

Using Literary Elements

Antagonists

Forces that work against the protagonist and create tension in a literary text. There are two kinds of antagonists:

External: nature, other characters, decisions, actions, and interactions

Internal: thoughts within the character's mind and emotions

Understanding how the protagonist copes with antagonists can offer insight into his or her personality, conflicts faced, and themes.

Climax

The moment or point of greatest intensity in the plot. Short stories usually have one climax, but novels can have small climaxes as the plot unfolds. The major climax is near the end. The climax, the highest point of the action, can deepen comprehension of plot details and also offer insights into themes.

Conflicts

Struggles or differences between opposing forces such as protagonist and nature, two characters, protagonist and a specific event or situation, or an internal conflict within a character. Some conflicts become problems. For example, the inner conflict of deciding whether to drive in a snowstorm leads to a problem when the person's car becomes stuck in a snowdrift on a desolate road. Observing how characters deal with inner conflicts and conflicts with other characters and/or a setting can reveal much about their personalities and the themes of the story.

Crisis

This is related to the climax—it's the moment when the protagonist must finally make some essential decision about who she is or what to do.

Denouement

Events that resolve the climax in a novel, short story, or drama; often referred to as the outcome. Understanding the outcomes of a narrative can lead to figuring out themes and central themes and deepen readers' understanding of how the plot brought them to back to a feeling of normalcy.

Diction

Whether you consider this a literary element or literary technique, diction is an underappreciated aspect of literature. How characters speak—the words they choose, their cadences, the degree to which they speak—all offer important clues to what they want and need, and who they are.

Other Characters

Observing how other characters relate to, dialogue with, and interact with the protagonist can deepen our knowledge of all their personalities as well the themes in a story.

Plot

Events that occur in a text and enable readers to observe characters in diverse situations. Plot supports an understanding of theme, conflicts, setting, and characters' personalities. Often referred to as rising action, the plot in a text builds from the opening of the story to a high point of interest, called the climax.

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Point of View

This refers to who is narrating the story.

- A first person narrator is often the protagonist, and the author uses first person pronouns: I, me, mine, we, us, our, ours.
- An objective narrator acts like an observer who sees and records information and events from a neutral perspective and uses third person pronouns: he, she, it, they, them, their, theirs.
- An omniscient narrator knows everything about the characters, their conflicts and problems, decisions and motivation, thoughts and feelings. Told from the third person point of view, it uses these pronouns: he, she, it, they, them, their, theirs.

Protagonist

The main character in a text who has problems to solve. Observing how the protagonist interacts with others, makes decisions, and tries to solve problems offers insight into this character's personality and motivations.

Problem

Something that gets in the way of a character's desire or goal and requires an action or decision to overcome, such as whether to risk diving from the high board as required by the PE teacher when you're a weak swimmer or lying to your parents about where you've been to avoid punishment and then coping with the guilt. Problems require characters to figure out solutions such as having no money for food, or coping after a twister or fire destroyed their home. How characters tackle problems and deal with their inability to resolve some can provide readers with deep insights into personality and decision-making processes.

Setting

The time and place in which a story takes place. A short text can focus on one setting while longer texts have multiple settings. How characters function in and react to a setting can deepen readers' understanding of characters' motivation and personality traits.

Symbolism

Short story writers and novelists sometimes select physical objects to signify the emotions and abstract ideas they are trying to communicate. Symbols often recur and don't always appear in the exact same way. Authors might use an object (a lighthouse, a locket) the weather in general or particular aspects of nature (sunlight; fog; darkness).

Theme

This is a statement about people and life that the author makes with the narrative. In folk and fairy tales, theme is frequently stated as a moral or lesson at the end of the story.