statements should avoid reducing the theme to a familiar cliché. [LP]

moral- a rule of conduct or maxim for living expressed or implied as the "point" of a literary work. Compare “theme.”

motif- “a conspicuous element, such as a type of incident, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature” [MHA]