

CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH LITERATURE



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Critical Thinking Through Literature

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SECTION OVERVIEW

2.1: About Creative Nonfiction

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- define creative nonfiction and understand the basic features of the genre.
- identify basic literary elements (such as setting, plot, character, descriptive imagery, and figurative language).
- perform basic literary analysis.

- craft a personal narrative essay using the elements of creative nonfiction, using MLA-style formatting.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

2.2: About Fiction - Short Stories and the Novel

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students should be able to:

- explain the difference between fiction and non-fiction, short stories and novels.
- describe the key elements of fiction.
- discuss the meanings of “tone,” “diction,” and “syntax.”
- identify the major elements of a plot.
- identify character, setting, and theme.
- differentiate between internal and external conflict.

2.2.1: What is Fiction?

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2.2.1: What is Fiction?

Overview



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Fiction refers to literature created from the imagination. Mysteries, science fiction, romance, fantasy, chick lit, and crime thrillers are all fiction genres. Whether or not all of these genres should be considered “literature” is a matter of opinion. Some of these fiction genres are taught in literature classrooms and some are not usually taught, considered more to be reading for entertainment. Works often taught in literature classrooms are referred to as “literary fiction” including classics by Dickens, Austen, Twain, and Poe, for example. We will be studying primarily literary fiction in our readings, unless your instructor decides otherwise.

Difference Between Fiction and Nonfiction

While nonfiction and creative nonfiction are true, fiction is **not true**. Fiction may chronicle real events that happened in a convincing way using **verisimilitude**, but for categorization purposes the literature is still fiction. For example, historical fiction adapts real events and historical figures into a compelling narrative. But even if 95% of the story is true, the 5% of imagination renders the narrative into fiction. Meanwhile, nonfiction and creative nonfiction must tell the truth. The flexibility in creative nonfiction comes in how the story is told. Fiction writers are not constrained by the truth in this way.

If an author presents untrue events as nonfiction, they are at risk of losing their reputation as writers or falling prey to lawsuits. For example, James Frey's "memoir" *A Million Little Pieces* is an example of what can happen when an author presents fictional events as nonfiction. His career was tanked. He was even kicked out of Oprah Winfrey's book club (Wyatt)! As creative nonfiction expert Lee Gutkind writes, "by virtue of the fact that some of the stuff in Frey's book never happened, it should be catalogued as fiction—not creative nonfiction" (Gutkind).

Fiction writers are not constrained by reality in the same way that creative nonfiction authors might be. They are only bound by the limits of their imaginations.

Why Should We Read Fiction?

Prose fiction, whether in the form of the novel or the short story, is one of the most popular and widely consumed literary **genres**. One only has to see the proliferation of bookstalls at railway stations and airports, for example, and the predominance of novels over other forms of writing made available in such locations, to realize the appeal of fiction.

Take a few moments to think about *Why* we read fiction. *What* do we hope to gain from reading stories about imagined events that happen to imaginary people?

Robert DiYanni begins his impressively wide-ranging study *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay* (1997) with the following assertion about why we read:

We read stories for pleasure; they entertain us. And we read them for profit; they enlighten us. Stories draw us into their imaginative worlds and engage us with the power of their invention. They provide us with more than the immediate interest of narrative – of something happening – and more than the pleasures of imagination: they enlarge our understanding of ourselves and deepen our appreciation of life. (p. 27)

Did your own answers to the question of why we read touch on any of the reasons DiYanni gives? I wouldn't be at all surprised if they did. It is, I think, true for all of us that there is an element of sheer escapism in our desire to read stories, to imaginatively engage with the incidents and events that befall the characters we read about. We often come to identify with these fictional characters, and think perhaps about how we would react and respond to the situations they find themselves in.

We can immerse ourselves in a fictional world in this way without necessarily applying a great deal of critical or intellectual effort, of course. But if fictional narratives are, as DiYanni puts it, to "enlarge our understanding of ourselves and deepen our appreciation of life," we need, perhaps, to read them in a more objective way, to subject them to a more critical scrutiny to see if they reinforce or challenge our existing ideas about the world around us. Close attention to the texts we read can only enhance our understanding, and this in turn can increase our pleasure in reading. In this section we will

concentrate largely on the various elements that make up a fictional **narrative**; the events that make up a **story** and how they are arranged (the **plot**); the perspectives from which stories can be narrated; the act of **characterisation**; the importance of **setting**, both in terms of time and place; and the actual language and style which writers adopt to tell their narratives. Above all, in what follows, and in your own readings of fictional narratives, you need to always keep in mind the question of *why* you think writers use particular narrative strategies. There are an infinite number of ways in which stories can be told; the choices made by individual writers of individual texts are not randomly made. We need to think about why those choices might have been made. There is no single authoritative answer to such questions. How we read is dictated largely by the experiences and contexts we each of us bring to a particular text, and for that reason no two readings are likely to be the same, even though we may be applying the same critical processes to our reading.



Video 4.1.1 : Introduction to Fiction

Works Cited

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2.2.2: How to Interpret a Short Story

A short story has a structure and a message. Can you analyze the picture below in much the same way as a short story?



Figure 2.2.2.1: Old Fence.

What Is a Short Story?

A short story is a work of short, narrative prose that is usually centered around one single event. It is limited in scope and has an introduction, body, and conclusion. Although a short story has much in common with a novel (See How to Analyze a Novel), it is written with much greater precision. You will often be asked to write a literary analysis. An analysis of a short story requires basic knowledge of literary elements. The following guide and questions may help you:

Setting

Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place. In a short story, there are fewer settings compared to a novel. The time is more limited. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How is the setting created? Consider geography, weather, time of day, social conditions, etc.
- What role does setting play in the story? Is it an important part of the plot or theme? Or is it just a backdrop against which the action takes place?

Study the time period, which is also part of the setting, and ask yourself the following:

- When was the story written?
- Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
- How does the time period affect the language, atmosphere or social circumstances of the short story?

Characterization

Characterization deals with how the characters in the story are described. In short stories, there are usually fewer characters compared to a novel. They usually focus on one central character or protagonist. Ask yourself the following:

- Who is the main character?
- Are the main character and other characters described through dialogue – by the way they speak (dialect or slang for instance)?
- Has the author described the characters by physical appearance, thoughts and feelings, and interaction (the way they act towards others)?
- Are they static/flat characters who do not change?
- Are they dynamic/round characters who DO change?
- What type of characters are they? What qualities stand out? Are they stereotypes?
- Are the characters believable?

Plot and structure

The plot is the main sequence of events that make up the story. In short stories the plot is usually centered around one experience or significant moment. Consider the following questions:

- What is the most important event?
- How is the plot structured? Is it linear, chronological or does it move around?
- Is the plot believable?

Narrator and Point of view

The narrator is the person telling the story. Consider this question: Are the narrator and the main character the same?

By point of view, we mean from whose eyes the story is being told. Short stories tend to be told through one character's point of view. The following are important questions to consider:

- Who is the narrator or speaker in the story?
- Does the author speak through the main character?
- Is the story written in the first person "I" point of view?
- Is the story written in a detached third person "he/she" point of view?
- Is there an "all-knowing" third person who can reveal what all the characters are thinking and doing at all times and in all places?

Conflict

Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the short story and is related to the main character. In a short story there is usually one main struggle.

- How would you describe the main conflict?
- Is it an internal conflict within the character?
- Is it an external conflict caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds himself/herself in?

Climax

The climax is the point of greatest tension or intensity in the short story. It can also be the point where events take a major turn as the story races towards its conclusion. Ask yourself:

- Is there a turning point in the story?
- When does the climax take place?

Theme

The theme is the main idea, lesson, or message in the short story. It may be an abstract idea about the human condition, society, or life. Ask yourself:

- How is the theme expressed?
- Are any elements repeated and therefore suggest a theme?
- Is there more than one theme?

Style

The author's style has to do with the his or her vocabulary, use of imagery, tone, or the feeling of the story. It has to do with the author's attitude toward the subject. In some short stories, the tone can be ironic, humorous, cold, or dramatic.

- Is the author's language full of figurative language?
- What images are used?
- Does the author use a lot of symbolism? Metaphors (comparisons that do not use "as" or "like") or similes (comparisons that use "as" or "like")?

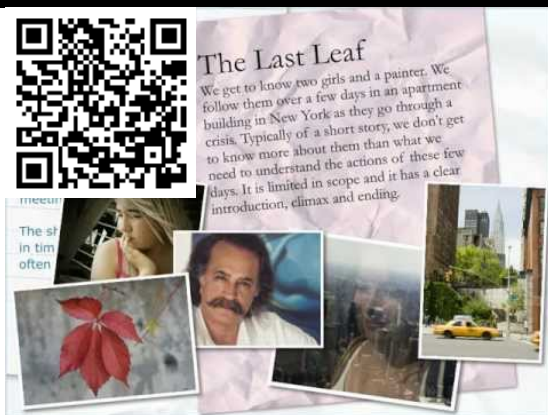
Your literary analysis of a short story will often be in the form of an essay where you may be asked to give your opinions of the short story at the end. Choose the elements that made the greatest impression on you. Point out which character/characters you liked best or least and always support your arguments.

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2.2.3: Short Stories versus the Novel

Short Story

Short stories are works of fiction that usually fall between 1,000 to 10,000 words. On the shorter end of the short story classification we have flash fiction (500-1,000 words). On the longer end, we might approach a novella (17,500-40,000 words). Aside from length, there are some other characteristics which qualify a work of fiction as a short story. It is written in prose, meaning sentences and paragraphs rather than the lines and stanzas of poetry. There is usually a clear storyline, or plot, that unfolds over time. In short stories, the plot usually stretches over a relatively short time span, and will involve fewer characters than a novel. Like in drama and novels, a short story will have a certain structure with a turning point or climax which brings the plot in an unexpected direction.



Video 4.2.1 : Short Story

The Novel

A novel is a work of fiction. This means that it is made up and not factual. Unlike the short story, it is NOT short: it usually focuses on many events and places as well as more characters than the short story. Also, the time span depicted in a novel is often longer than that of a short story.

In literary history, the novel is a fairly new form. Scholars count *Don Quixote* by Miguel Cervantes (1605) as the first narrative that fits modern criteria of a novel. Usually a novel is defined by its length, or, more precisely, the extension of its plot, which can span over longer time than, for example, a short story. But that is not always the case; there are many famous (and long) novels where the narrative evolves over a very short span of time, for example a couple of hours or a day. In addition, a novel often has an extensive cast of characters, and the plot may take place in many different settings. There are a number of subgenres that will identify a novel more specifically, such as fantasy, romance, historical, or bildungsroman.



Video 4.2.2 : Introduction to the Novel

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2.2.4: Types of Novels

Types of Novels

Satire

A satire is biting literary form. It can be a striking tool to pinpoint and raise criticism against political practices or other official activities.

The satire may as such be a strong weapon for opponents who want to reveal faulty, silly, or immoral practices by the authorities. It is also a way to highlight common proceedings that in fact are questionable or even foolish. But writing effective satire takes some skill and one will have to step lightly not to overexpose the object and give away the point too early. A well-written satire will cunningly strip down a certain practice and make it come out as the folly it really is.

To write a satire you have to take a step back and create some distance to the phenomenon you want to focus on, and describe it in an objective and unbiased manner. The narrative must be set in a credible context. That is, the satire will only work when the story or plot comes as an unpretentious presentation, and is told in a natural and effortless style without lecturing or exaggerating. A relevant technique is to let the narrator be either a somewhat naive observer, for example, a visitor from a foreign country or different culture, or someone who is given the chance to describe a phenomenon to an inquisitive audience. The clue is not to give away the critical attitude, but just to give an objective account and leave the rest to the reader. It is also important that the topic is both familiar and recognizable for the reader.

The optimal effect of a satire comes when the reader, after being entertained by the presentation, gradually or eventually gets the message. The good satire is a parallel so close to the real-life phenomenon that it will take some reflection to understand its satirical nature. The satire should not be confused with irony or parody which may be used for the same critical purpose, but are quite different approaches to the object.



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Humor: Irony vs. Satire

Famous writers often use humor in their works, and they do it quite deliberately. For example, Charles Dickens often chose to highlight the comical sides of characters he wanted to criticize. Ridiculing certain characters or institutions is a skillful way of manipulating readers. In general, it is liberating to laugh at authorities, and in that way humor can be an effective literary technique. Both irony and satire are widely used by writers to make a point and to lead the readers to draw their own conclusions. Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*, was a classic master of satire and humor. He had many friends, but his writing certainly made him some enemies as well. The ultimate aim of a satire is to present a certain phenomenon in a way that makes the readers laugh but at the same time respond to the serious issue behind the text. But for writers there is pitfall here, because humor may distort the thematic message in a text and move the readers' focus and intellectual understanding of the text. So a writer with a message must pick his method carefully and will often have to make a choice – because being funny and serious at the same time is not easy.

Crime

It is an interesting fact that crime literature never achieved any due respect or acclaim by literary scholars and critics. It is considered a simple and trivial genre without much literary merit. One reason may be that the universe of a traditional crime story

is displayed within a fairly predictable framework. When you pick up a crime story, you, to some extent, know what you will get. Certain elements are mandatory ingredients of the genre; number one is evident – there has to be a crime committed. Number two – there must be a criminal, and number three – there must be someone who goes after him.



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Science Fiction

Science fiction literature revolves around science and technology that does not yet exist and may never exist. But to keep the attention of most readers, it has to be plausible; therefore the science and technology described is based on the principles of science. These stories are most often set in the future. Sometimes they are about life on a changed Earth, but they also often deal with aliens, life on other planets, parallel worlds, or even time travel.

The main concern for many science fiction authors is not the scientific and technological developments themselves, but how they affect mankind. In fact, some science fiction stories depict situations arising mainly from the social or political change resulting from these developments. In other words, a lot of science fiction can also be seen as comments on important societal issues.

It was the editor Hugo Gernsback who coined the expression “science fiction” in the 1920s. Not very successful himself as an author, he launched the first science fiction magazine in 1926, in which he published the works of other science fiction authors. Since then, the science fiction genre has become increasingly more popular and has developed into several sub-genres. These sub-genres are not, however, surrounded by impermeable genre borders; most sci-fi stories cross over into other sub-genres – and even other genres.

Books and stories in the science fiction genre can focus on hard science fiction (revolving around science and technology), apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds, dystopian societies, time-travel, and space exploration and first contact, among other topics.

Children's Literature

The first English literature intended for children appeared during the Victorian age. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872) have become classics of fantasy literature for children. The characters Alice encounters in her underworld adventure have become immortal, like the Rabbit, the Mad Hatter and the Walrus, who is behind the famous quote, “The Time has come, the Walrus said, to talk of many things.” Much of the literature produced for children at the time was meant to be educational with a clear moralist Christian motive. Children were seen as small people apt to a sinful life if they were not taught the correct ways. Moral education may be good, but it is not entertaining. So literature for children had to be more than that. Towards the turn of the century writers like Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Rudyard Kipling contributed with books for children that are still read and cherished today. Who has not read or seen the animated film version of Kipling's *The Jungle Book*? Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* have also gained their positions as classics and have been successfully adapted to film. During the first half of the 20th century, literature for children gradually established itself as a genuine and fully recognized literary genre; and now one celebrated fiction writer after another came up with memorable and great literature for children. Examples include J.R.R. Tolkien's substantial epic *The Lord of the Rings* (1937-49), C.S. Lewis's wonderful *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56), A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, the magical world of Harry Potter created by J.K. Rowling, and the popular stories by Roald Dahl and the Swedish Astrid Lindgren. In today's fiction it is seen as sign of an author's versatility to be able to write both for children and for a grown-up audience.

Historical Fiction

History is an interesting and at the same time difficult subject. Researchers spend their time studying source material, and then draw their conclusions after having presented theories and discussed with colleagues. Our knowledge of history is based on

extensive and collective research by historians and archaeologists. So an author of fiction has to respect what these scholars have established as historical facts.

One way for the author to go is to “fill in” what history does not tell us, that is, to create a story about what “might have happened.” As long as the author steers clear of established historical facts this might work, but as soon as a character or a setting can be identified as factual history, he cannot tamper with it. For example, changing the fate of Napoleon or Hitler, or introducing hand guns in the Middle Ages would simply be a falsification, even if it is presented as fiction.

Another approach for writers of historical material is to use a factual setting and create one or more characters who take their places in a plot developing against a historical backdrop. This will give the author a framework that will be historically correct while his character(s) are purely fictional; they may even relate to and communicate with historical and factual characters. This has been done successfully by the Norwegian writer Kjartan Fløgstad in *Grense Jacobselv* where he creates a plot about how ex-Nazis were so smoothly re-established as clean and respectable citizens after the war. Another prime example of this approach is Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* which is the story of a failed insurrection during the French Revolution.

Reading stories set in history gives us a feeling of truth and authenticity. Such books (and films) may also bring about a sense of unification with the past and a rooting in our national identity. This is why historical novels were so popular during the Romantic Period. Stories about national heroes, chivalry, and bravery would spark the feeling of national pride and the urge for independence. Good examples are the historical plays of German playwright Friedrich Schiller and Scottish Sir Walter Scott’s stories about *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe*.



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Mass or Light Literature

In one of his essays, author George Orwell raised the question of whether “bad” literature can still be readable. The issue may seem far-fetched and indicate a rather highbrow attitude to literature, but who should be the judge of what is good and bad literature – the literary scholar or the reader? Critics might classify “bad” books as sub-standard writing that does not appeal to the intellect. They would probably claim that taste and popularity are not the same as quality. They may have a point, but it seems a bit pretentious to discard the literary preference of millions of readers.

Some of the most popular sub-genres of what is staple reading for the masses are available at a newsagent or in the supermarket rather than a bookstore. And this kind of literature has been and still is enjoyed by millions who just seek the pure entertainment of a reading experience. Examples of such literature are the western, hospital romance, family chronicle, science fiction, and crime, among others.

Exercise 4.3.1

How would you categorize these [extracts](#), all of which are taken from novels? Think about your reasons for suggesting a particular category.

Answer

How did you get on? The first extract is from an historical novel (Dunnett, 1993, p. 11). We can guess that it’s set in the past because the detailed description of Edinburgh doesn’t sound like a modern town. We know it’s from a novel since, in the last paragraph of the extract, we are allowed to share a piece of information that one of the characters has been given: ‘The

King's Wark, Anselm Adorne had been told.' Anselm Adorne did exist – he was a merchant and magistrate in Bruges in the second half of the fifteenth century – but Edinburgh is described as he sees it, and this we know can only be a fictional reconstruction. This is a good example of what historical novels can do: they can imaginatively recreate the past, peopling it both with characters who really existed and with characters who are completely fictional.

The second extract is from a popular romance (Mortimer, 1980, pp. 12-13). We know this, I think, because of the emphasis on the smouldering sexuality of the male character and the admiring response of the female character to him. They are stereotypes, placed in a stereotypical situation, although it's perhaps worth pointing out that the male figure has sound literary antecedents in the form of Heathcliff and Mr. Rochester, from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* respectively.

The third extract is science fiction (May, 1982, p. 11). We might deduce this from the unfamiliar situation, the use of strange words such as 'superficies' and 'normal space' and the fact that the Ship is a space ship, surrounded by stars.

I hope you could classify these extracts without too much difficulty, because you were able to draw on concepts of various kinds of fictional writing, based on your knowledge and experience of reading. This is the kind of classification that Dennis Walder summarises on page 9 of *The Realist Novel*, although he also points out that these classifications are not fixed or rigid.

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2.2.5: How to Read Fiction

How to Read and Analyze Fiction



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Novels are exciting machines (verbal machines) which transport their readers in space and time. They challenge us to meet the unfamiliar. They offer us a share in the pleasure

The above quote by Dr. Milligan shows us the pleasure a reader can get not only by reading a novel, but also analyzing it. The ultimate reading experience comes as a result of the collaboration between the writer and the reader; they both will have to contribute for the reading experience to be a success. So, once the writer has completed his task, the reader must do his bit for the literary universe to unfold. What happens in this process has occupied writers and scholars over the years. Many authors, including Virginia Woolf, have written extensive essays on the nature of literature, and how a literary text should be read. It is of course hard to define which basic elements are essential for the “correct” perception of a text, firstly because reading is a very private and individual experience. Secondly, writers are different and have their individual literary approach and style. But here lies the essence of a complete understanding of a literary text – the symbiotic unity of writing and reading.

The Act of Reading

The act of reading has been characterized by Robert DiYanni as involving three interrelated processes: experience, interpretation, and evaluation. The first thing we do when we read a novel is to experience it, that is to say, we respond to the development of the narrative and the characters presented to us. The story we read if it does its job effectively affects us on certain levels. We become involved in the events and incidents that befall the characters. The language of the narrative forces us to respond to it, maybe with pleasure or admiration, or sometimes with confusion. If we are engaged by the story on any level we will have feelings one way or the other about the outcome; we will all respond in different ways. That response is shaped by our reaction to the interplay of various narrative elements, which will be outlined now and discussed in detail later.

To read and appreciate a short story fully, you need to read it at least twice, especially if you are going to analyze it. You can follow the steps below:

1. Read the story in its entirety for enjoyment.
2. Read the story again, pausing often to reflect on what the description/events/language is trying to tell you.
3. Once you reach the end on the second read, you can reflect on the story as a whole based on your interpretations.

How to Read a Novel: Advice from Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's essay, "How Should One Read a Book?" is still useful today to understand one reads a novel.



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About the Author: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

Until she was 13, Adeline Virginia Stephen led a happy and carefree life in a harmonious Victorian family. Then a series of events threw her life into an accelerating downward spiral. Her mother died, which for her was “the greatest tragedy that could ever happen”. But there was more to come. After this her father despaired and was unable to take care of his three children, so Virginia and her sister had to be looked after by their half-sister Stella. In this new family setting the Stephen sisters were exposed to sexual advances by both Stella’s husband and their half-brother, George Duckworth. Virginia withdrew into a state of “frozen and defensive panic” and became a shy individual, feeling that the next shock would drive her mad. This came when her father soon after died of cancer, and Virginia had her first of a series of nervous breakdowns. She was on the brink of madness, wandering in and out of hallucinations and fighting with self-destructive thoughts.

Literature became her refuge. She and her sister Vanessa became the leading figures of the so-called Bloomsbury Group, an avant-garde circle based at their home in Bloomsbury, London. It was a group of intellectuals discussing social, cultural and political issues of the time – anti-imperialism, modernist literature and art, and feminism. She later married another member of the group, Leonard Woolf.

Her first writing was fairly conventional and straightforward, but gradually she developed a more experimental style influenced by modernist writers, such as James Joyce. She wanted to challenge the conventional concept of a novel and traditional narrative style. Some of her most famous works include *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), and *A Room of One's Own* (1929).

Virginia Woolf published two volumes of literary essays, *The Common Reader* (1925) and *The Second Common Reader* (1932), which are, as the titles indicate, written to encourage reading among common people as opposed to critics and literary scholars. She reflects on the style and approach of different writers, the criteria of literary quality, and most importantly, as in this excerpt from *The Second Common Reader* – the role of the reader.

How Should One Read a Book?: An Essay by Virginia Woolf

In the first place, I want to emphasize the note of interrogation at the end of my title. Even if I could answer the question for myself, the answer would apply only to me and not to you. The only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions. If this is agreed between us, then I feel at liberty to put forward a few ideas and suggestions because you will not allow them to fetter that independence which is the most important quality that a reader can possess. After all, what laws can be laid down about books? The battle of Waterloo was certainly fought on a certain day; but is Hamlet a better play than Lear? Nobody can say. To admit authorities, however heavily furred and gowned, into our libraries and let them tell us how to read, what value to place upon what we read, is to destroy the spirit of freedom which is the breath of these sanctuaries. Everywhere else we may be bound by laws and conventions, there we have none.

(...)

Yet few people ask from books what books can give us. Most commonly we come to books with blurred and divided minds, asking of fiction that it shall be true, of poetry that it shall be false, of biography that it shall be flattering, of history that it shall enforce our own prejudices. If we could banish all such preconceptions when we read, that would be an admirable beginning. Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice. If you hang back, and reserve and criticize at first, you are preventing yourself from getting the fullest possible value from what you read. But if you open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness, from the twist and turn of sentences, will bring you into the presence of a human being unlike any other. Steep yourself in this, acquaint yourself with this, and soon you will find that your author is giving you, attempting to give you something far more definite. The thirty-two chapters of a novel – if we consider how to read a novel first – are an attempt to make something as formed and controlled as a building: But words are more impalpable than bricks; reading is a longer and more complicated process than seeing. Perhaps the quickest way to understand the elements of what a novelist is doing is not to read, but to write; to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words. Recall, then, some event that has left a distinct impression on you – how at the corner of a street, you passed two people talking. A tree shook; an electric light danced; the tone of the talk was comic, but also tragic; a whole vision, an entire conception contained in that moment.

But when you attempt to reconstruct it in words, you will find that it breaks into a thousand conflicting impressions. Some must be subdued; others emphasized; in the process you will lose, probably, all grasp upon the emotion itself. Then turn from your blurred and littered pages to the opening pages of some great novelist – Defoe, Jane Austen, Hardy. Now you will be better able to appreciate their mastery. It is not merely that we are in the presence of a different person – Defoe, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy – but we are living a different world. Here in Robinson Crusoe, we are trudging a plain highroad; one thing happens after another; the fact and the order of the fact is enough. But if the open air and adventure mean everything to Defoe they mean nothing to Jane Austen. Here is the drawing-room, and people talking, and by the many mirrors of their talk revealing their characters. And if, when we have accustomed ourselves to the drawing-room and its reflections, we turn to Hardy, we are once more spun round. The moors are round us and the stars are above our heads. The other side of the mind is now exposed – the dark side that comes uppermost in solitude, not the light side that shows in company. Our relations are not towards people, but towards Nature and Destiny. Yet different as these worlds are, each is consistent with itself. The maker of each is careful to observe the laws of his own perspective, and however great a strain they may put upon you they will never confuse us, as lesser writers so frequently do, by introducing two different kinds of reality into the same book.

Exercise 4.4.1

- What does Virginia Woolf say about the relation between reader and writer?
- What is her advice about what to read?
- What does she say about defining "good" literature?
- What does she mean by saying that "few people ask from books what books can give us"?
- How is "reading a more complicated process than seeing"?
- In addition to an open mind, what does she suggest as a good starting point if we want to appreciate good literature?
- She mentions three famous English novelists; how does she describe their different styles?
- Explain the last sentence of the essay.

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2.2.6: Elements of Fiction

Elements of Literature

Before you dive straight into your analysis of symbolism, diction, imagery, or any other rhetorical device, you need to have a grasp of the basic elements of what you're reading. When we read critically or analytically, we might disregard character, plot, setting, and theme as surface elements of a text. Aside from noting what they are and how they drive a story, we sometimes don't pay much attention to these elements. However, characters and their interactions can reveal a great deal about the story's themes. Plot can act as a stand-in for real-world events just as setting can represent our world or an allegorical one. Theme is the heart of literature, exploring everything from love and war to childhood and aging.

With this in mind, you can begin your examination of literature with a “who, what, when, where, how?” approach. Ask yourself “Who are the characters?” “What is happening?” “When and where is it happening?” and “How does it happen?” The answers will give you character (who), plot (what and how), and setting (when and where). When you put these answers together, you can begin to figure out theme, and you will have a solid foundation on which to base your analysis.

We will be exploring several of the following literary elements in the following pages so that we can have a common vocabulary to talk about fiction:

- Tone
- Character
- Plot
- Setting
- Narration
- Rhetorical Devices
- Theme
- Imagery
- Symbolism

Here are a few questions to ask when looking at some of the main elements of fiction. We will be looking at each of these in more detail in the following pages.

Setting

Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place.

- What aspects make up the setting?
 - Geography, weather, time of day, social conditions?
- What role does setting play in the story? Is it an important part of the plot or theme? Or is it just a backdrop against which the action takes place?
- Study the time period which is also part of the setting
- When was the story written?
 - Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
 - How does the time period affect the language, atmosphere, or social circumstances of the novel?

Characterization

Characterization deals with how the characters are described.

- through dialogue?
- by the way they speak?
- physical appearance? thoughts and feelings?
- interaction – the way they act towards other characters?
- Are they static characters who do not change?
- Do they develop by the end of the story?
- What type of characters are they?
- What qualities stand out?
- Are they stereotypes?

- Are the characters believable?

Plot and structure

The *plot* is the main sequence of events that make up the story.

- What are the most important events?
- How is the plot structured? Is it linear and chronological or does it move back and forth?
- Are there turning points, a climax, and/or an anticlimax?
- Is the plot believable?

Narrator and Point of View

The *narrator* is the person telling the story.

Point of view: whose eyes the story is being told through.

- Who is the narrator or speaker in the story?
- Is the narrator the main character?
- Does the author speak through one of the characters?
- Is the story written in the first person "I" point of view?
- Is the story written in a detached third person "he/she/they" point of view?
- Is the story written in an "all-knowing" third person who can reveal what all the characters are thinking and doing at all times and in all places?

Conflict

Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the novel and is related to the main character.

- How would you describe the main conflict?
 - Is it internal where the character suffers inwardly?
 - Is it external, caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds themselves in?

Theme

The *theme* is the main idea, lesson, or message in the novel. It is usually an abstract, universal idea about the human condition, society or life, to name a few.

- How does the theme shine through in the story?
- Are any elements repeated that may suggest a theme?
- What other themes are there?

Style

The author's style has to do with the author's vocabulary, use of imagery, tone, or feeling of the story. It has to do with his attitude towards the subject. In some novels the tone can be ironic, humorous, cold, or dramatic.

- Is the text full of figurative language?
- Does the author use a lot of symbolism? Metaphors, similes?

An example of a metaphor is when someone says, "My love, you *are* a rose." An example of a simile is "My darling, you are *like* a rose."
- What images are used?

Your literary analysis of a novel will often be in the form of an essay or book report where you will be asked to give your opinions of the novel at the end. To conclude, choose the elements that made the greatest impression on you. Point out which characters you liked best or least and always support your arguments. Try to view the novel as a whole and try to give a balanced analysis.

These are the Elements of Literature, the things that make up every story. This is the first of two videos.



Video 4.5.1 : Elements of literature with Mr. Taylor: Part I



Video 4.5.2 Elements of literature with Mr. Taylor: Part II

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2.2.7: Character

Characters and Characterization

How do writers of prose fiction make us respond to the imaginary people they create? In order to encourage us to continue reading, writers must force us to react in some way to their characters, whether it is to identify, empathise, or sympathise with them; to dislike or disapprove of them; or to pass judgement on their actions, behaviour and values. As we have already seen, the fundamental question we repeatedly ask when we read a story is what happened next. Equally importantly we want to know to whom it happened, and we will only want to know this if we feel strongly one way or another about the characters in the story. In this respect the author's skill at characterisation is crucial.

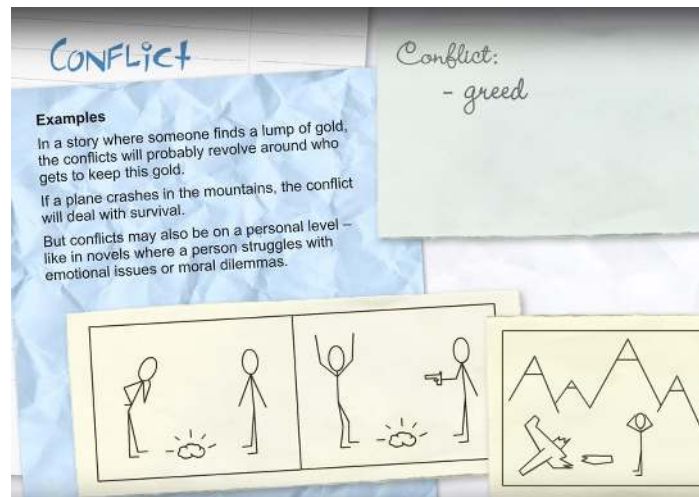
We use the term characterisation to describe the strategies that an author uses to present and develop the characters in a narrative. This use of descriptive techniques will vary from character to character. Some characters are central to a story; often there will be one main character around whom the narrative revolves: Pip in *Great Expectations*, for example, or, we may reasonably surmise from the opening paragraph we looked at earlier, Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. We expect that such characters, and others close to the heart of narrative events, will be presented to us in great detail; we may be allowed access to their consciousness, either by the use of first-person narration or third-person **focalisation**, and it is extremely likely that they will undergo some sort of significant personal change (for better or worse) as a result of their experiences. These kinds of characters are sometimes known as *dynamic*. Other characters, often described as *static*, may be much less thoroughly-drawn; they may be introduced to the narrative primarily to perform a particular narrative or thematic function, and will probably undergo little or no change in the course of the story.

Terms Related to Characterization

You are probably already adept at identifying the characters of a story, but there are some terms that will be helpful in your literary analysis. Keep in mind that characters aren't necessarily people. They can be animals, divine beings, personifications, etc.

One of the most important terms you will use is **conflict**. Conflict occurs between two opposing sides in a story, usually centering on characters' values, needs, or interests. A conflict can be internal or external. **Internal conflict** takes place within an individual, such as when a character is torn between duty to his family and duty to the state. **External conflict** occurs when two individuals or groups of individuals clash. A struggle between a character and his best friend is an example of an external conflict.

Video



Click for [video](#) to discuss that conflict is a struggle between opposing forces.

By examining the conflict, we can determine the **protagonist** and **antagonist**. The protagonist is the focal point of the conflict, meaning that he or she is the main character of the story. All the action in a story will revolve around its protagonist. In addition, a story that contains a series of conflicts can contain several protagonists – no story is limited to just one. The antagonist is the character who stands in opposition of the protagonist. The antagonist is the other half of the conflict. Remember that an antagonist doesn't have to be a person – it can be a nation, a group, or even a set of ideas.

Sometimes, the protagonist can take the form of the **antihero**. The antihero is a protagonist who does not embody traditional “heroic” values. However, the reader will still sympathize with an antihero. For instance, a protagonist who is a scoundrel is an antihero, as a traditional hero would embody virtue.

In addition to the protagonist and antagonist, most stories have **secondary** or **minor characters**. These are the other characters in the story. They sometimes support the protagonist or antagonist in their struggles, and they sometimes never come into contact with the main characters.

Authors use minor characters for a variety of reasons. For instance, they can illustrate a different side of the main conflict, or they can highlight the traits of the main characters. One important type of minor character is called a **foil**. This character emphasizes the traits of a main character (usually the protagonist) through contrast. Thus, a foil will often be the polar opposite of the main character he or she highlights. Sometimes, the foil can take the form of a sidekick or friend. Other times, he or she might be someone who contends against the protagonist. For example, an author might use a decisive and determined foil to draw attention to a protagonist's lack of resolve and motivation.

Finally, any character in a story can be an **archetype**. We can define archetype as an original model for a type of character, but that doesn't fully explain the term. One way to think of an archetype is to think of how a bronze statue is made. First, the sculptor creates his design out of wax or clay. Next, he creates a fireproof mold around the original. After this is done, the sculptor can make as many of the same sculpture as he pleases. The original model is the equivalent to the archetype. Some popular archetypes are the trickster figure, such as Coyote in Native American myth or Brer Rabbit in African American folklore, and the femme fatale, like Pandora in Greek myth. Keep in mind that archetype simply means original pattern and does not always apply to characters. It can come in the form of an object, a narrative, etc. For instance, the apple in the Garden of Eden provides the object-based forbidden fruit archetype, and Odysseus's voyage gives us the narrative-based journey home archetype.

Flat and Round Characters

Another useful distinction between types of characters was proposed by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*. “We may divide characters into flat and round,” Forster suggested (1927, p. 65). What do you think he meant by these terms?

I expect you found this rather straightforward. The word “flat” suggests a one-dimensional figure, and what Forster meant by “flat” characters were those who are largely taken to represent a particular idea, human trait, or set of values, much like the static characters described above. They are caricatures who can be easily and quickly summarised; Forster gives an example:

The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as “I will never desert Mr Micawber.” There is Mrs Micawber – she says she won't desert Mr Micawber; she doesn't, and there she is.

(ibid.)

The reference is to a character in Dickens' *David Copperfield* who does not change in any significant way in spite of the varied experiences she and her family encounter. “Round” characters, by contrast, are described and developed in such a way as to achieve three-dimensionality, a physical and psychological complexity that mimics that of the real people we come to know in our everyday lives.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* provides some interesting examples of “flat” and “round” characters. Note, however, that identifying those examples will largely depend on the reader's response to Austen's characters, but we might well place figures such as Mrs. Bennett in the former category, and the central character, her daughter Elizabeth, in the latter. As you may know, Austen sums up Mrs. Bennet in three short, direct sentences at the end of the opening chapter of the novel:

She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.

(Austen, 1813, p. 3)

Compare this with the opening of the final chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*:

Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters. With what delighted pride she afterwards visited Mrs. Bingley and talked of Mrs. Darcy may be guessed. I wish I could say, for the sake of her family, that the accomplishment of her earnest desire in the establishment of so many of her children, produced so happy an effect as to make her a sensible, amiable woman for the rest of her life; though perhaps it was lucky for her husband, who might not have relished domestic felicity in so unusual a form, that she still was occasionally nervous and invariably silly.

(ibid., p. 295)

These two descriptions of Mrs. Bennet, at the beginning and end of the novel are rare examples of Austen "telling" us about this particular character. More often, she "shows" us Mrs. Bennett by reporting her speech directly and allowing us to draw our own conclusions about Mrs. Bennet's attitudes and values. We are never given access to Mrs. Bennett's consciousness; events are never "focalised" through her. Why do you think this is?

It is probably because Mrs. Bennet's main function in the story is to represent a particular attitude of the period in which the novel is set, that the best, or only chance for women's social advancement and financial security was through marriage. By representing this view from the outside, as it were, Austen leads us to scrutinise it in a more rigorous way. To describe Mrs. Bennet as "flat" or "static" is not to imply that she is necessarily a negligible character. She may perform only one function in the novel, but it is a function that draws attention to the constrained position of women in the society Austen depicts.

That Elizabeth is a "round," or "dynamic," character is surely not in doubt. The entire novel revolves around her and we perceive much of the action through her eyes. The changes she experiences conform to Forster's template of "roundness," and the contrast with Mrs. Bennet demonstrates the necessity for combinations of "flat" and "round" that Forster sees as necessary for the successful creation of fictional narrative:

The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it – life within the pages of a book. And by using it sometimes alone, more often in combination with the other kind, the novelist achieves his task of acclimatization, and harmonizes the human race with the other aspects of his work.

(Forster, 1927, p. 75)

Activity: Character Analysis

Most novels will have a hero, a good guy. There is no doubt that Harry Potter is the hero and protagonist, and he has a lot of good friends. How do we know that they are good? We have to depend on information about looks, behavior, and speech.

Study the extracts and then answer the questions which follow.

Extracts from the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* used in the analysis.

EXTRACT 1

If the motorcycle was huge, it was nothing to the man sitting astride it. He was almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide. He looked simply too big to be allowed, and so wild – long tangles of bushy black hair and beard hid most of his face, he had hands the size of trash can lids, and his feet in their leather boots were like baby dolphins. In his vast, muscular arms he was holding a bundle of blankets. (Description of Hagrid)

EXTRACT 2

"S-s-sorry," sobbed Hagrid, taking out a large, spotted handkerchief and burying his face in it. "But I c-c-can't stand it – Lily and James dead – an' poor little Harry off ter live with Muggles—" (Hagrid talks about Harry's dead parents and how he has to

stay with the humans, the Muggles)

EXTRACT 3

“Yes, yes, it’s all very sad, but get a grip on yourself, Hagrid, or we’ll be found,” Professor McGonagall whispered, patting Hagrid gingerly on the arm as Dumbledore stepped over the low garden wall and walked to the front door. He laid Harry gently on the doorstep, took a letter out of his cloak, tucked it inside Harry’s blankets, and then came back to the other two. For a full minute the three of them stood and looked at the little bundle; Hagrid’s shoulders shook, Professor McGonagall blinked furiously, and the twinkling light that usually shone from Dumbledore’s eyes seemed to have gone out. (From the delivery of the orphan Harry at the Dursleys’ doorstep)

EXTRACT 4

“Look”— he murmured, holding out his arm to stop Malfoy. Something bright white was gleaming on the ground. They inched closer. It was the unicorn, all right, and it was dead. Harry had never seen anything so beautiful and sad. Its long, slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly white on the dark leaves. Harry had taken one step toward it when a slithering sound made him freeze where he stood. A bush on the edge of the clearing quivered... Then, out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast. Harry, Malfoy, and Fang stood transfixed. The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered its head over the wound in the animal’s side, and began to drink its blood. (From the first time Harry meets Voldemort)

EXERCISES

Study Extracts 1, 2, and 3

1. How does the author introduce us to Hagrid and Professor Dumbledore? What kind of impression do you get? Do you like them? Why?
2. Describe in your own words Hagrid’s looks.
3. How is speech used to describe the characters?

Villains/Antagonists

In most novels we will also meet some “bad guys.” They are often called villains or antagonists. How do we know that they are evil? Study **Extract 4** above.

1. Describe in your own words Voldemort’s looks and behavior.
2. How does the author tell us that Voldemort is an evil character (an antagonist)?

Character Development

Throughout the story Harry changes a lot. He develops from a loner into a sociable, more mature guy, and he also has to admit that he is mistaken. One of the characters that he thinks is “a bad guy” is actually “a good guy”! In most reports you will be asked to write a characterization of one of the main characters and to comment if they have changed or not.



Video 4.6.1 : Character

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2.2.8: Plot

Plot



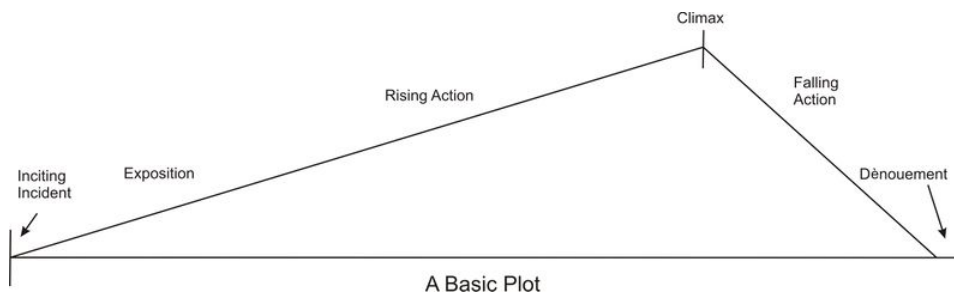
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Before you can write an in-depth explanation of the themes, motives, or diction of a book, you need to be able to discuss one of its most basic elements: the story. If you can't identify what has happened in a story, your writing will lack context. Writing your paper will be like trying to put together a complex puzzle without looking at the picture you're supposed to create. Each piece is important, but without the bigger picture for reference, you and anyone watching will have a hard time understanding what is being assembled. Thus, you should look for “the bigger picture” in a book, poem, or play by reading for plot.

A plot is a storyline. We can define plot as the main events of a book, short story, play, poem, etc. and the way those events connect to one another. Conflicts act as the driving forces behind a plot.

A plot has several main elements: **inciting incident**, **exposition**, **rising action**, **climax**, **falling action**, and **dénouement**. These elements often appear in the order listed here, but you should be aware that some works deviate from this form.

A Diagram of the Components of a Basic Plot



Inciting Incident: This is the event that sets the main conflict into motion. Without it, we could have no plot, as all the characters would already be living “happily ever after,” so to speak. Most stories contain many conflicts, so you will have to identify the main conflict before you can identify the inciting incident. Remember, the inciting incident and conflict are two separate things – the inciting incident is a moment in a story that starts the main conflict. For instance, a person throwing the first punch can be considered the inciting incident to the conflict of a long fistfight. In addition, the inciting incident can happen before a story takes place, in which case it is related to the reader as a past event.

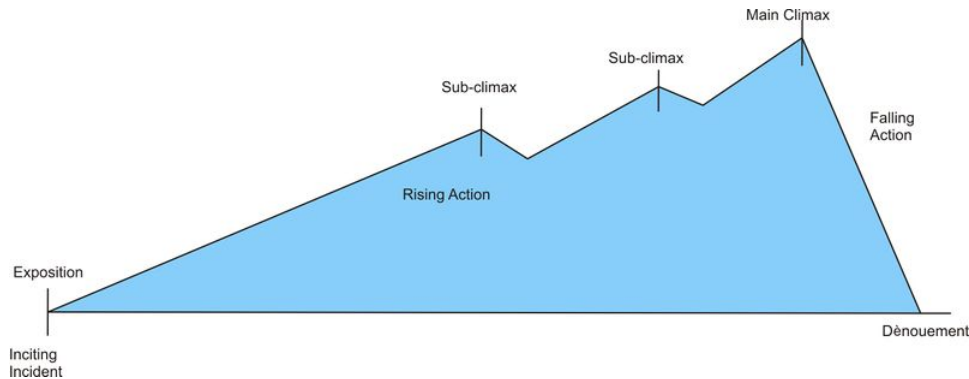
Exposition: This is the part of the story that tells us the setting. We find out who the main characters are and where the story takes place. The exposition also hints at the themes and conflicts that will develop later in the story. Exposition can take place throughout a story as characters reveal more about themselves.

Rising Action: The rising action is comprised of a series of events that build up to the climax of the story. It introduces us to secondary conflicts and creates tension in the story. You can think of the rising action as the series of events that make the climax of the story possible.

Climax: The climax has often been described as the “turning point” of a story. A good way to think of it is the incident that allows the main conflict of a story to resolve. The climax allows characters to solve a problem. It take many forms, such as an epiphany the protagonist has about himself, a battle between the protagonist and antagonist, or the culmination of an internal struggle.

Many stories actually have smaller climaxes before the main one. Like the main climax, these are turning points in the story. These sub-climaxes can be minor turning points in the main conflict that help build and release suspense during the rising action. They can also be the main turning points for secondary conflicts within a story. You might diagram a plot containing sub-climaxes and a main climax like this:

A Diagram of a Complex Plot, or a Plot that Contains Sub-climaxes



Falling Action: The events that take place after the climax are called the falling action. These events show the results of the climax, and they act as a bridge between the climax and the dénouement.

Dénouement: The word dénouement comes from the French “to untie” and the Latin “knot,” which gives us an indication of its purpose. It serves as the unraveling of a plot – a resolution to a story. In the dénouement, the central conflict is resolved. However, conflicts aren't always resolved. Some stories leave secondary conflicts unsettled, and a rare few even leave doubt about the resolution of the main conflict. The dénouement can also leave the story and characters in the same state they were in before the story began. This often occurs when an epilogue tells the reader that all the conflicts in the story have been resolved. Thus, we can see the dénouement as a kind of mirror to the exposition, showing us the same situation at both the beginning and end of a story.

A **flashback** (not shown in the diagram) is a device used to give the reader background information that happened in the past.

The first video below gives an overview about plot:

Video 4.7.1 : Plot



The second video talks about climax and turning point:



Video 4.7.2 : Climax and Turning Point

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2.2.9: Setting

Setting in Fiction



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If a story has characters and a plot, these elements must exist within some context. The frame of reference in which the story occurs is known as **setting**. The most basic definition of setting is one of place and time. You want to ask yourself, “Where and when does the story take place?” *Gone With the Wind*, for example, takes place in Georgia during the American Civil War. Setting can be very important in discovering and highlighting the **mood**, or the general feeling we get from a story. (Note: Be careful not to mix up mood and tone, as they are not the same thing. Mood is the feeling we get from a story; tone is a way of getting that feeling across.) For instance, Edgar Allan Poe portrays a very dark, oppressive setting in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” which makes the reader share the narrator’s feelings of confinement and depression. In addition, the house in Poe’s story can be seen as a kind of **internalized setting**. In this kind of setting, an aspect of the story external to a character represents the character’s internal development. For instance, the cracked face of the house can be said to represent the cracked minds of the Usher siblings.

Setting as Geographical Entity

We can define the “setting” of a story as the geographical location or locations in which the events of the narrative takes place, as well as the time in which those events are set. Location can refer to wider geographical entities such as countries or cities as well as to smaller entities such as households or domestic interiors. Time can refer to a general historical period or to the chronological boundaries of the story’s events.

Let’s look again at the beginning of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. How important is setting in this case? How does Rushdie’s narrative style help us to evaluate the significance of the setting?

I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more ... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicians ratified my authenticity.

(1981, p. 9)

Did you feel that setting was clearly very important here? We may not know exactly *why* at this stage, but the implication is that the time and place at which the narrator's story begins is of great significance. He describes himself as "handcuffed to history" by the circumstances of his birth, and, as I suggested earlier, we are alerted to the possibility of a story to come which will have historical and political associations, reinforced by the assertion that the narrator's "destinies" were "indissolubly chained" to the future of his country. Location is surely important here; the place of the narrator's birth is the first thing we are told. You might further have noticed that the specific cultural environment is suggested by the image of "Clock-hands join(ing) palms in respectful greeting," mimicking the Indian gesture of *namaste*. The references to "soothsayers," "newspapers," and "politicos" further enhances our sense of a culturally significant environment, where traditional and modern values interact. The American writer Eudora Welty has claimed that "every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else" (quoted in DiYanni, 1997, p. 67). Rushdie's use of place and time in this extract from *Midnight's Children* seems to bear this out; the narrative's entire meaning and significance rests on its setting, I hope you'll agree.

Setting as Time and Place

The surroundings in which characters are placed and in which narrative events take place can have other, more subtle effects on how we read and interpret stories. Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) is another novel rooted very specifically in time and place. Much of the action takes place in various country house settings, which represent different aspects of Russian society at the time. Into that environment comes the anarchist Bazarov, influenced by the ideas he has absorbed in the very different settings of the city and the university. As you will see from your study of the novel, the various settings come to represent different values, ideas and attitudes. This is equally true of smaller scale settings. We associate particular characters with the environments in which we encounter them, and the values associated with those places; characters often seem "at home" in specific places, but not elsewhere. In *Great Expectations*, Joe Gargery is uncomfortable when visiting Miss Havisham at Stasis House, and awkward in Pip's London dwelling. Other characters, like Turgenev's Bazarov, are **characterized** by their failure to "belong" in any of the locations they inhabit in the course of the story. Pavel Petrovich, seemingly the antithesis of Bazarov, also often seems ill-at-ease in his surroundings. He lives on the estate of his brother Nikolai, but is not originally from this sort of rural background.

Exercise 4.8.1

Read the following description of Pavel's room and try to decide what the setting tells us about him.

But Pavel Petrovich returned to his elegant room, hung with fine dark-grey wallpaper and decorated with guns fixed on a colourful Persian rug, with walnut furniture upholstered in dark-green velveteen, a Renaissance-style bookcase in old dark oak, bronze statuettes on a magnificent desk and a fireplace. He flung himself on his sofa, folded his hands behind his head and remained there motionless, gazing almost with despair at the ceiling. Whether it was that he wanted to hide from the very walls themselves what was happening to his face, or for some other reason, he stood up, undid the loops holding the heavy window curtains and once again flung himself down on the sofa.

(1862, pp. 40-1)

Answer

The overall impression given by the very detailed inventory of Pavel's room is one of a bewildering array of cultural styles and influences, from different times and places. It is undoubtedly the room of someone with a well-developed aesthetic sense, but does it appear at all comfortable or inviting? The very diversity of the décor seems to suggest a sense of rootlessness, reinforced by Pavel's behaviour here; the possibility that he is trying to "hide from the very walls themselves what was happening to his face." Even in the sanctuary of his own rooms on his brother's estate he seems to find himself alienated amongst the no doubt impressive, yet strangely soulless artefacts he has gathered around him.

The significance of setting will vary from novel to novel, or from story to story, of course, and one of the questions you should continually ask yourself as you read is *how* important to the narrative events and characterisation are the dual factors of time and place.



Video 4.8.1 : Setting in fiction

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2.2.10: Narration, Point of View, Dialogue

Narration



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When doing a close reading, you also need to keep the big picture in mind. You already know how to look for major plot points, identify the setting, and list possible themes, but you should also keep in mind who is telling you the story. The **narrator**, or the person telling the story, is one of the most important aspects of a text. A narrator can be a character in the story, or he or she might not appear in the story at all. In addition, a text can have multiple narrators, providing the reader with a variety of viewpoints on the text. And finally, a story can be related by an **unreliable narrator** – a narrator the reader cannot trust to tell the facts of a story correctly or in an unbiased manner.

Note: One thing you should always keep in mind is that the narrator and author are different. The narrator exists within the context of the text and only exists in the story. However, in most non-fiction and some fiction, the author can model the narrator after him or her self; in this case, the author and narrator are different people sharing the same viewpoint.



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Unreliable Narrators

In reading a first-person narration we encounter a potential problem that we do not have when we encounter an omniscient third-person narrative such as Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Can you think what that might be?

The factor I was hoping you would identify is that of the degree of reliability we can attach to a first-person narrative. As we read and discover more about a narrator we receive more and more indications that determine the extent to which we can trust the voice telling us the story. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is narrated by its central character, an English butler called Stevens, who recalls various events and incidents from the past in such a way as to constantly cast doubt on the dependability of his narration. At one point we are presented with a prolonged and heated argument between Stevens and the housekeeper Miss Kenton about the butler's ailing father, also a member of the staff of the same country house. The argument is

narrated in direct speech, suggesting an authentic recreation of the actual incident, but is followed by a piece of narration by Stevens that immediately undermines our trust in his version of events:

But now that I think further about it, I am not sure Miss Kenton spoke quite so boldly that day. We did, of course, over the years of working closely together come to have some very frank exchanges, but the afternoon I am recalling was still early in our relationship and I cannot see even Miss Kenton having been so forward. I am not sure she could actually have gone so far as to say things like: 'these errors may be trivial in themselves, but you must yourself realise their larger significance'. In fact, now that I come to think of it, I have a feeling it may have been Lord Darlington himself who made that particular remark to me that time he called me into his study some two months after that exchange with Miss Kenton outside the billiard room. By that time, the situation as regards my father had changed significantly following his fall. (p. 60)

There are numerous such examples of Stevens' "unreliability" throughout the novel. These become more significant when placed against the wider historical and political backdrop of the story. Stevens had been butler to Lord Darlington, devoting his life to the service of someone he saw as a "great man." However, as the narrative unfolds, and in spite of Stevens' selective and constantly revised memory, Darlington is revealed as an unwitting pawn of Nazism. The unreliability of Stevens' narration draws an implicit parallel between memory and history and shows both to be liable to distortion and manipulation, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Fragmented Narration

We can see, then, that even when the identity of the narrator of a prose fiction is made clear to us, there are possibilities for uncertainty and ambiguity. So what are we to make of the next extract?

Exercise 4.9.1

Please read the extract from [A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man](#) by James Joyce now and consider what the narrative is describing, and try to characterize the narrative voice and perspective.

Answer

This is not at all an easy narrative voice to characterise. Indeed, it is difficult to define who is narrating at various points in the opening section of this novel. However, I hope you realised at least that, as with the other two extracts, this is an account of childhood experience. It even begins with the time-honoured phrase used for telling stories to children – "Once upon a time." The diction of the remainder of the opening sentence seems very childlike, an excited-sounding unpunctuated flow with repetitions of childish terms such as "moocow" and nonsense words like "nicens." We are a long way from narrative "**realism**" here. As the novelist Anthony Burgess has implied, a more conventional representation of the child's impressions—"My first memories are of my father, a monocled hirsute man who told me stories"—would have a very different effect on us as readers. Burgess described the beginning of *Portrait* as "the first big technical breakthrough of twentieth-century prose-writing" (1965, p. 50) and I hope you were able to identify aspects of the extract that might warrant such a description.

The narrative seems to be made up of fragmented, unrelated associations; the father's "hairy face"; the mysterious Betty Byrne and her even more mysterious "lemon platt"; the random and sometimes distorted snatches of song and the sinister nursery-rhyme-like refrain "Pull out his eyes /Apologise"; and the unexpected reference to Michael Davitt and Parnell, which we need some knowledge of Irish politics to understand fully.

But can we detect some sort of order or pattern here? I think we can, though it is by no means obvious. The passage gives me the impression of an attempt to replicate a child's growing awareness of his world, the relationships between those who populate it, and the development of his facility for language. The novel begins with an episode of storytelling as we have seen, though we can't be sure whether the child or the father is the actual speaker at that point. The child's stumbling attempts at language are suggested by the nonsensical line of song—"O, the green woth botheth"—which seems to be a corruption of the two lines quoted prior to that. A world of sensations, sight, sound, touch, smell, and movement is invoked

and gradually the wider world begins to impinge and we can see the child beginning to categorise and impose order on his growing knowledge, recognising different smells and the ages of the adults around him. The family unit is then transcended as mention is made of the Vances and the "different father and mother," again implying a developing awareness on the part of the child-narrator. The sense of fragmentation remains strong, however, with the unexplained incident of the child hiding under the table (we are not told why he is there or why he must apologise). The critic Hugh Kenner has described the opening of *Portrait* as "contrapuntal," and there are certainly at least two contrasting perspectives revealed in this extract: what Kenner calls "an Aristotelian catalogue of senses, faculties, and mental activities" combined with "the unfolding of the infant conscience" (quoted in Beja, 1973, p. 126).

Narrative Organization

The way a story unfolds is as important as who tells it. Even though prose is just "regular writing," there are many different kinds of prose. Some prose is written as short stories, while other prose is written as novels and novellas. Each type of prose has its own organizational scheme as well. For instance, some stories are organized into large sections, while others are organized into chapters. Some prose is even organized into sections of journal entries or letters between characters.

It is important to note how an author divides a story. Ask yourself why a chapter ends where it does. Does the chapter ending add suspense to the story, or does it just provide a place to transition to another character's point of view? Does each section of a story have its own theme, or is there only one overarching theme? If you are reading an epistolary novel, why do you think one character chose to reveal certain information to another? Paying attention to how a text is organized, divided, and sub-divided will provide you insight into the plot and theme.

Points of View

All prose is written in one of three points of view: first-person narration, third-person limited narration, and third-person omniscient narration.

First Person

First-person narration is written in the first person mode, meaning that that story is told from the viewpoint of one person who often uses language like "I," "you," or "we." A first-person narrator can even be a character in the story she is narrating. Furthermore, the narrator will have a limited perspective; he cannot tell what the other characters are thinking or doing, and his telling of the story is influenced by his feelings about the other characters, the setting of the story, and the plot. When you read prose related by a first-person narrator, pay attention to the narrator's biases – they can tell you a great deal about the other elements of the story. For instance, here's an example of first-person narration:

As I walked home from the store, I could feel the cool spring breeze stir my hair. It was getting warm, and I had been looking forward to the end of snow, sleet, and rain for the past few months. I saw Charley coming down the sidewalk towards me. He was a nice guy, that Charley, but I always thought he was a few bulbs short of a chandelier. He waved at me, and I nodded in return.

As you can see, in the first-person mode, the narrator tells the story directly from his point-of-view. He has the ability to influence the reader's opinions of characters through his narration – here the narrator explains Charley is not a very intelligent person. However, for all the reader knows, this could just be the narrator's bias, not fact. Thus, when you read a story written in the first-person mode, look for evidence to support the narrator's claims.

Exercise 4.9.1

How would you describe the narrative voice and perspective of this extract?

Click to read the opening of [Great Expectations by Charles Dickens](#).

Answer

This is an example of first-person narration. The story is told by a character who is also a protagonist in the narrative. In *Great Expectations*, as in most **first person** narratives, the narrator is also the central character. The opening paragraph, with its emphasis on the narrator's family background, and the repetitions of his name – "So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip" – are an immediate suggestion that the character telling us the story is likely to be at the heart of it. This is further reinforced as we are then given more information about his family and his circumstances.

The story begins, then, with the narrator giving us an introduction to his own childhood, moving rapidly from the general to the particular and his meeting with the "fearful man" he met in the churchyard. Again, the relation of this incident at the start of the novel leads us to attach some significance to the episode and its participants, raising expectations that are not fulfilled until much later in the narrative.

Here, and throughout *Great Expectations*, there is in a sense a dual narrative perspective, presenting events narrated by the adult Pip which are at times mediated through the perceptions of the child Pip. The opening encounter in the churchyard, for instance, is enacted with a vivid immediacy. Look again at the point at which the narrative shifts from description to direct speech. The rapidity of the exchanges, with further repetitions of the main character's name and the allusion to his feelings of terror, engage us much more directly with the boy's feelings of horror and dismay.

Third-Person Limited and Omniscient

Third-person narration is related by someone who does not refer to him or her self and does not use "I," "you," or "we" when addressing the reader. Here's the same story as above, told in third-person narration:

As Bill walked home from the store, he could feel the cool spring breeze stir his hair. It was getting warm, and he had been looking forward to the end of snow, sleet, and rain for the past few months. He saw Charley coming down the sidewalk towards him. Charley was a nice guy, but he was a few bulbs short of a chandelier. Charley waved at Bill, and he nodded in return.

In this example, the story is told by someone looking at the characters from an outside perspective. A third-person narrator will not be a character in a story, but an outside entity relating the story's events. Third-person narrators rarely give biased accounts of events, but sometimes you will encounter an unreliable third-person narrator.

Some third-person narrators tell from a limited perspective. These narrators relate a story from one point of view, which is often the main character's point of view. Because readers can only tell what that character is thinking and feeling, they have a limited perspective of what other characters are thinking and feeling. In addition, since only one character's perspective is narrated, the audience gets to see the world through that character's eyes; this can be good for revealing certain facts about setting and character, but it can also present a slightly biased story.

The other type of third-person narration is told from an omniscient perspective. This means that the narrator relates the story in third person but has access to all information in the story. The third-person omniscient mode is often used when an author wants to relate a text through the viewpoints of several characters. Third-person omniscient narrators tend to be the most reliable narrators, as they can present all the facts of a story.

Finally, you will sometimes encounter a story that is told in first-person narration by multiple narrators. When reading a multi-narrator text, you must always be aware of who is speaking. Multi-narrator prose provides the reader with as much insight about the characters as third-person omniscient narration does. However, because the reader only receives first-person accounts from each character, this kind of narration tends to be very biased. Thus, it is up to the reader to analyze the information provided by the narrators to reach conclusions about the story.

Omniscient Narrators

This would perhaps be a good point at which to say a little more about third-person narrators. These are often known as an "**omniscient**" narrators. An omniscient narrator is one that exhibits full knowledge of the actions, thoughts and feelings of each of the characters in the story. Austen invariably used this omniscient perspective, and it remains a popular means of narration amongst contemporary writers. Indeed, more recent authors have made great play of drawing attention to the narrator's role as an all-powerful figure, an embodiment of the author who has full control of the characters at his or her mercy. The beginning of Martin Amis' novel *London Fields* demonstrates this well:

This is a true story but I can't believe it's really happening.

It's a murder story, too. I can't believe my luck.

And a love story (I think), of all strange things, so late in the century, so late in the goddamned day.

This is the story of a murder. It hasn't happened yet. But it will. (It had better.) I know the murderer, I know the murderee. I know the time, I know the place. I know the motive (her motive) and I know the means. I know who will be the foil, the fool, the poor foal, also utterly destroyed. And I couldn't stop them, I don't think, even if I wanted to. The girl will die. It's what she always wanted. You can't stop people, once they start creating.

What a gift. This page is briefly stained by my tears of gratitude. Novelists don't usually have it so good, do they, when something real happens (something unified, dramatic and pretty saleable), and they just write it down? (1989, p. 1)

We might be forgiven for thinking that this is the direct voice of Martin Amis himself. After all, he is the author of the novel, the manipulator of events and characters. But as we read on we realise that this narrator is another character, an American writer called Samson Young, who is living in London in the flat of yet another fictional writer, Mark Asprey (note the initials). To further confuse matters a writer called Martin Amis also makes a cameo appearance in the novel! *London Fields* uses a variety of narrative perspectives. When Samson Young is actually present at the events described first-person narration is used; when he is not we have something akin to the omniscient narrator of the Austen extract in Activity 2, but we also have the sense that that narrator has a name and a role in the novel.



Video 4.9.1 : Point of view/narrator

Dialogue/Dialog

Dialogue is defined as a conversation between two or more people in a movie. In addition, a fictional piece could have a monologue where a character is speaking out loud when he or she is alone. A character, for example, may contemplate the pros and cons of taking some form of action in a monologue. Dialogue, monologue, and narration progresses the story in literature.

When analyzing **character**, the terms **dialogue**, **monologue**, and **soliloquy** take on increased importance. Conversation between two or more characters is referred to as **dialogue** (usually the majority of speech in plays consists of dialogue). A **monologue** is when one character delivers a speech to convey his or her thoughts, although other characters may remain on stage in scene. Similar to a monologue, a **soliloquy** is a speech made by one character but delivered when he or she is alone on stage. Knowing the root words of each term can help clarify the distinction. Monologue comes from the Greek words *monos* (single) and *legein* (to speak); soliloquy comes from the Latin words *solus* (alone) and *loqui* (to speak).

What would fiction be without dialogue? Take a look at the following example of a scene with and without dialogue.

Jack, Suzie and Alec are walking home after work. Jack begins the conversation, as he always does. Suzie speaks, as she is always the first one to respond. Alec is silent for a moment and the other two stop walking. Alec notices that they stopped so he stops walking too. Bewildered, Alec mumbles. Jack retorts. Alec looks at them both. Suzie interjects. Alec returns a comment. After a brief moment of silence where all three look at one another, they shrug their shoulders and begin to walk again.

Suzie questions. Alec comments again. There is silence again and Suzie stops the other two. Suzie speaks. Jack interjects again. Alec calmly states. Jack and Suzie look at each other stunned.

The above scene, with no dialogue but just a description, is only a group of actions with no meaning. They could refer to almost any type of situation. As a viewer, after watching the above scene, would you be interested enough in watching the rest of the movie with no dialogue?

Now read the scene with dialogue.

Jack, Suzie and Alec are walking home after work.

Jack begins a conversation as he always does, “How was the work day?”

“All right,” Suzie says as she is always the first one to respond.

Looking at Alec, Jack asks, “How was your day, Alec?”

Alec is silent for a moment as the other two stop walking. Alec notices that they stopped walking so he stops. Bewildered, Alec mumbles, “What?”

“How was your day?” Jack retorts.

“Fine, fine.” Alec looks at them both. “How do you think it was?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I asked.”

Suzie interjects, “That’s why we asked. We like to know how your day was.”

“Oh,” Alec returns.

After a brief moment of silence, where all three look at one another, they shrug their shoulders and begin to walk again.

“Wait a minute! You never did tell us how your day was,” Suzie questions. “Yeah!” agrees Jack.

“Oh,” Alec comments again. There is silence again and Suzie stops the other two.

“Well...” Suzie says. “Yeah,” interjects Jack again.

“I quit my job,” Alec calmly states. Jack and Suzie look at each other stunned.

The dialogue gives the viewer an understanding of what is going on. If the above scene was at a beginning of the fiction piece, the viewer would have an idea what the conflict in the story was going to be.

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2.2.11: Word Choice, Tone, Voice, and Style



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Word Choice

Connotation Versus Denotation

When we read something, we first understand it at its most basic, literal level. This is called **denotation**. You can think of the denotation of a word as its dictionary definition. For instance, when you read the word “cow,” you think of a four-legged herbivorous mammal. However, every word carries a **connotation** as well as a denotation. A connotation is the non-literal meaning we associate with words. To continue our example, “cow” might connote farm life, the countryside, or a glass of fresh milk.

Examples

Here are a few more examples of connotations and their possible denotations.

Word(s)	Denotation	Connotation
George Washington	First U.S. President	Never told a lie, cut down a cherry tree, wooden teeth, crossed the Delaware
Rose	A flower	Love, affection, romance, sensuality, beauty, the color red
New York City	A major U.S. city	Crowded, center of art and culture, night life, traffic, Statue of Liberty
Green	A color	Vegetation, fertility, growth, envy, money, life, springtime, prosperity

As you can see, words have many connotations. Every person will find different connotations for a word, as connotation depends on a person's background, cultural setting, emotions, and subjective opinions. For instance, while the color green often represents prosperity to Western cultures, Eastern cultures associate the color red with wealth and good fortune. However, there are often a number of connotations that are widely accepted as connected to a word. People from all over the world, for example, associate snow with winter and heat waves with summer.

So, how do we apply this to reading? Well, when people read, certain words often stand out to them. This is usually because those words carry strong connotations for the reader. Thus, when you read, look for words whose meanings stand out, especially if they relate to a recurring theme in the text. As an example, read through the following excerpt from Edgar Allan Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Some words that stand out have been italicized.

I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the *vacant eye-like* windows—upon a few *rank* sedges—and upon a few *white trunks of decayed trees*—with an *utter depression*

of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the *reveller upon opium*—the *bitter lapse* into everyday life—the *hideous dropping off* of the veil.

When reading a passage like this, you might get a general impression that its mood is gloomy and depressing. Certain key words in the passage are what create that impression, and if we look at the italicized text, we can see a pattern. The narrator is describing a house, but “vacant eye-like windows” has a denotation of dark or empty windows, but it also brings up the connotation of corpses. “Rank” means overgrown, but it brings up connotations of abandonment and possible decay. Continue looking at the connotations behind each word, and see if you can detect any patterns. For instance, do the italicized words in this passage make you think of death, decline, and decay? Does the comparison to “the after-dream of the reveller upon opium” make you question the narrator’s state of mind? By asking these kinds of questions, you’re on your way to doing a close reading.

Tone

You will also want to keep an author’s **tone** in mind as you read. Tone is the attitude writing can take towards its subject or audience. For instance, writing can be informal, formal, sarcastic, or playful. These are just a few examples of tone. When trying to figure out a story’s tone, ask yourself how the writing is actually put together. Does the author use **diction**, or the overall word choice, to convey a specific tone? For instance, is there any reason to say “joyful” instead of “happy” or “seething” instead of “angry”?

Table

The following table provides examples of the same scene written in different tones. Pay special attention to the italicized words.

Joyful	Unhappy
The sound of their <i>revelry rang</i> throughout the town. The sun <i>gleamed brightly</i> on the parade, and colorful streamers <i>floated</i> through the air like <i>dazzling rainbows</i> .	The noise of the <i>cacophony shrilled</i> throughout the town. The sun <i>glared harshly</i> on the parade, and colorful streamers <i>rained</i> through the air like <i>falling debris</i> .

In addition, ask yourself if the author uses unusual **syntax** – the order in which the sentence is put together grammatically. (Look at “money is the root of all evil” versus “the root of all evil is money.” Does each sentence imply something different to you?) Keeping tone, diction, and syntax in mind will help in your analysis of literature.

With that said, we should always look at every aspect of these elements, from the most basic to the most complex when we read. Thus, this chapter will begin by giving you a broad overview of character, plot, setting, and theme then provide some examples of how you can use these elements to illustrate some of the more complex ideas in a story.

Narrative Voice

Two of the most fundamental choices that face the author of a fictional narrative is to decide *who* is to be the narrator and *how* the story is to be narrated. Along with tone, the authorial “voice” is one of the key distinguishing factors of a piece of writing and can range from aloof and distant to warm and personable.

Exercise 4.10.1

Click to read the attached extract from the opening of [Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey](#) (1818). Who is the narrator? How would you characterize the narrative “voice”?

Answer

This is what is known as third-person narration. The voice does not belong to a particular character in the novel, and in the extract it does not assume the perspective of any of the characters, merely describing their physical appearance, social status and relationships, and, in Catherine’s case, her likes and dislikes, her accomplishments and pastimes. You will probably have noticed that this extract comprises a single, extremely long paragraph and is mostly concerned with describing the young Catherine Morland. This amount of detail at the start of the novel suggests to us that Catherine is likely to be the central character, and so it proves.

At first sight the narrative voice seems to be fairly neutral and undemonstrative, like that at the beginning of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* above. But a closer inspection reveals greater subtleties. Indeed, it appears that the narrative voice is doing everything in its power to undermine our possible interest, while also drawing our attention to the kinds of

expectations and conventions that often attend the process of reading particular kinds of fiction. Everything about Catherine seems to militate against the possibility of her being an interesting central character. According to the narrator, she was no one's idea of a heroine, and her social and family connections are of little assistance in this respect too. Austen is poking fun here at the idea of the tragic heroine. The narrator sounds almost disappointed at the fact that Catherine is not a motherless waif whose plight can tug at our heartstrings:

Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as anybody might expect, she still lived on – lived to have six children more – to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself.

Neither does Catherine have the classical beauty of the novelistic heroine, her unprepossessing looks in themselves rendering her "unpropitious" for such a role. Furthermore, she clearly lacks aptitude and enthusiasm for the kind of accomplishments which young girls of this time were expected to acquire.

The overriding tone of this extract could perhaps be best described as coolly detached and above all ironic. As you will discover from reading further in Austen, irony was invariably the main feature of her narrative voices. In the case of the opening to *Northanger Abbey*, would you agree that this ironic strategy of seeming to deflate our enthusiasm is in fact a subtle device to heighten the reader's interest? If Catherine is such unlikely heroine material, what kind of narrative will it be that can feature her as its central character?

Style and language

What do we mean when we talk of a particular writer's style? It might help us to think of style as a way of organising and expressing narrative unique to the writer, as distinctive and personal a characteristic as the writer's handwriting or the prints on the fingers holding the pen. Just as no two sets of fingerprints are alike, so no two writers are alike. Writers write in a style that reflects their individual view of the world.

The word "style" can generally be used to encompass the various literary devices that authors combine to convey their themes and the content of their narratives. Some of those devices, such as narrative perspectives and the representation of character, have already been discussed, so I want to focus here on the language writers use and the effects of that language.

Exercise 4.10.1

Please read the attached extract from a short story, "[Kew Gardens](#)" (1919), by Virginia Woolf. How would you characterise the descriptive language Woolf uses here and the way in which she presents the thoughts and speech of her characters?

Answer

The descriptive language of the first and final paragraphs is intensely detailed. Various human figures pass by and butterflies flit from flower bed to flower bed – a scene we can easily visualize. But Woolf's use of terms such as "curiously irregular" to describe the movement of the humans and "zig-zag" to depict the flight of the butterflies suggests a sense of vagueness and randomness. The change of focus, from the general scene to the positioning and attitudes of a man, a woman—he "strolling carelessly," she moving "with greater purpose"—alerts us to anticipate that they will be the subject of what is to follow. Would you agree that there is almost a filmic quality to this narrative description? When I read this I imagine a camera panning across a wide screen before closing in on the two characters. The final paragraph of the extract, which describes how the husband and wife and their children "diminished in size [...]" as the sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches" seems to me to suggest a gradually dissolving image, such as we might see when a film deliberately loses focus. In spite of the plethora of detail and description, then, I feel there is nevertheless a somewhat impressionistic feel to Woolf's scene-setting.

Did you notice how a similar "blurring" effect seems to result from the second paragraph's shifts, first to the man's internal consciousness, as we are given access to his thoughts, and then to direct speech right at the end of the paragraph with "Tell me, Eleanor, d'you ever think of the past?" There is only a dash to denote this second shift; on a first reading we may not even notice that Woolf has moved from a depiction of thoughts to the representation of speech.

And what of the conversation between the man and woman? Does this strike you as a naturalistic representation of dialogue? Probably not, I would suggest. There is something artificial and heightened about the woman's speech in particular:

'Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren't they one's past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees ... one's happiness, one's reality?'

We might think that no one would really speak like this, or relate a memory of "the mother of all my kisses all my life" in quite such a mannered fashion. Only with the brisk command to her children – "Come Caroline, come Hubert" – does the woman's speech appear naturalistic. I think it's safe to assume that this is not merely bad writing on Woolf's part; she has chosen her language and her means of representing it for a reason. Indeed, it may seem as though the language itself, rather than the actual narrative, is the main focus of this piece of writing. Woolf was one of a number of authors in the early twentieth-century who sought new ways of writing, challenging the conventions of previous generations that gave a primacy to realistic and naturalistic representation and foregrounded narrative events; stories that had a beginning, middle and end, a strong sense of closure, and a fixed authorial point of view. The narrative, such as it is, of Woolf's story 'Kew Gardens' is episodic rather than linear, and is a good early example of a style of writing that later came to be labeled 'Modernist' (James Joyce, whose opening to *Portrait of the Artist* we looked at earlier was another dominant figure in this movement). We could say, then, that "style" seems to take precedence over subject matter in writing such as this, and I hope you can see how Woolf's particular use of language contributes to this.

Exercise 4.10.1

Now look at another extract, the closing section of a much more recent work, a short story, "[Gazebo](#)," by the American writer Raymond Carver. Think again about the questions I asked you to consider in Activity 7 before reading the Woolf extract. How does Carver's style differ from that of Woolf?

Answer

The language is minimalist, pared down to the absolute basics, and heavily dialogue-led. We are given no indication of speech intonation; the only verb used to describe the dialogue is the verb "to go," which gives us no clue as to how the words are spoken. This breeds a sense of uncertainty in the reader, I think, and as with Woolf's elevated tone and language this strategy is deliberate, I would suggest. Although the story is narrated in the first person I get a strong impression that the narrator, Duane, does not fully understand the situation he is describing: "I pray for a sign from Holly. I pray for Holly to show me." Similarly, the sparseness of Carver's writing leaves the reader in a state of uncertainty. Although the dialogue is, I think you'll agree, much more colloquial and naturalistic than that of Woolf's characters, there seems to me to be a great deal left unsaid, and a sense that the two characters, while conversing, are not communicating. This is, I would argue, a direct consequence of Carver's choice of style and language.

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2.2.12: Rhetorical and Literary Devices



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Rhetorical Devices

Now you know how to search for connotation and denotation in a text, but how do you tell which words you should examine closely? If you were to spend time doing a close reading of every word in a story, you would never finish. Thus, you want to look for **rhetorical devices** when you read. Rhetorical devices are words that serve a special function in the text. Authors include them in order to convey a meaning to the reader. Listed below are some of the most common rhetorical devices.

Metaphors and Similes

Two of the most common rhetorical devices are **metaphors** and **similes**. These are both means of comparison. A metaphor compares two things by saying they are the same, while a simile uses the words “like” or “as.”

Table

The following table contains a list of examples.

Metaphor	Simile
My Great Dane is a vacuum.	My Great Dane is like a vacuum.
That linebacker is a wall.	That linebacker is like a wall.
She is a cheetah.	She runs as fast as a cheetah.

In the first example, we know that the Great Dane isn't really a vacuum. Both the metaphor and simile, however, imply that the dog consumes a large amount. The main difference is that the metaphor creates a stronger comparison. However, in the last example, only the context will tell you that the metaphor is not talking about a real cheetah. If we were talking about a runner, saying “she is a cheetah” would carry the denotations of speed, grace, agility, liveness, et cetera. But if we are looking at the simile, we only see that the runner is fast.

Repetition

Repetition is another powerful rhetorical device. When you read, you should always keep your eyes open for repeated words and phrases. This can be tricky, as sometimes the repeated words appear close together and other times they are spread out in a text as a motif. For instance, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a green light is mentioned repeatedly; however, these references are spread throughout the text, never appearing more than once or twice per chapter. Therefore, you will need to keep your eyes open for repetition while reading a story. If you see a word or phrase appear more than once, make a note of it – it is likely that the author included the repetition intentionally.

Literary Devices

Imagery

Imagery is language that makes an appeal to the senses. It can apply to any of the five senses or a combination of multiple senses. Although imagery often comes in phrases or complete sentences, a word can evoke the senses.

Here are some examples.

Touch	The dog's fur was smooth and silky, as though it had just been brushed.
Smell	The delicious scent of freshly-baked cookies wafted out of the window.
Taste	Dinner was mouthwatering! We ate buttery rolls and a savory chicken dish with a side of rich gravy.
Sound	1st Street was a cacophony of car horns, people on cell phones, and police sirens.
Sight	The apple was a deep red, like the sky moments before the sun comes up.

Every time you find imagery in a text, it brings up a set of connotations. For instance, the scent of freshly-baked cookies might bring up connotations of childhood, comfort, or home. When you see a particularly striking image in a text, think of what it denotes to you. Ask yourself, "Why describe *this* thing in detail instead of describing something else?" An author often uses imagery to call attention to a particular idea, character, setting, or plot point. Imagery can also be used to create the mood of a text. For instance, a story that includes a great deal of rain imagery might have a very dark, dreary mood.

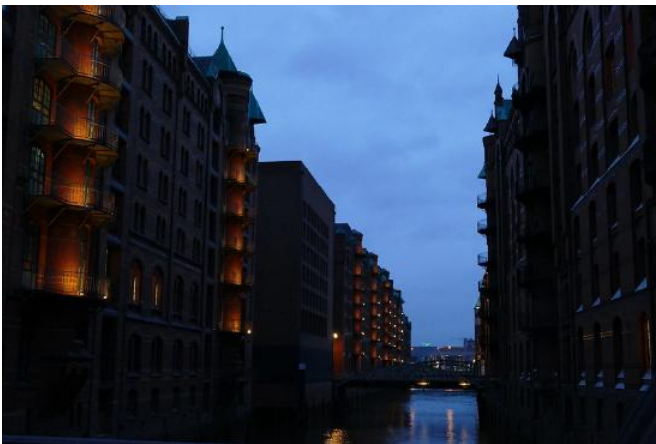


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Symbolism

Symbolism is a practice of using symbols, or anything that represents something larger than itself. Common examples of symbols are a country's flag and a heart symbol, which represent the country and love. Each has suggestive meanings – the flag brings up thoughts of patriotism and a unified country while a heart symbol indicates care and affection.

What is the value of using symbols in a literary text? Symbols in literature allow a writer to express a lot in a condensed manner. The meaning of a symbol is connotative or suggestive rather than definitive which allows for multiple interpretations.

Allegory

An allegory, on the other hand, has a fixed meaning. According to Dictionary.com, an allegory is "a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another."

Exercise 4.11.1

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Ellison's father, Lewis, a manual laborer who delivered ice and coal, was an avid reader who named his son after Ralph Waldo Emerson and who hoped that his son would grow up to be a poet. Unfortunately he died of a work-related accident when Ellison was three, which left the two brothers, Robert and Herbert, to be raised by their single mother, Ida. The absence of his father would remain a recurring theme in Ellison's work.

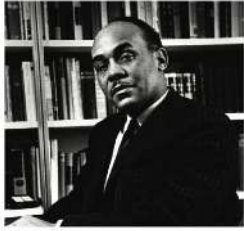


Image 6.5 | Ralph Ellison, 1961
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Read the [first chapter of Invisible Man](#), "Battle Royale," by Ralph Ellison.

Questions

1. What is the significance of the protagonist's dream? What does his grandfather's appearance symbolize?
2. Why do you think the protagonist still gives his speech even after he's been humiliated?





Video 4.11.1 : Symbols in Literature

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2.2.13: Theme



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Theme

Finally, you must examine theme in your basic analysis of literature. **Theme** is the unifying idea behind a story. It connects the plot points, conflicts, and characters to a major idea. It usually provides a broad statement about humanity, life, or our universe. We can think of theme, in its most basic definition, as the message the author tries to send their readers.

One thing you should remember about theme is that it must be expressed in a complete sentence. For instance, “discrimination” is not a theme; however, “genetic modification in humans is dangerous because it can result in discrimination” is a complete theme.

A story can have more than one theme, and it is often useful to question and analyze how the themes interact. For instance, does the story have conflicting themes? Or do a number of slightly different themes point the reader toward one conclusion? Sometimes the themes don't have to connect – many stories use multiple themes in order to bring multiple ideas to the readers' attention.

So how do we find theme in a work? One way is to examine **motifs**, or recurring elements in a story. If something appears a number of times within a story, it is likely of significance. A motif can be a statement, a place, an object, or even a sound. Motifs often lead us to discern a theme by drawing attention to it through repetition. In addition, motifs are often symbolic. They can represent any number of things, from a character's childhood to the loss of a loved one. By examining what a motif symbolizes, you can extrapolate a story's possible themes. For instance, a story might use a park to represent a character's childhood. If the author makes constant references to the park, but we later see it replaced by a housing complex, we might draw conclusions about what the story is saying about childhood and the transition to adulthood.



Video 4.12.1 : Introduction to theme in fiction

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Informed by a writing philosophy that values both spontaneity and discipline, Michelle Bonczek Evory's *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* offers practical advice and strategies for developing a writing process that is centered on play and supported by an understanding of America's rich literary traditions. With consideration to the psychology of invention, Bonczek Evory provides students with exercises aimed to make writing in its early stages a form of play that gives way to more enriching insights through revision, embracing the writing of poetry as both a love of language and a tool that enables us to explore ourselves and better understand the world. The volume includes resources for students seeking to publish and build a writing-centered lifestyle or career. Poets featured range in age, subject, and style, and many are connected to colleges in the State University of New York system. *Naming the Unnameable* promotes an understanding of poetry as a living art of which students are a part, and provides ways for students to involve themselves in the growing contemporary poetry community that thrives in America today.

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2.3.1: Introduction - Our Natural Right to Play

When the poet William Stafford was asked when he first realized that he wanted to be a poet, he responded:

My question is “When did other people give up the idea of being a poet?” You know, when we are kids we make up things, we write, and for me the puzzle is not that some people are still writing, the real question is why did the other people stop?

Other artists have asked similar questions, and made similar assertions. “Every child is an artist,” said the dramatist and poet Percy Mackaye, “with imagination and the artistic instinct. Life stamps these out—and in only a few cases, those we call geniuses, do they rise, and become sculptors, artists, poets—great creators.”

Discussion

What kind of artist were you when you were young? Did you paint, color with crayons, build things with blocks? What kind of creative acts did you enjoy? When did you write your first poem? What was it about? How did you come to poetry?

What both Stafford and Mackaye observe is the fact that we all naturally possess the ability to be expressive, to give free rein to our imaginations, to invent, to bring into the world something new. As Stafford notes, as children we naturally enjoy “making up things”; we delight in imagining, in creating, in *playing* with colors, shapes, with words—so why then do many of us stop playing, or stop being, as Mackaye says, “an artist”?

Answering this question is actually quite useful for us as practicing poets. If we can understand the barriers to writing poetry, then we can avoid writer’s block and stagnant periods by finding ways to avoid the barriers or bring them down. One of the obstacles to being creative, whether through painting or writing poetry, is our tendency to be critical and judgmental of ourselves and our art—especially while in the process of writing. If we are in the middle of writing a poem and begin to doubt ourselves or tell ourselves that what we are writing is silly or just not good, then we are standing in the way of our creative act of play and our growth as a writer. We are, in a sense, becoming our own obstacle. Think about what it means to play. The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides the following definition of “[play](#)”:

a : recreational activity; *especially* : the spontaneous activity of children

b : absence of serious or harmful intent : [jest](#) <said it in *play*>

c : the act or an instance of [playing](#) on words or speech sounds

When we play we are spontaneous. When we play we do not aim to harm ourselves—physically or with harsh criticism that stops us from playing. And when we play, we pay attention to words and sounds.

Imagine children playing. See two girls in a pink bedroom sitting at a tea table surrounded by stuffed animals. One of them wears a tiara. The other has wrapped a scarf around her head pretending to be a unicorn. The princess sips her tea and speaks of how warm the sun is on her shoulders, how the warmth turns everything blue into diamonds. The unicorn responds, “This scarf isn’t working. I don’t look enough like a unicorn.”

In this example, the girl with the scarf has broken the spell of imagination necessary for play. It is no different than when we criticize our own writing while in a state of creating—of playing—only in this case we are saying, “This line/image/word isn’t working. This isn’t good enough to be a poem.” In order to write poetry, we must be willing to indulge the creative state, to forgive ourselves as we write, to enjoy and appreciate what we have in front of us—especially in the early stages of a drafting a poem.

In poetry, there is always the opportunity to revise. The great poet Walt Whitman revised his book *Leaves of Grass* throughout his entire life, even after it was published. A poem has its own life, and for some, a poem may never be finished. And this is okay. The creative process can be expressed in a literally endless variety of ways. For as many people as there are living on this planet, there are as many, if not more, ways of expressing creative impulses. It is my hope that in your journey through this course, this book will act as a guide to nurturing your own natural creativity.

Essential Tools

In this book, I share with you what I have seen work for myself, for other poets, and for our students. The chapters will provide you with approaches to writing and reading poetry, suggestions for discussions and prompts for poems, explanations of key terms associated with poetry, some poetry history, and many poems to explore. To excel, you will need the following tools:

Something on Which to Write

Whether you write by hand in a notebook or type on a computer, you will need a space dedicated to writing. If you write on a computer, then I recommend purchasing a notebook for in-class exercises and note-taking, as many professors do not permit laptops or tablets in the classroom on a daily basis.

Something with Which to Write

Some poets prefer blue pens, some black. Some pencils. Whatever your choice, just be sure to bring it with you to every class.

A Folder

You will need to purchase a folder or binder for this class in order to keep yourself organized, to collect handouts, and to store pages of poems printed out from this book to discuss in class.

Crayons

Several of the writing exercises ask you to draw with crayons. So, if you don't have any, consider purchasing a small set. Coloring is making a major comeback—for adults—as it has been shown to be a practice that fosters relaxation, focus, and creativity.

Forgiveness

In her essay “The Getaway Car: A Practical Memoir About Writing and Life,” from her collection of essays *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, Ann Patchett lists forgiveness as being one of the essential skills necessary in order to write successfully:

Forgiveness. The ability to forgive oneself. Stop here for a few breaths and think about this because it is the key to making art, and very possibly the key to finding any semblance of happiness in life. Every time I have set out to translate the book (or story, or hopelessly long essay) that exists in such brilliant detail on the big screen of my limbic system onto a piece of paper (which, let's face it, was once a towering tree crowned with leaves and a home to birds), I grieve for my own lack of talent and intelligence. Every. Single. Time. Were I smarter, more gifted, I could pin down a closer facsimile of the wonders I see. I believe, more than anything, that this grief of constantly having to face down our own inadequacies is what keeps people from being writers. Forgiveness, therefore, is key. I can't write the book I want to write, but I can and will write the book I am capable of writing. Again and again throughout the course of my life I will forgive myself.

Patchett's advice is simple yet insightful. Even more, she is totally right that writers experience the feeling of failure almost “Every. Single. Time.” we write. One of my students recently asked me, “Once you have a master's degree and extensive experience, does writing become easier?” Oh how I broke his heart I'm sure when I said, well, not really. Of course mechanics become easier. And you find ways to organize yourself and develop habits—some good, some bad—that can advance (or hinder) the process. And of course the more you read, the more aware you become of different ways to write. But there are some struggles that never go away. These struggles can be different for each person. For me, I shudder at the blank page, am overtaken by waves of anxiety. I feel physically uncomfortable, like my skin is crawling with ants, and it's hard to focus and sit still at first. All I want to do is check my Facebook page. But if I commit myself to the mode of writing, lighten my inherent self-criticism, and permit myself to try to find “flow,” it becomes pleasurable.

Not only is forgiveness a necessary part of the writing process in the sense that we cannot translate exactly what we hope to from our minds to a page, but also in the sense that good writing deals with sensitive, hard-to-describe, difficult-to-face subjects, and I therefore find forgiving myself for past actions, thoughts, and desires—for feeling the way I actually do—necessary to write well. This doesn't just happen in personal poems that expose our memories and feelings directly; it can occur in more indirect ways, too. Such as when you are freewriting and an image forms itself in the process that calls up a difficult memory. Or when you experience an insight into how you truly feel about a parent or sibling or friend. Or when you realize how you may have hurt someone in your past or neglected someone you love. We all mistakes. And mistakes make good subject matter for poems. So, start forgiving yourself and move onward.

Receptivity

The mindset of forgiveness that Patchett describes is similar to what William Stafford writes in his little essay “A Way of Writing” when he recommends that a writer must “be willing to fail” in order to be successful. As with Patchett's essay, Stafford's advice is all about giving yourself over to the writing *process*. One cannot expect a poem or any piece of writing to be perfect, or as Patchett says, to translate the “brilliant detail” one imagines and feels onto a page. As Stafford explains, you have to listen to what occurs to you in your mind and let the ideas “string out.” The process relies upon trust—you must trust that what you are doing *will* go somewhere. Here is an excerpt from Stafford's essay (a link to which can be found in the resource section of this book):

One implication is the importance of just plain receptivity. When I write, I like to have an interval before me when I am not likely to be interrupted. For me, this means usually the early morning, before others are awake. I get pen and paper, take a glance out of the window (often it is dark out there), and wait. It is like fishing. But I do not wait very long, for there is always a nibble—and this is where receptivity comes in. To get started I will accept anything that occurs to me. Something always occurs, of course, to any of us. We can't keep from thinking. Maybe I have to settle for an immediate impression: it's cold, or hot, or dark, or bright, or in between! Or well, the possibilities are endless. If I put down something, that thing will help the next thing come, and I'm off. If I let the process go on, things will occur to me that were not at all in my mind when I started. These things, odd or trivial as they may be, are somehow connected. And if I let them string out, surprising things will happen. . . .

So, receptive, careless of failure, I spin out things on the page. And a wonderful freedom comes. If something occurs to me, it is all right to accept it. It has one justification: it occurs to me. No one else can guide me. I must follow my own weak, wandering, diffident impulses.

I am not sure if being “careless of failure,” as Stafford says, is a rule to apply to all aspects of life, but in creative acts such as writing, it is a necessity.

Silliness

The poet Richard Hugo has said that he wrote his book *The Triggering Town* in order to help the writer “with that silly, absurd, maddening, futile, enormously rewarding activity: writing poems.” And so, as he did then, I do so now.

Why prescribe silliness? For possibility. For new ways of thinking and writing. For fun. If you're worried that you may not have it in you, don't. According to Hugo, the fact that you are even taking a course in poetry already means that this quality, this playfulness, is already inherent in you. After all, as Hugo so eloquently puts it in *The Triggering Town*, “You have to be silly to write poems at all.”

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2.3.2: Getting Started - The Nine Muses

Chapter One: Getting Started: The Nine Muses

Throughout history, humans have credited poems and other forms of art as coming from somewhere mystical, mysterious, and divine. We've envisioned angels, muses, embodiments of inspiration who have been gracious enough to bestow upon us the moments of clarity and imagination from which our poems have crystalized. In Greek mythology, the god [Apollo](#) was recognized as the God of poetry and music. In Norse mythology, [Bragi](#) fills this role. [Aengus](#) is the Irish god of poetry to whom William Butler Yeats devotes his poem "[The Song of Wandering Aengus](#)." And if you had a very specific type of poem you wished to write, you could call upon the Nine Greek Muses (Calliope for epic poetry, Clio for history, Erato for music, and so on) for inspiration. In his 1933 essay "Theory and Function of the *Duende*," poet Federico Garcia Lorca articulated the source of poetry as coming not from without, as from angels and muses, but from within—it "has to be roused in the very cells of the blood." He called this force *duende*, "an Andalusian word used to describe the particular quality of deep song," as Michelle Kwansy explains. Throughout the essay, Lorca describes *duende* as a power, "the spirit of the earth," as a force that breaks old structures, as "authentic emotion," and he describes her, as she is linked so closely with surrealist images, death, and passion, as "dragging her wings of rusty knives along the ground."

Should you ever call out to one of these gods and receive no answer or struggle to tap into *duende*, however, I'd like to introduce you to nine alternative muses who have been known to grant poems:

1. Journaling
2. Collecting
3. Reading
4. Freewriting
5. Meditating
6. Moving
7. Keeping a Writing Routine
8. Creating a Ritual
9. Dreaming

Journaling

For many of us, a poem starts with an idea, a memory, a sound, an image. Or it starts when we finally take a pen to paper or sit at our computers and begin to type. But, actually, a poem begins way before we begin to compose that first line. As we move through our day, our mind sorts through experiences, sensations, feelings, images, and ideas and files them in our memory. And as time passes, we forget many of the memories we hold onto in the short term. Something we experience today and remember tomorrow may be lost in a year. It is one of the many reasons writers keep journals—to take notes, pay attention and observe, collect images, sounds, ideas, and experiences as they happen before they are stowed away in the basement of our brains.

Although we only remember a small percentage with our conscious minds, research shows amazingly that our brains retain every single thing we do, say, hear, taste, touch, and feel. There are some people, in fact, who have what's called [hyperthymesia](#) who consciously retain a much higher percentage of memories than is normal, and for whom the condition poses difficulties. These people are able to recall specific details of a day in their life by simply looking at or hearing a date. They cannot forget even the minutest detail. Imagine being able to tell me what you ate for lunch on a random day, say February 8, 2002. Or what you wore on July 23, 2011. Our brain is an amazing organ. But it is not perfect. And it is not under our control. We cannot always make it do what we want.

Perhaps when you were younger you kept a diary. One with a tiny gold key or an attached ribbon to tie around it. I remember writing in one first when I was in fifth grade. It was blue and came with a tiny lock. I used to keep a record of the weather and what I did every day. Then I formed a crush on an eighth-grader and I began to record our encounters in the cafeteria and in the hallway. I became an observer, and began to feel desire. Later, maybe in seventh grade, the purpose of my diary grew. I began to record not only my observations, but also my feelings and thoughts, and eventually I wrote my first poem. Who knows how this happens. We begin to indulge in writing and expression and soon we fine-tune our ears to the music, to the [prosody](#), of language. We become ever more aware of the sensual power of language and tighten the connection between how we feel and how we place these

feelings in words; between what we see in our mind's eye and what we describe through words on a page; between what words on a page describe and what we see in our mind's eye.

As we grow into adulthood, journaling takes on different uses than tracking weather and crushes—especially if we are writers, thinkers, creators. We might start our day writing as the poet William Heyen has done for decades; it is such a necessary habit, he has said to me, that he cannot go a day without it. We might write down our dreams or initial thoughts for the day, our plans. We might reflect on yesterday's events or expound on our ideas for our next series of poems.

Discussion

Keeping a personal journal is a basic practice encouraged in all sorts of writing and art classes. Why do you think that is? Have you ever kept a journal? For what purpose? Did it have an effect on your creative writing?

Keeping a journal works to encourage poems in mainly two ways. First, it provides us time to practice writing and to play with words, while at the same time it uncovers potential material to bring to our poems. The poet William Wordsworth famously defined poetry as “a spontaneous overflow of feelings” recollected in tranquility. Keeping a journal encourages time for the second half of this equation. When we make time to sit with and explore our thoughts and feelings in writing, we edge closer to those memories created during intense moments of experience. The practice, and I'd venture so far as to say *learned skill*, of making time to write can sometimes be the hardest obstacle to overcome in our daily lives of work, school, and family responsibilities. Keeping a journal produces a routine that becomes easier to keep the more we do it, and it gives us a way to uncover material to write about.

Secondly, in many circumstances, keeping a journal can clear our heads of everyday concerns and frustrations—we can vent in our journals, unload our thoughts and memories that may be standing in the way of our imagination's flow. If we use the journal to essentially dump the itty-bitty concerns eating away at us, we clear the path for new thoughts and relax enough to forget our worries and play.

If you are a lover of objects, one of the joys of keeping a journal is being able to purchase an attractive book in which to write. I find the feel of the journal, the smell of its cover and its colors to be enjoyable. It makes me feel special. Perhaps it's the ten-year-old me still dazzled by my first diary, but perhaps you, too, will discover this pleasure as you begin to keep your own. Of course, today, it may be more practical for you to type on a screen. And if that works for you, then by all means let it. I have actually experimented with both and found each to have its own advantages.

Activity

Purchase a journal or notebook and commit to writing in it every day for one week. It might help to schedule this activity for the same time each day. If you would like to experiment with typing a journal instead, create a document folder for your journal and save your writing there. Either way, try to write in a place that is quiet and pleasing—a coffee shop, a library, a comfy chair on the front porch. At the end of the week assess how your journal is working for you. Are you writing with the intention to create poems? Or are you venting? Either way, how has journaling affected your imaginative flow? Your thoughts? Your actions?

Collecting

A journal can be very useful in helping us to collect material for when we have time to and are ready to actually write. But collecting does not only come in the form of prose writing. Remember, the brain works in fragmented and non-sensible ways. Memories are subjective and often unreliable. In our contemporary technological world of multi-tasking, our attention spans have been shortened. Sometimes, in order to maintain a writing lifestyle, it is more practical to work in bursts. And this is where we can remain attentive and we can, like fishing, catch moments—images, ideas, phrases—that we come across and write them down. Keeping a “collection notebook” helps us to remember the gems of images and sounds that spark poetry before we forget them. When you hear, see, or think something that sings, write it down.

As mentioned earlier, many writers keep notebooks or scraps of paper on their night tables, in their cars, in pockets and purses. As long as you have a pen and some form of paper—oh how many poets are surprised by pockets of words they find on napkins and pieces of envelopes!—you are equipped and can consider yourself to be a writer in the act of hunting. Then, when you sit down to write, you will not start from nothing; you can flip through what you've collected and build from there.

If carrying around a pen and paper is awkward, another way to collect ideas and tidbits is to send yourself text messages or emails. I have found recording myself on my iPod or cell phone also handy.

Activity

Carry around a small notebook and jot down musical or odd phrases or pieces of conversation you overhear throughout your day. Write down a new word you learn in biology class, or a funny sentence out of context you overhear while waiting in line at the dining hall. Write down a phrase you like from a poem or a story you read, or capture an image you see while you're driving or on a walk: a bird's shattered blue egg, the greasy fingerprints of a child in a display window, a squirrel towing an apple down a neighbor's porch stairs. If you remember a strong memory write it down: a hawk that screamed then dove into a river for a fish, the first time you met your significant other. While having coffee, take your earbuds out and engage the world, mine it for language and images. When you write, pull out your collection and begin a poem from one of the phrases or images, or insert one into a revision.

Many beginning writers make the mistake of trying to compose poems entirely in their heads, forgetting that as soon as we actually start writing the direction our words take are guaranteed to change. Keeping a collection notebook helps with these obstacles. Therefore, I encourage you to write little things down and to not think too much about them. Do not try to write poems in your head—this is not *writing* poems; it is *thinking* poems. Allow your full imaginative process to come forth when you can actually write.

Reading

For many, the act of writing is wed to the act of reading. When I can't seem to get a groove on while writing, I read. Reading poetry re-patterns the rhythms in my mind and refocuses my attention on the craft of poetry. There are poets I turn to again and again, but I also read literary journals, magazines, new books of poetry, and essays on craft—anything to engage me in the contemplation of writing or inspire me to write. Usually it doesn't take long for me to be moved to write. Sometimes it does, and that's okay, too.

The poet Richard Hugo and I differ on the matter of reading. In his introduction to *The Triggering Town* he writes:

Many writers and many writing teachers believe reading and writing have a close and important relationship. Over the years I have come to doubt this. Like many others, I once believed that by study one could discover and ingest some secret ingredient of literature that later would find its way into one's own work. I've come to believe that one learns to write only by writing.

I do grant him the point that that one cannot simply become a good writer by reading and not writing. But, of course, one wouldn't be much of a *writer* if one wasn't *writing*. He continues:

I'm not trying to undermine the study and teaching of literature. Far from it. I think literature should be studied for the most serious of all reasons: it is fun. For a young writer it should be exciting as well.

I believe that a writer learns from reading possibilities of technique, ways of execution, phrasing, rhythm, tonality, pace. Otherwise, reading is important if it excites the imagination, but what excites the imagination may be found in any number of experiences (or in a lack of them). Reading may or may not be one.

Oh, pshaw, Mr. Hugo. I am here to tell you, dear students, that reading is, in fact, important to learning to become a good poet. It introduces you to approaches and moves that you otherwise would not have imagined or made. It introduces you to a wider world of the poetic imagination. And it introduces you to the standards of good writing. It saves you time by giving you your predecessors' experiences to build upon. Imagine trying to learn any art with no knowledge of what came before. Imagine playing the drums or piano and aiming to compose a symphony, or being handed a pot and fork with the aspirations of cooking a soufflé but without ever having seen or tasted a soufflé before. We build upon the achievements of our predecessors and when you write poetry, you write on the shoulders of such poets as Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Shakespeare and you add pages to our *BIG BOOK*. You, of course, will not necessarily enjoy all the poets you read, or agree with their writing philosophies, but it certainly helps you as a writer to be aware of them and to consider them. It helps you to learn to know your poetic self.

Activity

Begin to assemble your own anthology of poems that interest you. Either poems you enjoy or ones that puzzle you. Anything that stimulates your capacity to think, feel, or inspires you to write. You may include poems you do not like, too—it all adds up to your own poetic persona. How can you tell someone who you are as a poet and imaginative individual by simply allowing them to read your anthology? What poems will you pick to represent you?

As an added more in-depth assignment, write a 100-300 word response to each poem explaining what it is about the poem that represents you. What have you learned about writing from these poems?

When we read in this way, we say we are “reading like a writer.” What does it mean to read like a writer? Well, for starters, it means we are *actively* reading, paying close attention to the decisions the poet made when composing and revising the poem as though we ourselves were the poet who wrote it. We consider the choices made concerning line, tone, image, diction, metaphor, form. We ask questions about its composition:

- Why did the poet choose this word instead of another **synonym**?
- Why is this written in **quatrains** instead of **couplets**?
- Why choose to end on an **image** rather than a statement?
- Why choose to write this in **third person** rather than **first**?
- What does this title do for the reader’s experience of the poem?

Asking questions such as these makes us think like writers rather than just readers. The hope is that we will learn some tricks to bring back to our own poems.

An exercise that can help us to delve even deeper into the processes of other writers is to write an imitation poem in which you mimic a poem’s form and moves to create a new poem. The purpose of the exercise is to immerse yourself deeply and attentively into a poem and, following its style, produce a poem modeled after its characteristics. By unfolding a poem step by step and repeating its poetic moves you will see what it is like to actually make the mental decisions and leaps that the poet did. Some of the elements you will want to pay attention to include the following:

- Form and line length
- Syntax and sentence structure
- **Tone**, voice, and mood
- Frequency of **metaphor** and images
- Use of punctuation

Here is an example of an imitation poem. After reading it and the imitation, discuss what similarities you see between the two poems line by line. The original poem is [1]William Heyen’s “The Tooth”:

The Tooth

After the beheading, they found
the one gold tooth in Custer’s mouth.
They propped open his jaws,
cut away his upper lip,
& looked into the tooth in firelight.
It was like a small television
tuned to the news, & a white man
in a white suit was already
stepping down onto the moon.

Copyright ©William Heyen. “The Tooth” is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.

The Bullet

After the hanging, they felt
a hard object in John Brown’s arm.
They sliced open his shoulder,
dug into his flesh,
& looked at the bullet under torchlight.
It was like a zeppelin
crashing into the earth, & a black man
dressed as a King was already
rising from the flames.

Activity

Using the above poem by William Heyen and my imitation as an example, browse the Academy of American Poets [online collection](#) for a poem you like and compose your own imitation of it. Moving line by line, note the syntax of each one—perhaps take notes in the margins—and then transcribe these moves into your own poem.

Now, reading need not be limited to poetry or literature. In fact, it must not be. When we write poetry we don't write about poetry (usually). We write from experiences either real or imagined and, therefore, reading books of all kinds benefits you by expanding the possibility of the experience and knowledge you bring to a poem. Personally, in addition to poetry and literature, I read cooking magazines, *National Geographic*, books about gardening, non-fiction books about many, many things—insects, salt, American history, mythology, religion, anthropology, crop circles, the topography of Montana. These feed my writing by providing me with new images, words, ideas, metaphors. Knowledge and experiences are the imaginative fuel on which our poems' engines run.

Activity

Go to the library and find a book on a subject that interests you but that you know little about. Horses, the human brain, gemstones, Aboriginal Australians, astronomy, coral. Adopt this book into your writing life by committing to write a poem inspired by your new knowledge. Alternatively, you might collect images and words, phrases and ideas into your collection journal as described in the last section and integrate them into your poems.

Freewriting

In Peter Elbow's classic text on creative writing, *Writing Without Teachers*, the first chapter opens with an explanation of freewriting. What is freewriting? It is as it sounds. It is writing for a certain amount of time without stopping—it is writing down whatever occurs to you without being charged with having to be correct grammatically or syntactically or factually; it is writing with no barriers or taboos: it is *free* writing. Sometimes it is referred to as automatic writing and it is incredibly helpful for both loosening the imagination, warming up our writing brains, and as was the case with the Surrealists who loved such activities, capturing what associations our minds are making unconsciously and bringing to light the unknown parts of ourselves.

When we freewrite we do not judge. We simply let what occurs to us in our minds come straight out to the page. If our minds go blank we may write, "I cannot think of anything to write my mind is blank," and so on until a new direction arises. The main point, however, is to not edit as we write—good advice for whenever we write anything, as writing and editing are two completely different steps in the process. If we edit while we write we set up blockages. Rarely does any good writing take shape on a first try. As Ernest Hemingway so elegantly phrased it, "The first draft of anything is shit." Instead, we must work our way through ideas and words and ways of explaining and showing, and then revise to find the best words in the best order. But first we must allow the seed to germinate in all that fertile soil to which Hemingway so eloquently refers, and tend to its sprouting and growth.

But I am already ahead of myself. Freewriting does not have to result in a poem. Rather, it is one step in the process of coming to a poem. You may do a freewrite exercise and simply feel more relaxed without any desire to sift back through what you wrote, like writing in a journal. And that's fine. As Elbow explains:

Practiced regularly, it undoes the ingrained habit of editing at the same time you are trying to produce. It will make writing less blocked because words will come more easily. You will use up more paper, but chew up fewer pencils.

It is, in a sense, an exercise. Like playing scales on the piano or running sprints. Freewriting readies us for writing without judgment, for writing without editing ourselves while in the beginning stages in which wild and raw energy, uncovering connections, and taking risks are more important than properly constructing sentences that are clear and cliché-free. To put it simply, it is a type of play.

I like to think of the results of freewriting as blocks of clay we can shape. A block of clay may become a beautiful sculpture, but much work need be done before it emerges and is smoothed into art. So it is with our writing. You can't give up or place the pressure of perfection on the beginning stages of creation. Give it time and attention and the poem will naturally evolve.

Activity

Choose from one of the following prompts and write for fifteen minutes without stopping or editing yourself. No matter what, do not stop. Do not rest your hands. Do not under any circumstances worry about the subject of your writing changing. Just follow where your thoughts lead. Do not concern yourself with proper spelling or punctuation or even complete sentences. Just keep writing whatever comes to your mind. Just keep going, going, write, write, write.

- If you could spend your day doing anything what would that be?

- Describe your ideal vacation. Where would you go? What does it look like?
- From a dictionary, choose two words randomly and insert them into the following sentence:
 - Explaining _____ to a _____.
 - Now, explain!
- What did you dream about recently?
- If I were any animal I'd be a _____.
- Are you more like a river or a lake?

Meditating

Although writing results in an external object that can be shared, the formation of it depends and arises from a process that takes the inward life of a writer and delivers it outward. Because writing is an internal, solitary process, sometimes it can be frustrating, such as when you cannot seem to make language capture your exact feelings and thoughts. Your blood pressure rises, your body heats. You lose interest and excitement in your project and your patience and attention wane. Meditation can help to quiet the mind and give you the tenacity to keep trying. It can also clear your mind of distractions that may be keeping you from connecting with your poem. Meditation can help you focus and relax so new thoughts come easier into the mind and the body permits the mind to enter a flow state.

In a flow state, time evaporates. You begin to write and everything else falls away. It's just you and the page. When you stop it feels like you're returning from another dimension—and, in some sense, you are. Perhaps some of you have experienced this state as an athlete or performer. Some days you're just "in the zone." You're focused, measured, energetic, precise. On the field, on the court, on the stage you are exactly where you are supposed to be, doing exactly what you need to do—and doing it well. Unfortunately, we do not enter these states 100 percent of the time.

So, what can we do to improve our chances of finding flow? If you are a runner, you train daily. You run sprints, lift weights. You keep an encouraging voice in your head and a positive attitude. Not only do you prepare your body when you are exercising on the trail or at the gym, but you also prepare at rest, at home, at work. You regulate your diet watching what you eat and drink. You monitor your stress. You track how long and well you sleep. Well, what if you don't want to be better runner, but a better writer? How do you train? Like with any sport, instrument, or art, you train not only on the field, but off of it, as well. Meditation, yoga, prayer are all ways that we can quiet our minds and make focusing easier when we write.

In order to meditate, you do not need to join a class or buy a yoga mat. You do not need to join a church. But you can do any and all of these things if you wish. Whatever works for you. In its simplest form, meditation is focused attention. Conscious movement, conscious stillness. Awareness of your thoughts and acceptance of them. It is, according to Wikipedia, "an internal effort to self-regulate the mind in some way." It may be done sitting, standing, reciting a mantra, practicing silence, or it may include rituals and objects like prayer beads. In short, "there are dozens of specific styles of meditation practice, and many different types of activity commonly referred to as meditative practices."

Activity

Quiet the room and dim the lights. Sit on the floor cross-legged or lie comfortably back on the floor with a pillow under your head and a pillow under your knees. Close your eyes. Breathe deeply in through your nose and into your belly. Your belly should feel relaxed and puff out with your breath. Now, hold the breath in for three seconds, and release the breath slowly as you exhale through your mouth. Repeat five times.

Return to a more relaxed breath: in through your nose, out through your nose. Picture a place of peace you know well. Somewhere where you have felt relaxed and whole. Perhaps it is on top of a mountain or beside a river. Perhaps it is on a towel at a beach. Imagine yourself there. Feel the air, the sun. Smell the water, the trees.

Starting with your forehead, tense your muscles, hold for a count of five, and release. Next, your eyelids. Move down your body like this all the way to your toes. Keep breathing deeply. Move to the cheeks, mouth, neck, shoulders, and so forth. Stay focused on your breath, your body, your peaceful place.

If your mind wanders or nags, it's fine. Let it, but listen from a distance. You are not attending to that now. Attend to your breath, your body, your peaceful place. Those other thoughts will be there later; you can let them go for now. Only your breath, your body, your place. Stay here for a while, 5-10 minutes.

Then, begin to wiggle your toes, flex your feet. Move your muscles slowly up from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head. Open your eyes. Take your time rising. When you stand, reach your arms to the sky, stretch. Refocus.

You can perform this basic meditation exercise whenever you feel the need to refocus, relax, or you can perform it upon waking. For a more in-depth exploration, I recommend visiting your local bookstore or library, or checking out a site like Wikipedia and surfing the net for meditation web sites that interest you and provide you with ideas for practice.

Moving

For some poets, it's not so much going in that helps them to write; it is going out. Wallace Stevens famously composed poems in his head on his daily two-mile walks to and from work in Hartford, Connecticut, where he was employed at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. It is reported that he liked to match the sounds and rhythms in his poems to his steps. Edward Hirsch shared similar feelings in a 2008 *Washington Post* article. As he sums up, "Poetry is written from the body as well as the mind, and the rhythm and pace of a walk can get you going and keep you grounded."

In addition to keeping words in rhythm with your steps, walking is also useful for observing. Simply carry a notebook with you to collect images or ideas. Given the power of rhythm as observed by Stevens and Hirsch, it is no surprise that in my own experience I tend to leave hiking trails with ideas for poems. Surrounded by the trees, mountains, rocks, and mosses, by the river and birdsong, the skitter of small mammals, my mind consistently falls into a writing rhythm on the trail.

I'm not sure if this is due to the new heightened awareness to health in this country, but I know many writers who run 5Ks, 10Ks, half, and even full marathons. Maybe we naturally like to punish ourselves (writing can be so hard!) or maybe all of the oxygen in the brain is good for the imagination. Either way, creating opportunities for your mind and body to speak with one another is a proven way to inspire writing, and it's good for your health.

Activity

Go for a walk around your neighborhood and observe the day. What is happening outside your home? What are the neighbors doing? What is newly sprouted or drooping? Dictate what you are seeing in your mind and imagine it in rhythm with your steps. If you are a runner, do the same when you go for a jog in the park. If you mutter something of interest do not be afraid to stop and jot it down.

Keeping a Writing Routine

In order to be a good writer you should follow these rules:

- Always write at night.
- Always write in the morning.
- Always write in the afternoon.
- Write everyday for 15 minutes.
- Write everyday for three hours.
- Write on weekends all day long.
- Write only with blue pens.
- Write only with black pens.
- Always type your first drafts.
- Use only pencils.

Whatever your preference, whenever you write, it can be helpful to you as a writer to have a routine. Like physically training your quadriceps for a marathon, routine trains us as writers to write well, to be prepared and ready to catch and develop ideas. Routine readies our mind to write.

Early Birds

When it comes to creating a routine, the poet William Stafford and many others will argue that writing in the morning is best. In his *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* essay, Stafford explains that in the early morning hours "something is offering you a guidance available only to those undistracted by anything else." And he should know, as it is a practice he's kept for over fifty years.

I remember when I was a graduate student at Eastern Washington University and the poet Jonathan Johnson committed himself to working in the morning. He was a full-time professor with a young daughter and wife. I remember him explaining that it was the

only time when he could devote himself fully to the process, before the other things in his life asked for his time and attention. The morning has its advantages. It's before one is bogged down with responsibilities and also a time when the subconscious mind is closest to the conscious: upon waking. Writing in the morning might offer you deeper images and surreal subject matter.

Like Jonathan Johnson, [Henry David Thoreau](#) would also cast a vote for writing in the morning. In his book *Walden*, Thoreau praises and expounds on the high qualities of mornings and being *awake* both physically and spiritually.

Lunch Poems

In 1964, Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights published [Frank O'Hara's](#) collection of poems entitled *Lunch Poems*. Many of the poems were composed during O'Hara's lunch hour while sitting in Times Square. Many were written in the moment and were focused on events happening in those moments. The tone of the poems is conversational and easy-going. Use [this link](#) to read an example of one.

I don't think O'Hara only wrote during his lunch hour, but here it makes a point—write when you can, regularly. O'Hara built a collection of poems; maybe you can, too.

Another New Yorker who thrived creatively during the afternoon is [Walt Whitman](#). He would extend his own lunch hour, often not returning to the newspapers where he worked (there are multiple because he was frequently fired, perhaps for taking too many lunch breaks). Instead, he took notes for images of things he observed in the busy streets of Manhattan and all of its diversity and bustle.

Activity

Write your own series of lunch poems. Every day for a week, break out pen and paper or a keyboard and write a poem or notes toward a poem about what's happening around you. Describe the people and what they do. Zoom in on the scents and sounds. Recreate what you're eating on the page through language. Make your readers' mouths water. Yum!

Night Owls

Still, for others, it is easier to write at night, despite W. H. Auden's claim that "Only the 'Hitlers of the world' work at night; no honest artist does." And if you choose to give this a try, you will be joining [Bob Dylan](#), [Franz Kafka](#), and [Ann Beattie](#). Similar to morning, the night can be quiet and solitary. The rest of the world asleep, you feel focused on your poetry, your job and responsibilities for the day done. Maybe you collect ideas throughout the day and pour them into your poems at night. It all depends on you and what works best for your schedule and for your senses—people's bodies are different and run on different schedules. For more on the issue, check out Kathryn Schulz who extrapolates on her own experience as a night owl in her essay "Writing in the Dark" originally published in *New York Magazine*.

Discussion

When do you find yourself writing? Are you a night owl, early bird, or neither? What do think the advantages might be to writing at these different times? Include in this discussion your professor's experience. When does he/she write and how did he/she come to do so?

Create a Ritual

Mason Currey's book *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* chronicles the habits of 400 writers and their quirky rituals, many of which include partaking in coffee, tea, sherry, wine, and tobacco. It is well-known but not known to what degree that Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote poems while on opium. The poet William Heyen lights a candle before he writes. Whatever the ritual, the purpose of it is to instill a certain mindset that arises from the act. As you may know, many athletes have rituals, too. Boston Red Sox third-basemen Wade Boggs ate chicken before each game. Among his many eccentricities, pitcher Turk Wendell insisted on chewing four pieces of black licorice whenever he started a game. According to David K. Israel, "At the end of each inning, he'd spit them out, return to the dugout, and brush his teeth, but only after taking a flying leap over the baseline." We need not be that elaborate, but of course, if it works. . .

Discussion

What type of rituals, if any, have you used for writing, sports, or performing? Do you have any ideas for some you might consider adopting for writing?

Activity

Create a writing space, or visit multiple coffee shops, changing what you write by where you write. For example, work on a series of poems about your travels at the kitchen table but write only about your relationships in the student union. Try this for a short period of time and note how the setting and ritual affect your mindset and focus.

Dream

Whether it's staring out a window and daydreaming or keeping a dream journal, exploring the strange images in our mind can also inspire writing, especially, if you're an avid dreamer, those images we experience at night. When we dream, our brains make connections that our conscious mind does not make while we're awake. And sometimes these connections lead to eureka moments and new discoveries. For example, did you know that all of the following scientific discoveries were made in dreams: the periodic table; evolution by natural selection; and the scientific method? (You can read about these and others at the website [Famous Scientists](#).) Or did you know that [Paul McCartney](#) reportedly composed the melody of "[Yesterday](#)" in a dream? According to an article by Jennifer King Lindley, "[Stephanie Meyer](#) awoke from sleep with the idea for the *Twilight* series." And just imagine what effect dreams had on *The Twilight Zone* writer [Rod Serling](#)?!

Throughout human history, cultures have relied on dreams for knowledge and insight. Some Native Americans, for instance, believed that their ancestors visited them in their dreams. The Greeks and Romans believed that gods and goddesses visited them in their dreams. Many religions connected dreams with supernatural or divine intervention. And Sigmund Freud famously understood dreams to be an expression of our inner-most desires and fears.

In recent times, scientific research and experiments have shown that while our bodies sleep, our dreaming mind sorts through the day's stimuli not only organizing them, but developing them. In the article "While You Were Sleeping," Jennifer King Lindley explains how sleeping heals the body, enhances memory, reduces stress, and boosts creativity. Good news for poets!

John Steinbeck was right when he wrote, "It is a common experience that a problem difficult at night is resolved in the morning after the committee of sleep has worked on it." That "committee," explains Dr. Jessica Payne, director of the Sleep, Stress, and Memory Lab at the University of Notre Dame, consists "of billions of busy neurons examining patterns between existing knowledge and new memories to develop innovative solutions." She continues, "When you dream in REM sleep, the rational control center of the brain is deactivated. This produces an amazingly creative state, and you are able to come up with ideas that you would not be able to when you are awake."

This knowledge must have been known to the group of French writers and artists who, in the 1920s, began the [Surrealist Movement](#). Interested in turning away from logic and reason, the Surrealists turned toward the subconscious and the inexplicable. They were interested in dreams, freewriting, random selections of images and phrases from various places that when juxtaposed would evoke a strange, unfamiliar sense of knowing that could not be explained rationally. Their work is surprising, startling, captivating and contemporary poetry has been very much influenced by their approaches and aesthetic. The poem "The Painted Couple" by [Matthew Rohrer](#) is a good example of a recent use of surrealistic technique:

The Painted Couple

A couple paints themselves like the sky so no one will see them.

In this way they hope to stay in bed all day.

In the evenings, they walk as if invisible.

They are overjoyed.

No eyes to either meet or avoid on the sidewalk,
perhaps perfect solitude at last.

Everyone stares. A couple, naked and painted like the sky,
walk down the street holding hands.

They stop to look in the windows of stores.

They point at the shoes. They point at old beads.

The birds rouse themselves from their roosts
and fly at the couple.

Dozens of drowsy birds moving as one,
diving at the couple painted like the sky.

The postman stares from his left-handed truck
and the tavern proprietor stares from behind his stack of matchbooks
and their friends stare from a passing Volkswagen
and a teacher stares from a copy shop, over the lid of a copier,
and the policeman stares from his flashing car.

The couple who painted themselves like the sky
stand before the magistrate, in clothes.
He is speaking. His mouth opens and closes
under his wig.

Wisps of cirrus clouds slip out from under the man's cuffs.
the Pleiades rise and fall under her dress.

"The Painted Couple", from A HUMMOCK IN THE MALOOKAS: Poems by Matthew Rohrer. Copyright ©1995 by Matthew Rohrer. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

A couple painting themselves like the sky is, well, impossible in real life, but not impossible in a poem. It evokes the painting of [Rene Magritte](#), himself a surrealist, and known for painting people who look like the sky. It is easy to imagine this leap of the imagination arising from a dream. Note the strangeness of the image of the magistrate in the **penultimate** stanza: "He is speaking. His mouth open and closes / under his wig." This description is strange. The magistrate is described in a mechanical way that makes him feel distant, foreign. Rather than saying he "talks" or "speaks," we are given the image of his mouth opening and closing like an inanimate object "under his wig," which adds a further sense of fakeness or artificiality. These details create a surreal image in our mind's eye and make the magistrate feel cool and far away in the poem. Rohrer is a contemporary writer, but you can learn more about surrealism by researching writers at the roots of the movement such as [Andre Breton](#), [Stéphane Mallarme](#), and [Guillaume Apollinaire](#).

In addition to examining poems that use surrealist techniques, you might also consider checking out art. One example of a piece of art, housed at the [MOMA](#) in New York, that strikes me personally was crafted by [Meret Oppenheim](#) after a conversation she had at a Paris cafe with [Pablo Picasso](#) and [Dora Maar](#), when Oppenheim was wearing a bracelet covered with fur. The result was a [teacup covered with gazelle fur](#). The MOMA web site is a great source for viewing surrealist and Modern art.

Activity

Keep a dream journal on the side of your bed and write down your dreams every morning before you rise for one week. At the end of the week, read through and select the best material to start a poem. Keep this practice up and when you need images or material, flip through your dream journal for ideas.

Activity

Consult a dream dictionary and look up some of the images catalogued in your dream journal. Blending the meaning and the images together, compose a poem in which your dream becomes reality.

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2.3.3: Welcome, Reader- Reading Poetry

Chapter Two: Welcome, Reader: Reading Poetry

Muriel Rukeyser says in *The Life of Poetry* that in order to successfully read a poem, we must give a poem “a total response.” This means giving it all of our attention, taking it in slowly, reading it several times. It means listening to the poem openly, without judgment, and without projecting our own assumed meanings onto it, but rather as Rukeyser writes, coming “to the emotional meanings at every moment.” As she explains, “That is one reason for the high concentration of music, in poetry.”

To come to emotional meanings at every moment means to adjust and react to the way a poem takes shape with every word, every line, every sentence, every stanza. Each poem creates its own universe as it moves from line to line. It is a universe that Rukeyser describes as the “universe of emotional truth.” So how exactly does one listen with his or her emotions?

Reading is one of the most intimate forms of connection we can have with someone. We take their words—their breath—into ourselves. We shape the words with our own bodies and, too, give them life with our own breath. Reading poetry, we breathe in what a poet breathes out. We share breath. The words and their meanings become part of our body as they move through our mind, triggering sensations in our bodies that lead to thoughts. And through this process, we have experiences that are new and that change us as much as any other experience can.

Poetry is a condensed art form that produces an experience in a reader through words. And though words may appear visually as symbols on the page, the experience that poems produce in us is much more physical and direct. The elements of poetry permit a poet to control many aspects of language—tone, pace, rhythm, sound—as well as language’s effects: images, ideas, sensations. These elements give power to the poet to shape a reader’s physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience of the poem. Because form and function are so closely intertwined, it is impossible to paraphrase a poem. When I was an undergraduate at SUNY Brockport, my first poetry teacher Anthony Piccione used to say, “A poem is what a poem does.” This is why we must read poems with full concentration and focus more than once. It is why we must read them out loud. It is why we must be attentive to every aspect of the poem on both ends: as a writer, and as a reader.

Readers come to the page with different backgrounds and a range of different experiences with poetry, but it is how we read a poem that determines our experience of it. By “read” I do not mean understand or analyze, but rather, the actual process of coming to the poem, ingesting its lines, and responding emotionally.

Be a Good Listener

Discussion

I’m willing to bet that all of us have heard someone described as a “a good listener” in our lifetimes. Well, what is it that makes someone a good listener? List the qualities we associate with good listening skills and share your experiences of people who demonstrate these skills. In contrast, what makes someone a “bad listener”? How can we relate these concepts to reading a poem?

Being a good listener requires many of the same traits as being a good reader. When we listen to someone speak, we listen to their emotions and ideas through meaning and tone, body gestures, and emphasized words. We do not judge. We do not interrupt. We may touch the speaker’s arm to express care. We certainly use facial expressions and gestures to let the speaker know we are listening and understanding, that we are advancing emotionally alongside them with each turn of the story. Before offering advice, condolences, or other reactions, we as listeners try to see their perspective and its complexities from their side. We take our identities out of the equation and place their concerns in the middle of our attention.

Every poem has a speaker that seeks connection with a listener. A poet seeks to create an emotional experience in the reader through the poem’s process, just as if a friend—or stranger—were telling an intense story. Unlike a person speaking, who can use the entire body to gesture, poetry has only a voice to rely on to speak. Yet the poem seeks to speak to a reader as if it had a body. The poem uses rhythm, pauses, stresses, inflections, and different speeds to engage the listener’s body. As readers, it is our role to listen to the speaker of the poem and to *embody* the words the speaker speaks with our own self as if we are the ones who’ve spoken. We as readers identify with the speaker, with the voice of the poem. We listen with what John Keats called a “negative capability,” meaning we are capable of erasing our own identity and ego in order to imagine what it is like to take on another. Although Keats used the term to apply to the writing side of poetry, it is useful to consider the concept in terms of the reading side of the equation, as well.

Like individuals, each poem's speaker speaks from a place of perspective, a place which can be physical and/or psychological. As we as readers move word to word, line to line, we must allow the universe of the poem to take root in our imaginations as if it is the only universe that exists. When we are open to the words' music and meaning, the poem has the potential to envelop our entire being and body, as poet Emily Dickinson expresses in one of her letters:

If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know. Is there any other way.

Dickinson speaks of the poem affecting her entire body and being. Great poetry does this, as Rukeyser explains, because of the musical language, one the most important properties of poetry. Music is seductive. Music is instinctual beyond language. Music is a universal language. When accompanied by language, it has the power to affect our **senses** and our sensibility in intense ways.

How to Conduct a Close Reading of a Poem

The Title Matters

Reading a poem, we start at the beginning—the title, which we allow to set up an expectation for the poem in us. A title can set a mood or tone, or ground us in a setting, persona, or time. It is the doorway into the poem. It prepares us for what follows. How would you describe the tone of each of the following titles?

Discussion

Look at the following titles and discuss the reactions and expectations they create:

- Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening
- Happiness
- Wishes for Sons
- Riot Act, April 29, 1992
- Reckless Sonnet
- Pissing Off the Back of the Boat into the Nivernais Canal
- How Much Is This Poem Going to Cost Me?
- The Turtle
- A Blessing
- Girl Friend Poem #3
- Sex at Noon Taxes
- The Tree of Personal Effort

The First Time Through

Upon a first reading, it's important to get an idea of what it is you are entering. *Read* the poem out loud. *Listen* for the general, larger qualities of the poem like tone, mood, and style. *Look up* any words you cannot define. *Circle* any phrases that you don't understand and *mark* any that stand out to you. Some questions we may ask ourselves include:

1. What is my first emotional reaction to the poem?
2. Is this poem telling a story? Sharing thoughts? Playing with language experimentally? Is it exploring one's feelings or perceptions? Is it describing something?
3. Is the tone serious? Funny? Meditative? Inquisitive? Confessional? Here is a list of tonal descriptors that may help you pin down what you're hearing:
 - Abrasive, accepting, admiring, adoring, angry, anxious, apologetic, apprehensive, argumentative, awe-struck
 - Biting, bitter, blissful, boastful
 - Candid, childish, child-like, clipped, cold, complimentary, condescending, critical
 - Despairing, detached, didactic, direct, discouraged, doubtful, dramatic
 - Fearful, forceful, frightened
 - Happy, heavy-hearted, horrified, humorous
 - Indifferent, ironic, irreverent
 - Loving
 - Melancholic, mysterious
 - Naïve, nostalgic

- Objective, optimistic, peaceful, pessimistic, playful, proud
- Questioning
- Reflective, reminiscent
- Sad, sarcastic, satirical, satisfied, seductive, self-critical, self-mocking, sexy, shocked, silly, sly, solemn, somber, stunned, subdued, sweet, sympathetic
- Thoughtful, threatening
- Uncertain, urgent
- Whimsical

These initial questions will emotionally prepare you to be a good listener. When we come to a text, though we release ourselves of any preconceived judgments, we do come prepared emotionally. Picking up a book of fiction is different than opening a book of nonfiction essays. Within us there is an ever-so-slight yet important preparation. Think about it. Although both nonfiction and fiction share similar writing tropes, how would you feel if someone told you that the nonfiction book you are reading—the one that brought you to tears—is not nonfiction, but actually fiction? Most people become upset. It feels like you’ve been lied to. To put it another way, think about how differently you prepare to engage with a performance depending on its genre. How do you set yourself up differently for a stand-up comic as opposed to an opera? Not only are the effects of the performance different, but the way we emotionally prepare ourselves to receive them is also different.

Let’s begin to apply our approaches to the following poem by Stephen Dunn:

The Insistence of Beauty

The day before those silver planes
came out of the perfect blue, I was struck
by the beauty of pollution rising
from smokestacks near Newark,
gray and white ribbons of it
on their way to evanescence.

And at impact, no doubt, certain beholders
and believers from another part of the world
must have seen what appeared gorgeous—
the flames of something theirs being born.

I watched for hours—mesmerized—
that willful collision replayed,
the better man in me not yielding,
then yielding to revenge’s sweet surge.

The next day there was a photograph
of dust and smoke ghosting a street,
and another of a man you couldn’t be sure
was fear-frozen or dead or made of stone,
and for a while I was pleased
to admire the intensity—or was it the coldness?—
of each photographer’s good eye.

For years I’d taken pride in resisting
the obvious—sunsets, snowy peaks,
a starlet’s face—yet had come to realize
even those, seen just right, can have
their edgy place. And the sentimental,
beauty’s sloppy cousin, that enemy,
can’t it have a place too?
Doesn’t a tear deserve a close-up?
When word came of a fireman

who hid in the rubble
so his dispirited search dog
could have someone to find, I repeated it
to everyone I knew. I did this for myself,
not for community or beauty's sake,
yet soon it had a rhythm and a frame.

"The Insistence of Beauty", from THE INSISTENCE OF BEAUTY: POEMS by Stephen Dunn. Copyright © 2004 by Stephen Dunn. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Begin with the title: "The Insistence of Beauty." What does this title do to you? What kind of expectations and tone does it set up?

Perhaps you expect a poem about beauty, or because it is the "insistence of" you may feel determination, or like beauty is up against some other force. Or maybe you expect a poem about art.

Then ask and begin to answer these questions:

1. What is my first emotional reaction to the poem?
 - There is no one answer to this, obviously. But maybe you feel loss. Or hope. Or desperation. Or sadness. Or admiration. Maybe you're confused or feel a combination of these.
2. Is this poem telling a story? Sharing thoughts? Playing with language experimentally?
 - This poem seems to be telling a story. The poem contains a sequence of events: "The day before"; "I watched for hours"; "the next day." The speaker is sharing emotional reactions to something, as well as his actions to an event.
3. Is the tone serious? Funny? Meditative?
 - It seems serious, inquisitive, and confessional. It's not humorous and isn't experimental.

Images and Tone

After an initial introduction to the poem, read slowly and allow the meanings to emerge as you move from line to line, paying attention next to images and **tone**. Before moving ahead, ask what your emotional response is at the end of each line, as lines can create different meanings and give the poem complexity. For instance, in the following stanza, we respond one way to the first two lines' image, and another way after its turn to the third line:

The day before those silver planes
came out of the perfect blue, I was struck
by the beauty of pollution rising
from smokestacks near Newark

In the second line, the phrase "I was struck" forms an image with what precedes before it can form an image with what follows. This second line leaves us with the image of the speaker being struck by something. It might be different for you, but because I am holding the image of a plane in my mind, a plane being a large and physical object, I immediately imagine the speaker being "struck" physically by an object. Therefore, we momentarily hold the image of being struck physically: "The day before those silver planes / came out of the perfect blue, I was struck."

But when we move to the third line, the image changes. The speaker is no longer struck by an object, but by an emotion or idea: the "beauty of pollution rising." Although we may think of pollution as ugly, here we are being told that it is beautiful. The word reverses our assumptions; maybe we see in our mind's eye the clichéd image of smog rising from smokestacks and ask, "How is that beautiful?" Or maybe we think about how smog makes the colors of sunsets more intense. Either way, the speaker is telling us that he sees pollution as beautiful even with all of its complications (it's harmful, smelly, ugly, etc.). Rather than leave us with only the speaker's judgement of pollution, the next lines create for us an image of that "beauty" so we can see it, too: "gray and white ribbons of it / on their way to evanescence." These last two lines help us make sense of the idea that pollution is beautiful. The ribbons evaporating maybe *are* somehow beautiful. If we disconnect our knowledge from the image so we do not think about how the ribbons are smoke, if we simply see the visual the smoke makes: "ribbons...on their way to evanescence," we experience what the speaker experiences: beauty. Or, perhaps, what the speaker sees as beautiful is the pollution disappearing. From this perspective, the speaker would see not the gray and white ribbons as beautiful, but the gray and white ribbons *disappearing* as beautiful.

Tonally, the words "perfect" and "struck" stand out for different reasons in the first two lines—one for meaning, one for sound. When something is "perfect" we feel admiration, maybe the need to protect it. Since nothing really is perfect, it also sounds a little

romantic, subjective, or too good to be true, which may also produce tension as we know perfection isn't real, or doesn't last. The word "struck" is a harsh, violent, physical word. And ending the line on it emphasizes it even more. To be struck by something suggests shock, surprise, immediacy, and change.

In addition to these two words, the first phrase sets a tone, too, of expectation. We know something significant is being made of the planes because they are marking a day: "The day before those silver planes." The event is important enough to refer to it in such a way. This is how we speak of big events. The day we were married. The day we went swimming. The day those silver planes came out of the blue.

The tone in the first stanza immediately produces a connection between the speaker and reader. We feel the speaker is disclosing something to us, or divulging something important. As we continue through the poem the speaker's tone becomes inquisitive as he asks questions:

—or was it the coldness?—

that enemy,
can't it have a place too?

Doesn't a tear deserve a close-up?

Is he asking questions of the reader? To himself? A bit of both? We journey with him on his seeking.

Discussion

Read through Dunn's poem and identify the rest of the images. Discuss how each image makes you feel. To what words or images is your attention drawn? What associations do you make from them?

Find Connections and Ask Questions

After moving through the poem and noting images, their effects, and the tone or places where tone changes, the next question that is helpful to ask is: What does *x* remind me of? Or, what associations am I making? Usually the connections I would suggest making would be within the poem itself and the patterns it creates—between lines, images, repetitive words or themes, **diction** (word choice)—but in Dunn's poem, before we can make connections within the poem, we are actually reminded of something outside of the poem. In the first stanza, the two planes near Newark and two ribbons evaporating may remind you of the iconic image of the September 11th attacks on The World Trade Center in New York City. This an **allusion** (an indirect reference) to that event, as suggested by the second stanza: "believers from another part of the world / must have seen what appeared to be gorgeous." Making this connection provides us with a context for the poem's occasion. Maybe we begin to ask, "How can the attacks on the World Trade Center and its subsequent collapse be seen as gorgeous?"

You may be wondering what happens if you didn't make that connection. Will you misread Dunn's poem? In a poem, allusions like this usually aren't usually necessary if the poem makes use of all the other elements of poetry successfully. And in Dunn's poem we are actually given enough, I would say, to have a sufficient experience if the allusion isn't made. In the poem the planes cause an "impact," believers elsewhere watch the "flames of something of theirs being born," the speaker watches "mesmerized," the media posts photographs of the fearful and "dead or made of stone" watching the events; then the poem focuses on the speaker's emotional reactions and thoughts regarding the event, and what thoughts it evokes within him in regard to beauty. The poem closes with the story of the fireman and his dog and the speaker's insights. Looking at it this way, maybe 9/11 is secondary in experiencing the poem. It's hard to be certain since I cannot *not* make the connection to the event personally, but perhaps it is possible that the allusion is not central to the poem's experience, since it is all of the other poetic techniques of the poem that create the sensual reaction in the reader.

Let's for a moment pretend that the poem isn't alluding to these events. This will leave us to focus on the private and unique universe of the poem and make connections within it. If we begin to make connections within the poem itself, one of the first connections we might make is how the ribbons in the first stanza appear beautiful to the speaker even though they are pollution, and how the flames in the second stanza appear "gorgeous" to the believers even though they are destructive. What does that suggest? The connection bridges the distance between the speaker and the believers, as they both have the capacity to see beauty in something harmful, in something that others see as ugly. This further suggests that beauty is subjective, though the ability to see it is universal.

You can see how making connections like this and asking questions about those connections can lead to insight into the poem's experience, as well as insight into the experience of being human. Here, Dunn's speaker has found similarities between himself and

people who might be considered enemies. Beauty, we see, may be received and interpreted by our senses and not rely on context.

What other connections and patterns can we see? And what questions can these patterns raise in us? In the third stanza the speaker watches the collision “replayed”—be it on a television screen or in his mind—and admits to a desire for revenge. Later, in the last stanza, the speaker repeats the story of the fireman: “I repeated it / to everyone I knew.” What does this suggest? He says “I did this for myself, / not for community or beauty’s sake, / yet soon it had a rhythm and a frame.” How are we to understand the impact of his repeating his story? If it is told “for myself,” then what exactly is the speaker getting from this and how is it connected to the replaying of the collision? What might be meant by rhythm and frame?

In the fourth and fifth stanza the speaker makes a connection between himself admiring “the intensity” of the people in the photographs and between the photographers taking the photographs:

The next day there was a photograph
of dust and smoke ghosting a street,
and another of a man you couldn’t be sure
was fear-frozen or dead or made of stone,

and for a while I was pleased
to admire the intensity—or was it the coldness?—
of each photographer’s good eye.

The speaker asks, “Was it the coldness?” This seems to suggest a distance, or emotional coldness, in the voyeuristic qualities he is experiencing and the way photographers act as objective eyes for the audience. The photographers cannot act on their emotions or empathies, but instead to succeed, photographers in intense situations must shut down their responses and capture the moment visually, detached from their emotions. The speaker says that he admires this, “the intensity—or was it the coldness?— / of each photographer’s good eye.” Perhaps he sees courage in the act of taking these photographs, or maybe he sees something admirable in the way a person can detach himself from an event in order to focus only on the image, the visual, the camera’s eye with a “good eye” that can see art and capture it.

In the fifth and sixth stanzas, the speaker muses on how he’s reacted to beautiful things in the past just as coldly as these photographers: “For years I’d taken pride in resisting / the obvious—sunsets, snowy peaks, / a starlet’s face.” The pattern of “coldness” is established by several word choices here: “fear-frozen,” “coldness,” “snowy.” The words are used as physical description and emotional description. They are literal, and they are figurative. Our speaker then tells us how he discovered that images of “sunsets, snowy peaks, / a starlet’s face,” too, have their “edgy” place. This is a little mysterious. Does “edgy” refer to the destructive, ugly yet mesmerizing collision and photographs he’s been viewing? Is this suggesting that serene beauty and edginess are somehow closely related?

The speaker then introduces the idea of “the sentimental,” which he refers to as “beauty’s sloppy cousin, the enemy,” and asks if it can have a place to also be appreciated. The word choice of “enemy” is interesting, as it echoes the relationship between the speaker and the believers from the beginning of the poem. What does this suggest about the relationship between enemies, and between the roles they play? The speaker ends the stanza with another question: “Doesn’t a tear deserve a close-up?” The image represents sentimentality, beauty’s “sloppy cousin,” but it actually could be another allusion, this time to a commercial by the Keep America Beautiful campaign, made in the 1970s at the start of the environmental movement. It is another reference that will not diminish the poem’s effect on a reader if he or she doesn’t know it, but it can add another layer of complexity if it is understood. In [the commercial](#), a Native American witnesses the pollution of a river as he paddles a canoe up the river, and as he turns to the camera, we zoom in on a tear slipping from his eye. The allusion echoes the pollution that the speaker found beautiful in the first stanza.

In the last part of the poem, the speaker confesses that he retells the story about the fireman hiding in the rubble “so his dispirited search dog / could have someone to find.” And that he retells it not “for community or beauty’s sake,” but for himself. Why would he do that? Why does it matter that he does? The story is moving. Who isn’t moved by the relationship between a man and his dog? Our focus shifts from all of the people who perished in the rubble whom the fireman and his dog cannot help, to the “dispirited” feelings of the dog that the fireman tries to help. It is almost as if all the devastating emotion we feel thinking about those people and their families, empathizing with them, transfers to the emotion we feel thinking about the dog, empathizing with the fireman who feels such empathy and emotion for the dog that he hides in the rubble so the dog can find someone. In this moment, the feelings the dog has become as important and as worthy as our own—a dog’s emotions equate with a human’s. If we can feel such strong empathy toward the dog, as the fireman clearly does, can we not also feel it toward our enemies? And are these feelings in

any way similar to “revenge’s sweet surge,” referred to earlier in the poem? Are they maybe one side and the other, sloppy cousins of each other like beauty and sentimentality? Or is the dog and fireman story too sentimental to fall in love with? And if it is, doesn’t it “deserve a close-up” too?

Look Closely at Diction

When reading a poem, you should always look up words you do not know, but sometimes it can help to look up words that you do know when they have more than one meaning, too. The last line of the poem may seem a bit mysterious: “I did this for myself, / not for community or beauty’s sake, / yet soon it had a rhythm and a frame.” A rhythm and a frame? What on earth does that have to do with anything? Is the speaker suggesting that beauty relies somehow on rhythm and a frame? We can begin by looking in the poem for other things that have rhythm and a frame. The poem itself, does, for starters. Poetry has rhythm. Speech has rhythm. And the images of the building collapsing repetitively have a rhythm too, as well as a frame if they are being shown on television, captured through a camera lens. But “frame” is a word with many meanings. If we look at the word “frame,” we find that it is a noun defined as:

1. a border or case for enclosing a picture, mirror, etc.
2. a rigid structure formed of relatively slender pieces, joined so as to surround sizable empty spaces or nonstructural panels, and generally used as a major support in building or engineering works, machinery, furniture, etc.
3. a body, especially a human body, with reference to its size or build; physique: *He has a large frame.*
4. a structure for admitting or enclosing something: *a window frame.*
5. usually, frames. (*used with a plural verb*) the framework for a pair of eyeglasses.
6. form, constitution, or structure in general; system; order.
7. a particular state, as of the mind: *an unhappy frame of mind.*

In looking at the above definitions, there are several that have resonance in relation to this poem.

1. a border or case for enclosing a picture, mirror, etc.
 - We frame art and other works of beauty, and the title of the poem is “The Insistence of Beauty.” What is the purpose of a frame in this sense of the word?
2. a rigid structure formed of relatively slender pieces, joined so as to surround sizable empty spaces or nonstructural panels, and generally used as a major support in building or engineering works, machinery, furniture, etc.
 - The World Trade Center, like all buildings, had a frame, which was destroyed in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Were the Twin Towers a piece of art that had beauty and a frame? What did they represent symbolically?
3. a body, especially a human body, with reference to its size or build; physique
 - All people—no matter what their culture or nationality—and other living beings have frames.
4. form, constitution, or structure in general; system; order
 1. Poems have form; society has systems; the United States has a Constitution; the 9/11 terrorist attacks were very orderly and systematic. How is beauty linked to order?
5. a particular state, as of the mind
 - A poem’s speaker has a state of mind, as does the reader; the events of 9/11 place us in a certain “frame of mind.” What frame of mind is the reader in? What frame of mind does the poem put the reader in?

The word “frame” adds layers of meaning that can contribute to our interpretations, reactions, and understandings of this poem, as the word relates to many of the poem’s themes: beauty, violence, love, destruction, storytelling, the visual nature of art, to name a few. Considering these definitions, we might follow our thoughts to conclude something like this:

“Frame” can refer to the building’s architecture, the human body, systems, and orders. We frame photographs—a single moment captured from time—and hang them on our walls. A frame lends support, gives something its shape. And rhythm? Our first rhythm: our mother’s heartbeat—rhythm is elemental and basic. It is the basis of music and poetry. The human body finds rhythms pleasing. Rhythms repeat themselves. The man telling the story of the fireman and his dog creates a rhythm through its repetition; it becomes artful, monumental. It becomes an experience shared rather than isolated. It stands as a symbol, an allegory for the wreckage of person, animal, and city. Perhaps the retelling becomes its own type of architecture that listeners can enter, or the bones within someone, like the fireman, who in retelling this story finds strength and support.

Discussion

What is your experience of this poem? How do you interpret its meaning? After discussing your reactions to the poem, discuss the specific approaches you used to come to your interpretation. What do you think is the most powerful part of the poem? What, if anything, confused you in its reading? Did that change once you conducted a closer reading of the poem? Did your interpretation align with mine in some places? Or are there sections in which it differed? Remember, there is no one way to interpret a poem. That's what makes discussing them so pleasing and rewarding.

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2.3.4: Images

Chapter Three: Images

To put it simply and directly, creative writing is the language of images. Whereas other forms of writing like news articles, academic essays, and instruction manuals relay information from the writer to the speaker in order to *inform* or *instruct*, in fiction and poetry images are how we translate the world into a text so that a reader may *experience*. If you are a creative writer, then you are an image creator. And to be a master image creator, you need to be really good—really, really good—at finding ways to stimulate a reader’s senses through significant, concrete detail. When poets write, they see through the speaker’s eye, what we call *the mind’s eye*. By writing through the mind’s eye, you literally describe what the speaker *sees* in order to recreate the world of the speaker in words on a page so then the reader can translate those words back into images and experience the poem.

Language is Physical

If we examine the words associated with the act of writing, we find that language is directly rooted in the physical world of the body. Let’s consider the answers to the questions below.

Q. *Where does poetry come from?*

A. *It comes from the imagination—*

Imagination. Imagine. Image. This is the language of creative writing. What the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines as “a mental picture” which we as writers see through the mind’s eye. When we read writing, our mind processes the words into mental images with our five senses—sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. When we are writing poetry we want to give our readers the world in its raw form, its physical, concrete existence. The more specific we can be, the better.

For example, note how the following descriptions affect your physical, emotional, and mental experience differently:

1. The child was sad because it was her first day of school.
2. Standing in the doorway between her classroom and the sunny sidewalk, four-year-old Meredith twisted her mother’s flowered skirt in her hands, hid her face in its folds, and stained its red silk with the thick mucus of her nose.

The second example is much more detailed and imagistic than the first. It, therefore, engages our senses and sensibilities much more directly.

Discussion

In example two above, vivid details invite your senses to take in the scene. But once a piece of creative writing contains specific images and details, those details begin to have an additional affect on the reader’s intellect as the images resonate into symbols and create connections and suggestions. What affects do the images in the above example have on your intellect? What types of connections, contrasts, resonance, and suggestions do the images make? For example, notice the contrast between the shady classroom and the sunny sidewalk. What types of interpretations does this image invite? What others do you perceive?

Q. *How does poetry affect the reader?*

A. *With sensations—*

Sensation. Sensual. Sense. This is how we make sense of the writing. How we *make sense* of the words on the page. We do not understand through abstract thought. We understand mentally through what our eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin understand physically. Merriam-Webster defines “sense” as:

One of the five natural powers (touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing) through which you receive information about the world around you.

One of our five natural *powers*. The word “power” makes us sound supernatural; but these are not *supernatural*—they’re natural to our bodies. Poetry enables us to use and sharpen them.

Q. *What do we do when we rework a piece of writing?*

A. *We envision it differently through revision—*

Envision. Revision. Vision. Again, a root word associated with sight. *Merriam-Webster* defines “vision” as:

a : something seen in a dream, trance, or ecstasy; *especially* : a supernatural appearance that conveys a revelation

b : a thought, concept, or object formed by the imagination

c : a manifestation to the senses of something immaterial <look, not at *visions*, but at realities —Edith Wharton>

The second and third definitions reflect the impact of poetic images on a reader. These poetic images produce *vision* in the reader by manifesting “to the senses” “something immaterial.” In other words, a reader’s senses react to the vision, or images of an “object,” created by the poem as though that object were actually real. With poetry, those images give way to “a thought, concept,” or idea. In the above example describing Meredith’s first day of school, for instance, we are led to the thought or concept of how she is sad via the images.

Types of Writing

Activity

Relying only on your experience and intuition, take a look at the following passages of text and match each with its correct genre:

A. Poem

B. News article

C. Novel

D. Non-fiction essay

E. Diary entry

F. Text message

G. Advertisement

1.____ FYI, I’m running l8. ETA: 8:30.

2.____ Lately I’ve been feeling really depressed. I don’t know if it’s hormonal or the weather or what. I just want it to go away. Not sure how to act in front of Jack when I feel like this. I don’t want to lie or be a fake, but I don’t want him to think I’m not fun to be around. So I’ve just been avoiding him—which is so stupid because now he’s gonna think that I don’t like him, which is totally not true. But I can’t tell him. God if he ever read this I would die! Kate is of no help either. She just makes me worry even more.

3.____ In a speech on the Dartmouth campus in Hanover, N.H. to students, staff and alumni, Philip J. Hanlon, the president, said the college would create new spaces for social activity as alternatives to Greek houses, give faculty members more of a role in residential life and provide students more extensive training on preventing sexual assault. But much of his address was devoted to alcohol and the Greek system. “In the majority of alcohol-induced medical transports, it is hard alcohol — rather than just beer or wine — that lands students on a hospital gurney,” Dr. Hanlon said, and so “hard alcohol will not be served at events open to the public, whether the event is sponsored by the college or by student organizations.”

4.____ To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. The plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks. The last rains lifted the corn quickly and scattered weed colonies and grass along the sides of the roads so that the gray country and the dark red country began to disappear under a green cover. In the last part of May the sky grew pale and the clouds that had hung in high puffs for so long in the spring were dissipated. The sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet. The clouds appeared, and went away, and in a while they did not try any more. The weeds grew darker green to protect themselves, and they did not spread anymore. The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country.

5.____ Introducing the all-new 2015 Subaru Outback. At 33-mpg, it’s the most fuel-efficient midsize crossover in America. Symmetrical All-Wheel Drive with X-Mode provides go-anywhere traction and stability. Being named a 2014 IIHS Top Safety Pick provides peace of mind. All to better help you explore the season. Love. It’s what makes a Subaru, a Subaru.

6.____

I erased you at mile 251.

Just pushed the mile counter and Poof,

you were gone. Like that. Zero. Not even a snowflake

on the car's warm rug. Not even an eyelash
mite. Earlier, we braked for a tabby
crossing the road and laughed. We licked
enchiladas from the crescent moons
of each others' chins. I might miss the taste
of your smoky breath, might think again of
your pale blue eyes, an unsure December sky,
your fingers, my waist, your thumb
on my hip bone, your unshaven face. How you told me
I was beautiful, how you told me you were willing
to stick all the way to the coast.

7.____ My great-grandfather on my mother's side ran a drugstore in a small town in central Illinois. He sold pills and rubbing alcohol from behind the big cash register and creamy ice cream from the soda fountain. My mother remembers the counter's long polished sweep, its shining face. She swirled on stools. Dreamy fans. Wide summer afternoons and clinking nickels. He sold milkshakes, cherry cokes, old fashioned sandwiches, (what did an old-fashioned sandwich look like?). Dark wooden shelves. Silver spigots on chocolate dispensers.

There are, of course, numerous ways to identify which passage belongs to which genre. And I imagine that when you formulated your answers, you relied on multiple evaluations of tone, form, and diction. Clearly the use of lines—verse—indicates a poem. But now, go back through the passages and notice the use of images, or lack thereof. What do you notice? Where are images most prominent?

Here are the answers: 1.F, 2.E, 3.B, 4.C, 5.G, 6.A, 7.D.

Reviewing, you should see that the literary genres—poem, essay, novel, are replete with images. Whether it's the snowflake melting on a rug in the opening of my poem "The Hitchhiker" (6), or the sun glaring down "until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet" in John Steinbeck's opening paragraph to his novel *Grapes of Wrath* (4), or "the counter's long polished sweep, its shining face" in Naomi Shihab Nye's essay "Mint Snowball" (7), we as readers enter the world of the text through its images which evoke our senses.

Not so in the case of the text message, diary entry, news article, or advertisement. Why is that? To understand these ways of writing, we should consider their purposes. What is the purpose of a text message? A diary entry? A news article? An advertisement?

Text Message. With the text message, its purpose is its one-time use of sharing information: In our above example, this person is going to be late and arrive around 8:30.

Diary Entry. With the diary entry, the information is more complex. Remember the differences between journaling and keeping a diary discussed in chapter 1? A diary keeps track of something—experiences, feelings, observations, and is usually kept private. Since the only intended audience for a diary is the writer him/herself, there is little if no attention given to how the writing will affect an outside audience. In fact, in the above example, the writer hyperbolically states that if Jack were to read her diary she would *die*.

News Article. In the case of the news article and advertisement, the point is to provide information. The news article by Richard Pérez-Peña informs *New York Times* readers by objectively and authoritatively summarizing information and naming sources.

Advertisement. The advertisement persuades you to purchase something; in this case, a 2015 Subaru Outback, which gives an overview of its attractive features and establishes ethos through mentioning its awards: "Being named a 2014 IIHS Top Safety Pick provides peace of mind."

But when we look back at the novel, essay, and poem, among the most relevant things we see is the use of images and description. These genres immerse their readers in a different world, one which values and believes in the power of language to stimulate our senses and transport us somewhere new. And the most successful ones, the masters like John Steinbeck, are able to access our brains in the same way that real-life experiences do, producing in the reader feelings and thoughts and insights generated intelligently by the processing of sensory information.

Discussion

[Richard Hugo](#) once wrote that in a poem, “I caution against communication because once language exists only to convey information, it is dying.” What does Hugo mean by this? Does creative writing communicate? If so, how? If not, what does it do? Can this be phrased differently?

The Purpose of Poetry

If you’ve taken a composition or freshmen writing course, you might recognize some familiar terms used above—summarizes, sources, persuades, ethos. All words you will rarely if ever use in reference to writing poetry. And why is that? Well, what’s the purpose of poetry? Perhaps this is not an easy question to answer. In fact, the answer might depend on time and culture. Epics such as *Gilgamesh* aided in memorization and preserved stories meant to be passed down orally. The British [Romantics](#) valued the pleasure derived from hearing and reading poetry. In some cultures poetry is important in ritual and religious practice. In contemporary times, many describe poetry as being a tool for self-expression.

In the excellent glossary in his book [How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry](#), poet [Edward Hirsch](#) provides the following definition for a poem:

Poem: A made thing, a verbal construct, an event in language. The word *poesis* means “making;” and the oldest term for the poet means “maker.” The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* points out that the medieval and Renaissance poets used the word *makers*, as in “courtly makers,” as a precise equivalent for *poets*. (Hence William Dunbar’s “Lament for the Makers.”) The word *poem* came into English in the sixteenth century and has been with us ever since to denote a form of fabrication, a verbal composition, a made thing.

William Carlos Williams defined the poem as “a small (or large) machine made of words.” (He added that there is nothing redundant about a machine.) Wallace Stevens characterized poetry as “a revelation of words by means of the words.” In his helpful essay “What is Poetry?” linguist Roman Jakobson declared:

“Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and internal form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality.”

Ben Johnson referred to the art of poetry as “the craft of making.” The old Irish word *cerd*, meaning “people of the craft,” was a designation for artisans, including poets. It is cognate with the Greek *kerdos*, meaning “craft, craftiness.” Two basic metaphors for the art of poetry in the classical world were carpentry and weaving. “Whatsoever else it may be,” W. H. Auden said, “a poem is a verbal artifact which must be as skillfully and solidly constructed as a table or a motorcycle.”

The true poem has been crafted into a living entity. It has magical potency, ineffable spirit. There is always something mysterious and inexplicable in a poem. It is an act—an action—beyond paraphrase because what is said is always inseparable from the way it is being said. A poem creates an experience in the reader that cannot be reduced to anything else. Perhaps it exists in order to create that aesthetic experience. Octavio Paz maintained that the poet and the reader are two moments of a single reality.

Of the many ideas provided here in this definition, perhaps the one to emphasize most is that the poem is “an event in language.” It is also one of the harder to understand concepts. “A poem creates an experience in the reader that cannot be reduced to anything else,” writes Hirsch. Especially not through paraphrase. This means that in order to “experience” a poem, a reader needs to read it as it is. The poem is itself a type of virtual reality.

Jeremy Arnold, a professor of Philosophy at the University of Woolamaloo in Canada, likens the poem to the “pensieve” device in the Harry Potter series: “A poem allows someone to preserve a mental experience so that an outsider can access it as if it were their own.” When coming to poetry, there may be nothing more important to understand because nothing can shape your perspective more on how to write and for what purpose. Poetry requires a reader, an audience; therefore, the poet must learn how to best engage an audience. And this engagement doesn’t happen by sharing ideas, feelings, or experiences, by telling the reader about *your* experiences—it happens by *creating* them on the page with words that evoke the senses. With *images*. These, then, are how the literary genres speak. Images are their muscles. Their heart. Images are poetry’s body and soul.

Activity

Choose a poem from [the Poetry Foundation’s featured poems](#) and look again at Edward Hirsch’s definition of poem. How does this poem typify his explanation? Are there any ways in which it does not? Write 300-word response paper explaining how you see your selected poem in relation to Hirsch’s definition.

“Show Don’t Tell”

How many of you have heard this phrase before? Maybe you heard it in your high school creative writing or English classroom? Or maybe this is the first time you are hearing it. The phrase reminds me of the television show *Lassie* in which eleven-year-old Timmy’s collie named Lassie would run to tell Timmy’s family whenever Timmy was in trouble and needed rescuing. Timmy was curious and always getting into trouble. Timmy’s family couldn’t do anything to help him until Lassie did more than bark; Lassie had to show them exactly what was wrong by leading them directly to Timmy so they could *see precisely* what the matter was.

In this analogy, the language of your poem can either bark generally or lead specifically. And you do this with either general, abstract words that make a reader think, or you do this with specific, concrete words that allow a reader to see. The adage “Show don’t tell” is shorthand for the most important tenet of creative writing. It asks you to create with an attention to the concrete, physical world rather than telling with abstract words which produce thoughts about the speaker’s experience or ideas instead of feelings in the reader’s body through the five senses.

In the following poems, images can not only be seen, but heard, tasted, smelled, and felt. Here are some examples of the different types of imagery we use in poetry. Many use more than one kind:

Auditory Imagery

She sinks her eight ball, drinks me under
the table. I whimper for a date, a smooch,
a slap. She hits the jukebox, that old song.
(Mike Dockins, from “American Love Story”)

...Oh
prayer for the hat to be a puller
for her even as it circles the city
or enters someone else’s flat, hat
have an arm to keep her from his fist,
moon and train, moon and train, moon
and train: pull her, pull her, pull her.
(Michael Burkard, from “Hat Angel”)

Gustatory Imagery

I love saying the name. Each sweet syllable seems like there ought to be a crush of sugar on your tongue, a tiny reward just for saying the word. These milk-balls, fried golden and soaked in sugar syrup, are glassed up in a luxuriously oversized jar that my grandmother collects under her spice table to store homemade mango and spicy lime pickles.

(Aimee Nezhukumatathil, from “Gulabjamoon Jar”)

Olfactory Imagery

I loved him most
when he came home from work,
his fingers still curled from fitting pipe,
his denim shirt ringed with sweat
and smelling of salt, the drying weeds
of the ocean.

(Doranne Laux, from “The Shipfitter’s Wife”)

On things asleep: No balm :
A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,
Worse than castoreum of mink or weasel,
Saliva dripping from warm microphones,
Agony of crucifixion on barstools.

(Theodore Roethke, from “The Longing”)

Tactile Imagery

I am a man of many heads. Each one capable of loving you, each one unwrapping your paper delicately by hand, slipping my fingernail beneath your coating till I can feel the smooth skin of your nakedness.

(Robert Evory, from “Garlic”)

I love the sound of the bone against the plate
and the fortress-like look of it
lying before me in a moat of risotto,
the meat soft as the leg of an angel
who has lived a purely airborne existence.

(Billy Collins, from “Osso Bucco”)

Visual Imagery

The fish rises with a red body in the green pond.
Under the arch of heaven
The fisherman travels smoothly in his blue skiff.

(Georg Trakl, from “The Sun,” translated by Robert Bly and James Wright)

They decide to exchange heads.
Barbie squeezes the small opening under her chin
over Ken’s bulging neck socket. His wide jaw line jostles
atop his girlfriend’s body, loosely,
like one of those nodding novelty dogs
destined to gaze from the back window of cars.

(Denise Duhamel, from “Kinky”)

Notice not only how imagistic these examples are, but how specific the details are, as well. In the poem “Hat Angel,” Michael Burkard recreates the sound that the train makes in the last two lines through his use of diction and line breaks. And in “Kinky,” Denise Duhamel attends to the small details of a Barbie doll—“the small opening under her chin” while Robert Evory in “Garlic” brings our eye to the meeting of the delicate paper of a garlic clove and a fingernail. These poems describe a pair of pants, a Barbie doll, and a garlic clove the way we would see them if we were holding them in our hands. And with Billy Collins in his poem “Osso Bucco,” we get the sense that we are looking closer and closer and closer at the meat on his (on our!) plate. In these examples, the reader must be—cannot avoid being—sensually immersed in these images, which trigger the five senses—sight, taste, smell, touch, and hearing—through memory and imagination to create an actual experience for the reader. We do not read about George Trakl’s experience on the water in the poem “Sun”; we are there ourselves.

Discussion

Click on the following link to read Gary Snyder’s poem “[The Bath](#).” Lines 1-9 are a good example of how the senses may be activated in multiple ways from one image. For example, the line “steaming air and crackle of waterdrops” can be classified as auditory, visual, and tactile. We see the steam and drops, hear the crackle, feel the heat.

Can you identify any other images that engage more than one sense? After Snyder, return to the preceding examples and see if you can identify places where more than one sense is being used. How are your senses activated in the poems? What pictures do you see when you take the images in? Go through each poem and underline examples of objects you can touch—pants, waistband, snap, zipper, etc.

Adjectives and Adverbs

In an effort to create sharper, clearer images, beginning writers tend to add adjectives and adverbs to their sentences:

The sun shone brightly on the relaxing lake.

The flower is beautiful.

In each of these sentences adjectives and adverbs make for vague, generalized images by presenting ideas rather than things. What does it mean that the lake is “relaxing”? It is an idea and therefore does not produce a specific image in your mind’s eye. What

image is brought to mind with the word “beautiful”?

Although it may seem counterintuitive, relying on adjectives and adverbs actually dulls an image rather than sharpening it. They tell a reader rather than show a reader by providing judgments made by the speaker. To remedy this, we need to sharpen the images through expansion or tightening:

The sun shone on the flat surface of the lake reflecting the purple evening light and the white-capped mountains in the distance.

The tulip spread its petals wide creating a circle yellow as the sun.

Sticking to concrete, specific details engages readers’ senses and allows them to come to the conclusion of whether or not the lake is relaxing or the flower beautiful.

Activity

Make the following images more concrete by replacing the adjectives and adverbs. You may also reconsider the verbs and their tense. Feel free to rewrite them using more than one sentence:

- Driving in the snowstorm was difficult.
- Our new puppy is so cute.
- Angela was thrilled to finally reach the top of the mountain.
- Grandpa gently planted this year’s seedlings in his lovely garden.
- Mom frantically got the kids ready for school.

Abstract vs. Concrete Words

The success of the above poems results in the poets’ uses of concrete images, the images that refer to things you can actually touch in real life. In poetry, we work with two types of words: **abstract** and **concrete**. Ideally, the poem should re-create the experience of a poem through concrete details so the reader isn’t merely *told* about the experience through the speaker, but *shown* the experience which the poet re-creates in a way that engages the reader’s five senses. If the poets had used mostly abstract words, their poems may not be, well, poems. They might tell us more than show us. They might report or summarize. For example, if Gary Snyder relied more on abstractions than concretes, “[The Bath](#)” might tell us outright how he feels about washing a baby or how the baby feels about being washed rather than creating images of the baby being washed. The concrete images create a scene and allow us to come to our own conclusions through the images. Here is an example of what Snyder’s poem might look like if it relied too heavily on abstractions:

The baby was scared
but we were happy
in the sauna washing him
and keeping him safe
because we love him
and his body so much.

The sentiment in these lines is intimate and warm, but as readers we struggle to see the event in our mind’s eye. But note, even with the abstractions, the poem cannot escape using some concretes—baby, sauna, body. Rather than putting us in the room with the bath and allowing readers to feel the actions and be there themselves, the poem shifts its spotlight on the feelings of the speaker.

Activity

To prove the usefulness of concrete, sensory detail, and the failings of being overly abstract in one’s language, especially in one’s descriptive language, the poet Mike Dockins works with his creative writing students to describe the scene of a motorcycle accident. As a class, make a list on the board of various concrete (and sensory) images that a witness would observe. Telling the story with only concretes, and literally no abstractions, does the emotional level come across? If they do, how do they accomplish chaos, panic, fear, shock, terror, death?

To better understand, let’s look closer at abstract words. Here are some examples:

- Love
- Fear
- Happiness

These are what we call *abstract* words. They refer to ideas we think with our minds rather than specific, individual things we can feel with our five senses and that call an exact image into our mind's eye. Think of concrete words as something you can actually *touch*. You cannot touch "love" and "safe" but you can touch your son in "warm water / Soap all over the smooth of his thighs and stomach." Once you finely tune the images into specific, concrete details, the sentiment will come through naturally.

Sometimes this concept confuses my students. "But I can *feel* love," they say. "I can *feel* anger." And, yes, of course we can recall what those emotions feel like when they are referenced in a poem. And, in fact, we feel actual sensations brought on by these emotions when they happen. Our blood races when we're in love, our stomach jumps when our lover or someone we desire walks into sight. We feel our chests swell when we think about our mothers and our fathers, but when we read abstract words like "love" and "anger" we experience them in a vague, cloudy way, reliant more on our own individual memories that involved our five senses to make, rather than the poem itself using our five senses through imagery to create a new experience and memory.

Trying to avoid concretes is difficult. In fact, in order to even explain to you the sensations we feel when we experience love, as I just did, I had to use much more specific language that refers directly to physical things—chest, blood, stomach. Lover, mother, father. We read the word "love" and imagine love but it takes our brains on an extended voyage of neural connections; we do not have a specific image come immediately into our mind's eye. And immediacy is the poet's job and responsibility to the reader of poems—words should vanish. The walls between the experience created by the words and the reader's senses taking in that to which the words refer, should fall. When we read good writing, we get lost in the experience and in the images the words are creating in our minds. We are transported.

In contrast to abstractions, take in these words:

- Apple
- Blue
- Boat

What happened? What do you see?

Discussion

Go around the room and have each class member share the image that comes to mind with the above words. How many different images are there for apple? Blue? Boat?

In a poem, we want readers to have a specific experience created by images. The above words bring images to our mind, but we can do better still by being even more specific.

Use Specific, Significant Details

Now, what if we were to make these words even more specific:

- Apple ... Golden Delicious Apple
- Blue ... Turquoise blue
- Boat ... Sailboat

Now the brain is working more quickly. We see these things more immediately in our mind's eye.

Activity

Begin with the following vague categories and narrow down the word making it more and more specific:

1. Food
2. Vehicle
3. Animal

In the poem "[The Bath](#)," Gary Snyder is very attentive to specific details. He names his son, Kai, places us in a sauna, describes the lantern as being kerosene and set on a box. There is not a window, but a *ground-level* window which the light from the lantern illuminates. The light also illuminates not the stove, but the *edge* of the *iron* stove. Kai's body stands not in water but *warm* water, and it's not his body that is soapy—but his *thighs* and *stomach*.

Snyder creates a concrete, physical world for his readers and places us in a very specific time and setting. The details feel like they are slowed down—in both the writing and reading process—so the event may be created on one side and taken in on another. Snyder slows down and looks closely so we may, too.

Once details become this specific, something magical begins to happen. The poem naturally begins to amass different levels of meaning; it grows in complexity. For example, what's the significance of the lantern being kerosene? What does that tell us about the setting? The speaker? What do we take away from the detail about the ground-level window? What ideas come to mind when we read "ground-level"? Once we attain a literal reading, a first reading, which creates the scene, we may look again only this time more closely at the words, the diction. We may notice that "ground-level" evokes a sense of simplicity in us, an idea about being closer to the earth, being grounded. If so, how then does this feeling and idea relate to the poem as a whole?

This symbolic way of reading of poetry happens naturally when images are concrete, and details specific, and significant. Snyder could have used any words in the poem, but he used these. Why? What do these words do inside their poetic space? What we do as writers affects the way readers read our poems. But when we write—here's the catch—we don't necessarily have to think of how a reader will interpret and read the poem. We just need to concentrate on making the words we choose be specific and significant so language—naturally symbolic—can do its thang. After all, Alexander Fleming didn't discover penicillin by setting out to cure disease—he saw some mold growing, tapped into his curiosity, and used his imagination.

Read the poem "[What Came to Me](#)" by [Jane Kenyon](#) and note how the poem thinks small but produces big feelings. The poem's use of line, sound, tone, and image creates a moment in which the speaker is overwhelmed with grief. And what causes this for both the speaker and the reader? Finding a drop of gravy on the porcelain lip of a gravy boat. One "hard, brown / drop." Why does this image have such power? It is a short poem—nine lines—and those lines are short, ranging from four syllables to one line that is seven syllables long. But although brief, it is compact and bursts with emotion. We are not told how the speaker feels. She does not say she felt sadness, pain, remorse, or loss. The first line describes action, simply, "I took." And the penultimate, the second-to-last, line also describes an action: "I grieved." Kenyon doesn't write "I felt grief" (a filter) or "I thought of all the good times" (a cliché). Instead, we are there with her, lifting the gravy boat from the box, only to discover in line five, a "hard, brown" and in line six, "drop of gravy still." The word "still" here doubly stops time and implies no movement while it also ends the line and hangs there, still on the sixth line's edge just as the gravy drop is on the edge of the gravy boat's lip.

As Hirsch writes, "A poem creates an experience in the reader that cannot be reduced to anything else." The effect of Kenyon's poem cannot be reduced only to the image of the gravy drop. As said, the diction, sound, form and tone do a lot of work. But it cannot be denied that the image is central to the poem's effect. And when it is combined with all the other poem's elements, it produces an experience that cannot be replicated any other way.

Activity

Write a poem about an experience with an object that invokes emotions for you. Rather than tell the reader about this experience, show the reader by using concrete, specific words. You may wish to start by free writing about the memory and then forming it into a poem, especially if no specific object comes immediately to mind. Through writing about an emotional experience while paying close attention to specific details, a concrete object should emerge.

Write What You See

...not what you think. Thoughts explain, report, conclude, reflect, and basically do the opposite of what images do. With images, readers are left to come to their own conclusions, reflections, ideas, analyses, and insights. And readers like it this way. They don't want to be told what to think and feel. They don't want to be told the ending to a movie that they haven't yet seen. When we tell instead of show, when we use conclusions to inform a reader rather than evoke his or her senses, we steal the pleasures of literature from them. The pleasure of reading literature, and therefore poetry, comes from being able to reflect on what you experienced and form your own conclusions. When we read a story, we want to go along for the ride and lose ourselves with our imaginations. In writing, we say trust your reader. It means letting the images and actions exist without our interpretations. If a reader wants interpretations they will reach for a book of criticism, an essay, or the editorial section of a newspaper.

Often in creative writing classes, beginning writers rely heavily on saying how they feel and what they think rather than describing what they see. It is because beginning writers are used to being asked for their thoughts in classes like composition and courses in literature. But here we are *writing* the literature. Not interpreting it. It's a different kind of writing.

When revising, try to change thoughts to images. It's okay to have thoughts, what Ezra Pound called *logopoeia*, at any stage in the writing process. The trick, as poet Bruce Smith once so eloquently wrote to me, is "not getting rid of thought, but finding a way to realize and music the thought." Note the word "music" being used as a verb—*music* your thought. When we revise, poets will sift through a poem over and over making images more succinct, diction more precise, lines more musical. The following is a sampling of words and phrases that indicate a thought that can be developed into an image:

1. Transitions :

- *in conclusion*
- *furthermore*
- *however*
- *in c ontrast*
- *either way*
- *for the purpose of*
- *in short*

Here's an example followed by a revision:

- I was smart. In contrast, my brother was dumb.
- The same year I received straight A's on my report card, my brother tried to get high licking frogs from our dad's pond.

Reserve transitions like “in contrast” for expository writing classes. They cheat the reader by defining the relationships between things rather than letting the reader discover the relationships himself through details.

2. The word “I” followed by:

- *feel*
- *think/ thought*
- *kno w/ knew,*
- *consider*
- *suppose*
- *remember*
- *imagine*
- *wish*
- *wonder*

3. The words:

- *seem*
- *believe*
- *argue*
- *claim*

4. The phrases:

- *in my opinion*
- *in my mind's eye*
- *might have*

The above examples in 2, 3, and 4 are of what we call *filters*—because they filter the sensory experience of the poem through the speaker to the reader, rather than connecting the reader's senses directly to the experience of the poem. Look at the difference between the following:

- It seemed to me that the Northern Lights might have made the sky look on fire.
- The Northern Lights made the sky look on fire.

In addition to eliminating the middle man—the speaker—standing between the image and the reader, eliminating the phrases “It seemed to me that” and “might have” cuts unnecessary syllables, weak prepositions, and makes the voice sound more confident. It adds energy to the writing.

Activity

Explore art books, or alternatively an [online painting database](#) or [photograph database](#), and find an image that entices you. Translate this image into words that produce images. Do not interpret the art. Only try to capture exactly what you see with your eyes. Pretend you are describing the painting or photograph to a friend who has never seen it. Be as detailed as possible.

Activity

Close your eyes and envision in your mind's eye your childhood bedroom. Look around the room, in the drawers, in the closet. Try to remember colors, smells, textures. Then, using a box of crayons, draw your room on a sheet of paper. What details do you remember when you are drawing that you didn't remember before you picked up the crayons? Once the room is drawn, remember an event that took place in your room and conduct a free write with the intention of crafting a poem from the exercise.

Zoom In, Zoom Out

One way to enable yourself to see things more vividly when you write is to imagine that your mind's eye is a camera. And, like a movie camera, it can zoom in and out. It can move outside a house, inside a house. It can be on a roof, in a basement, and in orbit all in one poem. How boring would a film be if the camera stayed in one spot the entire time? Move your lens around. Change out the telescopic lens in one line for a microscopic lens. Use a wide angle in partner with a 50 mm, which captures things closest to their actual size. And, as any good photographer knows, when photographing a subject, try a different angle. Instead of taking shots from only above the bird's nest, move to the side, see what's below.

When taking pictures one cannot use a filter to make a photograph say, "*I thought* the blue egg looked like a sapphire." Nope. Instead, the photograph can only show a sapphire-blue egg. The photographer's opinion doesn't exist in the picture; he stays behind the lens. So, too, with the poet. Stay behind the lens and let the images and their sequence speak for themselves. The fact that the poet points the camera in a specific direction already tells the reader that the speaker/cameraman/poet believes this is important to see.

Just as a cameraman must be present in her surroundings when filming, so too the poet must locate herself in the setting—be it time, place, or mood—of the poem. Pay attention to what your senses detect. What do you see, hear, smell? Who is with you? Who was here before? Look around. Orient yourself.

Activity

Begin by locating yourself very specifically in a moment with your lens. Then, move out from there—through time, through space. Try not stay in one spot. Don't stagnate and bore your reader. You can go anywhere, any time. Think of chaos theory and the butterfly effect: if a butterfly flaps its wings halfway around the world, does it cause something else to happen on the other side? It doesn't matter. A butterfly flaps its wings on a dry stone at the edge of Otsego Lake's shore. In Seattle, a meteor lights the sky. Are these connected? It doesn't matter—they can both exist in a poem and, therefore, be connected. Or not. What else do you want to see? Pick up the camera and go.

Activity

Using a place as a unifying principle, write a poem that creates a type of collage of events that happened in that place throughout time. For example, try a diner, a hospital room, a stage, a street corner, a schoolroom—a specific desk for that matter (third row back by the window) and create a series of moments that have taken place there using the zoom in, zoom out method.

Use Active Verbs

Earlier I spoke about filters and how removing them can make your writing more energetic. Another way to add energy to your writing is to use active sentences and specific verbs. Verbs are amazing little things. They may be only one part of speech but they're the one that provides motion or stillness that define a subject or event. Verbs affect tension, energy, and pace. And just think about it: grammatically, a sentence cannot exist without one.

Of course, such is the way of the world: not all verbs are created equal. *To be* forms of verbs create passive sentences, which slow down the pace, zap energy from writing, and tend to create generalized images. They add unnecessary syllables to an art form whose purpose is to be concise and condensed. They appear as the following:

Present Tense

- I am, We are
- You are, You are
- He/She/It is, They are

Past Tense

- I was, We were

- You were, You were
- He/She/It was, They were

Progressive Form

- I am being, You are being, He/She/It is being

Perfect Form

- I have been, You have been, He/She/It has been

Here is an example of a sentence that uses the *tobe* forms of *wash* and *vacuum*:

I was washing the dishes while my brother was vacuuming the carpet.

And here is that sentence rewritten with active verbs:

I washed the dishes while my brother vacuumed the carpet.

Notice how the change creates a sentence with more stresses thereby creating more energy.

A passive sentence that places the emphasis on the milk:

The milk was spilled by Hector.

An active sentence that focuses our attention on the subject's action:

Hector spilled the milk.

Though passive sentences have their place and create their own effect by shifting emphasis from the subject to the object, generally they should be used sparingly.

Discussion

Read Dorianne Laux's poem "The Shipfitter's Wife" and take note of her verbs. Make a list of them. What do you notice? What is the effect of these verbs on the poem's experience? Now, change those verbs to *tobe* forms. What else changes?

In addition to using the active forms of verbs, experienced poets use a wide variety of verbs in their writing. As you revise, don't settle on the first verb you think of; every verb can offer something different. For example, did the little girl *look* out the window at the deer? Or did she gaze, peer, stare, glance, glimpse, notice, or behold? All of these words produce a slightly different meaning and music.

When revising your poems, a [thesaurus](#) can be a useful tool when expanding your vocabulary.

Anglo-Saxon vs. Latinate Diction

The English language is a combination of Latin and German. As you begin to expand your vocabulary by experimenting with different verbs that make your images more specific, keep in mind that for a poet, short and succinct Anglo-Saxon verbs work best rather than Latinate, multi-syllabic verbs. Though all words have their place, those Latinate, so-called "SAT words" or "ten-dollar words" slow down your reader. They are intellectual rather than physical; of the mind rather than of the body. Anglo-Saxon words tend to be shorter and more concrete, whereas Latinate words tend to be longer and more abstract:

Latinate	Anglo-Saxon
Masticate	Eat
Abdomen	Tummy
Inquire	Ask
Disclose	Tell
Cognizant	Aware
Excrement	Shit
Precipitation	Rain

Think about how and when you hear these words. If you stub your toe or slam your finger in a car door, I bet most of the words you say would be monosyllabic and Anglo-Saxon rather than multi-syllabic and Latinate. The shorter words are more immediately felt, whether exclaiming them or reading them. When people become excited, their words shorten and the pace of language quickens. There is more urgency and more energy—what we want in our poems.

I have, in the past, had students worry that their poems will be too remedial if they stick to shorter words. Though there is nothing wrong with a reader having to use a dictionary on occasion, and I would never use the phrase “dumb-down” to describe the poetry writing process; remember that creative writing is the land of images. We want our readers to forget they are reading. We want them to experience a poem through their senses. Poems are condensed moments of an experience meant to be taken in as a whole; all at once, in a way, no matter the length of the poem. We want the words on the page to translate into images in the mind’s eye quickly; therefore, big, academic words are usually not the diction of choice in poetry.

Activity

Choose a poem from this book or [the Poetry Foundation](#) and change Anglo-Saxon words into Latinate words. What difference do these new words make to how you experience the poem?

Figures of Speech

Figurative language uses words or expressions not meant to be taken literally. Whether you realize it or not, we encounter them every day. When we exaggerate we use **hyperbole**: *I’m so hungry I can eat a horse*; when Rhianna sings about *stars like diamonds in the sky* she uses **simile**; when we say *opportunity knocked on my door* we are using **personification**. In addition to making our conversations interesting and capturing our intense feelings, figurative language is very important to the making of poetry. It is a tool that allows us to make connections, comparisons, and contrasts in ways that produce insight, raise questions, and add specificity. Earlier we worked to make words more specific. We changed *apple*, *blue* and *boat* into *goldendelicious*, *turquoise*, and *sailboat*. The changes made the images more immediate and sharper and offered the reader opportunities to understand the poem. Figures of speech are the next step to adding layers to your poems, to adding even more complexity and meaning.

Types of Figurative Language

Figurative language, often the comparison made between two seemingly unlike things, is almost all image-based and, therefore, a good friend of poetry. In fact, some, like Owen Barfield in his [essay on metaphor](#), would go so far as to say that poetry *is* metaphor:

The most conspicuous point of contact between meaning and poetry is *metaphor*. For one of the first things that a student of etymology—even quite an amateur student—discovers for himself is that every language, with its thousands of abstract terms, and its nuances of meaning and association, is *apparently* nothing, from beginning to end, but an unconscionable tissue of dead, or petrified, metaphors. If we trace the meaning of a great many words—or those of the elements of which they are composed—about as far back as etymology can take us, we are at once made to realize that an overwhelming proportion, if not all, of them referred in earlier days to one of these two things—a solid, sensible object, or some animal (probably human) activity. Examples abound on every page of the dictionary. Thus, an apparently objective scientific term like *elasticity*, on the one hand, and the metaphysical *abstract* on the other, are both traceable to verbs meaning “draw” or “drag.” *Centrifugal* and *centripetal* are composed of a noun meaning “a goad” and verbs signifying “to flee” and “to seek” respectively; epithet, theme, thesis, anathema, hypothesis, etc., go back to a Greek verb, “to put,” and even *right* and *wrong*, it seems, once had the meaning “stretched” and so “straight” and “wringing” or “sour.” Some philologists, looking still further back into the past, have resolved these two classes into one, but this is immaterial to the point at issue.

“Nihil in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu.”

“Nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses,” wrote philosopher John Locke. In short, the way we know *anything* is through the senses—even abstract idea originates through experience gained through our bodies. And in the case of language’s origin, as explained above, it appears that all words, at their invention, referred to something concrete—an object or a specific action that evoked the senses. As we continue to use words, they evolve, for they live their own life. And when we use a word, we invite its history and permutations into its meaning. Of course, this is all way too much to think about at once in the writing process. But it is why writers revise and cross-examine their diction, thinking out what meanings the word may suggest. Language is *naturally* symbolic in origin, in its fabric. And an art that uses words cannot help but also have more meanings than just the literal.

The following types of figurative language are used most often in poetry:

- **Metaphor**—A direct comparison between two unlike things, as in *Hope is the thing with feathers* (Emily Dickinson, “Hope”).

- **Simile**—A comparison that uses *like* or *as*, as in *something inside me / rising explosive as my parakeet bursting / from its cage* (Bruce Snider, “Chemistry”).
- **Personification**—Human characteristics being applied to non-human things, as in *irises, all / funnel & hood, papery tongues whispering little / rumors in their mouths* (Laura Kasischke, “Hostess”).
- **Metonymy**—When one thing is represented by another thing associated with it, as in *Thepen is mightier than the sword* (where pen stands in for writing, and sword stands in for warfare or violence).
- **Synecdoche**—When a part of something symbolizes the whole, or the whole of something symbolizes the part, as in *All hands on deck* (where *hands* stands in for *men*), or *Thewhole world loves you* (where *wholeworld* represents only a small number of its human population).

When we read such literary devices, our mind lights up a new pathway between the two things and we discover new ways of thinking about the relationship between these two things. We wonder, how is his love a red, red rose? But before we wonder, our senses have already made a connection. As we look closer at the poem, we begin to explore the idea more.

The following is a poem by [Laura Kasischke](#). It contains numerous metaphors and similes:

Confections

Caramel is sugar burnt
to syrup in a pan. Chaos
is a pinch of joy, a bit of screaming. An infant sleeping's
a milky sea. A star
is fire and flower. Divinity
is beaten out of egg whites
into cool white peaks. Friendship
begins and ends in suspicion, unless
it ends in death. Ignite
a glass of brandy in a pan, and you'll
have cherries jubilee: sex
without love's sodden nightgown
before your house burns down. Music's
a bomb of feathers
in the air
in the moment before it explodes
and settles itself whispering
onto the sleeves of a child's choir robe. And
a candied apple's
like a heartache—exactly
like a heartache—something
sweet and red tortured to death
with something sweeter, and more red.

Laura Kasischke, “Confections” from *Fire & Flower*. Copyright © 1998 by Laura Kasischke. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of Alice James Books, www.alicejamesbooks.org.

The poem begins with a sentence that mimics a metaphor—stating something is something else: *carmel is sugar burnt / to syrup in a pan*. It sounds like a metaphor, but it actually isn't. Carmel actually is sugar burnt to syrup. Rather than a metaphor, the first two lines function as a definition, which sets the stage (note my own figurative language) for understanding how metaphors work in our minds, for whether definition or metaphor, we use the same structure: *x is y*; our minds equate the one thing with the other. In the poem this happens with *carmel to sugar burnt to syrup*.

In “Confections,” the opening definition that looked like a metaphor is followed by a true metaphor (or is it?). *Chaos is a pinch of joy, a bit of screaming*. We take this as metaphor, but because we do, it brings us back to the first sentence. If sentence two is

figurative why isn't sentence one? And if sentence one is literal, why isn't sentence two? Both are structured exactly the same. Kasischke's poem exposes the slipperiness of language and syntax: how we use them and interpret them. The poem asks us to examine closely the line between imagination and reality and the role language plays in sorting them out, or not.

The next two metaphors are more imagistic than the previous: *An infant sleeping's / a milky sea. A star / is fire and flower*. While we couldn't "see" the abstraction *joy* and could only hear *screaming*, we certainly see a milky sea, and we certainly see a star flaring as fire, and flower. The parallel of fire and flower is interesting because they are so different. A flower would not survive if it were ablaze in flames. Yet, Kasischke's comparison between the star and fire and flower makes sense to us. It plays not on the science of heat, but on the images associated with fire and flowers—they both spread outward. So, we equate the shape and motion of a star with both fire and flower. Of course, like the comparison of caramel to sugar burnt to syrup, a star actually is a fire. Again, the poem engages our ability to hold two things in the mind at once—just as a metaphor does—only with the poem as a whole, these two things are the literal and symbolic nature of language.

Discussion

Read the poem "Confections" and continue to discuss the effect of the figurative language. Explore the comparisons deeper: how is an infant a milky sea? How is chaos a pinch of joy, a bit of screaming? Continue through the whole poem and rank the effectiveness of each figure of speech.

When we use figures of speech in our poetry, we have the opportunity to invite a whole new layer of meaning into the poem. For example, returning to our *apple, blue, boat* exercise, we can use a simile or metaphor to invite images that affect the mood, tone, and meaning of our poems.

Golden Delicious Apple . . . the size of a fist

The image of the fist introduces an element of violence or determination into the poem. How would the effect of the metaphor be different if we changed it?

The Golden Delicious apple was one of Zeus' coins in that child's hands.

What ideas does this metaphor bring to mind that is different from a fist?

Now let's look at the next example:

Turquoise blue . . . like the sky on your wedding day

We sense a happy mood with the mention of wedding, usually. The fact that it is the sky to which the color is being compared lends a cosmic quality, something larger than us, something natural and yet familiar. Let's try something else:

Turquoise blue like a young widow's eye shadow in winter.

This description is sadder, chilling. The mention of widow and winter lends a clear coldness to the mood that a wedding day does not.

Lastly, let's try the boat:

Sailboat . . . with ripped white sails waving in surrender.

Similar to how Kasischke compared chaos to joy, one thing we can do is introduce abstract ideas like *surrender* when they are strongly supported by and partnered with concrete images that balance them out. In this case, the boat, sails, and waves are physical enough to hold up a word like *surrender*. If we didn't want to use an abstraction but still wanted to introduce the idea of surrendering we could just build the image:

Sailboat with ripped white sails waving its shreds in the wind.

Figurative language allows us to use concrete language to relate abstract ideas.

Featured Poet and SUNY Brockport graduate Mike Dockins and his Favorite Metaphor Exercise

THE FISHTANK OF RAGE

Goal: What we are essentially creating with this exercise are "implied" or "submerged" metaphors, where, in this case, the concrete object is never mentioned explicitly, but only implied by its descriptions.

PREP / MATERIALS

Prepare a whole bunch of little index cards: one pile consisting of concrete details (skyscraper, waterfall, volcano, etc.) and the other of abstractions (fear, loneliness, joy, etc.). Dockins says he uses emotions specifically rather than other abstract concepts such as capitalism or knowledge. For a quick list, see the appendix in the back of this book.

ROUND 1

In this first round, each student gets two index cards, one concrete and one abstract, and the first thing they do is “re-write” the name of their game. So now instead of “The Fishtank of Rage,” they have “The Dagger of Fate” or “The Cocoon of Grief.” At this point, do not worry about all the rules (see below), but, rather, describe the abstraction in terms of the qualities of the concrete object, not the other way around. For example, “A cocoon was sad because somebody died” is getting things backwards. The statement should actually be “Grief is somehow like a cocoon,” and the question for you to answer is, “How so?” How is grief like a cocoon? Well, grief is confined to a small space, but in time can break out of its shell. Something is alive inside of grief. Grief is fragile, etc. Take just a few minutes and brainstorm as many such short sentences as possible, and then we share a few. Be careful not to over-literalize: “When grief opens up, a moth flies out”—the idea in fact is to create metaphors. So, you should think imaginatively, creatively.

ROUNDS 2, 3, ETC.

In Round 2 and beyond (you can do as many rounds as you like), select new combinations of cards. Complete the steps described in Round 1 with your new words and share your work with each other.

Make sure that you consider **all** aspects of the concrete object. Make sure to not be too inflexible in your thinking — for example, if you only think of the object’s size and shape. Think about how your object changes, and what associations we have with it. For example, a balloon can be a certain color and size and shape, but it can also inflate, deflate, pop, and fly away from you. It can also symbolize celebration, birthdays, hospital visits, etc. Or, a volcano isn’t always erupting. It spends much of its “life” in dormancy, and should give us a feeling of awe of the passage of time. Plus, it can be dangerous but also beautiful.

THE RULES / GUIDELINES, IN SHORT

1. Write several separate sentences, as opposed to one long continuous little story.
2. Describe the abstraction in terms of the concrete object, not the other way around.
3. Do not mention the concrete object directly.
4. Do not be overly literal.
5. Consider any and all of the object’s qualities and associations.
6. You’re essentially creating metaphors, so be creative! Be imaginative! Be profound!

Clichés

One of the reasons why Laura Kasishcke’s poem “Confections” is so successful is because of its originality. When we read about how a star is fire and flower, or how a “baby sleeping’s / a milky star,” we are taking things in through our senses that we have not before; we are forming new connections between things in our minds. One of the dangers of using figurative language in our writing is relying on *clichés*, or *word packages*, that have lost their evocative effect. Rather than startle our senses alive with new connections, clichés roll over us numbly, failing to spark an image in our minds. They are the walking dead of language.

One way to avoid clichés is to not use a phrase if you’ve heard it before. If you’ve heard it in a song, don’t use it. If you’ve heard it on a television show, don’t use it. The following is the first half of common clichés. See if you can complete the phrase:

Cold as _____.

Hot as _____.

Blind as a _____.

Faster than a _____.

You are the apple of _____.

It’s likely you were able to fill all of these in. Here are the answers:

Cold as ice. Hot as hell. Blind as a bat. Faster than lightning. You are the apple of my eye.

Rather than bringing an image to mind, notice how the words stay distant. They do not succeed in engaging your senses. They have become conceptual instead of sensory. When you have a cliché in your writing, the reader disengages from the poem's experience. To fix clichés, there are two main remedies:

1. Say what you mean. Eliminate the figurative language and be literal, direct. Instead of saying *I'm at the end of my rope*, say *I am frustrated and impatient*.
2. Rewrite the expression by expanding descriptive language. Instead of *He took the bait*, explain in detail and images what the bait is and how he took it. For example:
 - When Marty's wife asked him to run to the store for milk, Marty said sure and pulled the keys to the truck out of his pocket. The trip would give her enough time to sneak the cake in from the garage and plant 45 candles into its sweetness.
3. Freshen up the figurative language by inventing a new metaphor. Instead of *quiet as a mouse*, why not find something else quiet that reflects the poem's original subject? *Quiet as a pitchfork on Easter morning*.

For a more complete list of clichés, see the following web sites:

- <http://www.clichelist.net/>
- <https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/figures-similes-list.htm>

You may also wish to check out some "Chandlerisms" online. Chandlerisms are novelist and screenwriter Raymond Chandler's playful turns of phrase and spoofs on **clichés**.

Activity

Go back to one of your poems and find places where the language is stale or clichéd. Apply each of the above remedies to each cliché to invent options for a fresher read.

Activity

Write a poem composed entirely of clichés.

Activity

Rewrite the following clichés into fresh figures of speech:

- Home is where the heart is.
- Only the good die young.
- An eye for an eye.
- He has his head in the clouds.
- Clean as a whistle.
- Tough as nails.

Activity

Mix and match clichés:

- Home is where the good die young.
- Clean as the heart is.
- Tough as an eye.

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2.3.5: Voice

Chapter Four: Voice

The speaker is the bridge between the poem's experience and the reader, and similar to language, when it works best, it becomes invisible, cemented to, part and particle of the poem's experience. Tone of voice is responsible for creating trust between the reader and the speaker, in seducing the reader to lose him or herself in the experience; it is responsible for letting a reader be enraptured by the poem.

In the introduction to the *2006 Best American Poetry* anthology, the judge for that year, poet [Billy Collins](#), explains the key role that a poem's tone of voice played in determining which poems to place in the pile that left him "cold" and which poems to place in the pile that caught him "in their spell," those that he would eventually consider for inclusion in the collection. Collins begins by elucidating how the voice of a poem took on a bigger role once Modern poetry began to experiment with free verse:

Once [Walt Whitman](#) demonstrated that poetry in English could get along without standard meter and end-rhyme, poetry began to lose that familiar gait and musical jauntiness that listeners and readers had come to identify with it. But poetry also lost something more: a trust system that had bound poet and reader together through the reliable recurrence of similar sounds and a steady dependable beat. Whatever emotional or intellectual demands a poem placed on the reader, at least the reader could put trust in the poet's implicit promise to keep up a tempo and maintain a sound pattern. It is the same promise that is made to the listeners of popular songs. What has come to replace that system of trust, if anything? However vague a substitute, the answer is probably tone of voice. As a reader, I come to trust or distrust the authority of the poem after reading just a few lines. Do I hear a voice that's making reasonable claims for itself—usually a first-person voice speaking fallibly but honestly—or does the poem begin with a grandiose pronouncement, a riddle, or an intimate confession foisted on me by a stranger? Tone may be the most elusive aspect of written language, but our ears instantly recognize words that sound authentic and words that ring false. The character of the speaker's voice played an indescribable but essential role in the making of those two piles I mentioned, one much taller than the other.

It is interesting that Collins refers negatively to the "voice of a stranger" as aren't all speakers of poems strangers to a reader? We do not know the poet, so how can we possibly know the speaker? Yet here, Collins suggests that there is something in us that does know something of the speaker, some credibility that "sounds authentic" rather than "ringing false," and this has more to do with tone of voice than subject matter. After all, who believes someone who doesn't sound trustworthy? It is like watching a play with bad acting—you can't lose yourself in the story or character, you cannot transport, you cannot release yourself to get "caught in its spell." We have trouble trusting our senses and giving our time to the speaker without suspicion, which acts as a barrier between the reader and the experience. It is similar to what poet [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#) called a "suspension of disbelief," in a sense: We need to be willing to be wrapped up in a poem's experience and if we're untrusting than we're not willing. Tone of voice develops from the many moves a poem makes and can be considered, in another way, the *stance* the speaker takes, the relationship between the subject matter and the speaker.

Trust vs. Truth

How do we gain someone's trust? We can build a reputation if we're, say, a journalist or reporter. We can create a history of trust with a friend or spouse by being reliable. We can plead and swear on a Bible like we do in courtrooms, but even then there's no guarantee someone is telling the truth. Maybe you remember from your childhood or teenage years what you needed to do to be believed even if you were fibbing. Much of it had to do with details. The more specific the details of a story, the more convincing the story. If we look at film and television, we see entire narratives based on deceit and maintaining a lie. The AMC hit series *Breaking Bad* followed the life of Walter White who had to constantly work to keep his family from discovering that he was involved in the world of crystal meth. In the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, Gwyneth Paltrow's character dresses as "Thomas Kent" in order to audition for a performance in which women are prohibited to perform. And in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), Ferris has to deceive his family and teachers in order to keep from being caught for skipping school—after deceiving his mom by convincing her he was too sick to go to school. Alternatively, in the 1979 Monty Python classic *The Life of Brian*, poor Brian Cohen, born on the same day as Jesus, cannot convince anyone he is not God's only holy son. We can ask how these characters convince other characters (or not) of their stories, but the real question in regard to creative writing is more along the lines of why are we *the audience* so lost in these characters lives and swept up in their stories? And how can we, as the speaker of a poem, make our audience feel with that same intensity when they read our poems?

Like the stories in these movies, poems do not have to be factual or even based on fact to earn the trust of a reader and ring true. The experience poems create can be either real or entirely made-up. The speaker must simply, as Billy Collins says, “sound authentic.” The truth of a poem, like the truth in a short story or novel, need not be based on the author’s experience; it simply need be an experience that convinces us to lose ourselves in it and the voice that tells it.

Don’t Try to Sound Poetic

One of the mistakes I see beginning writers make frequently is using archaic or unnatural **diction**, or word choice, in a poem. Words like *amongst*, *thou*, *thine*, *hath*, *thee*, *thysself*, or adding an *-eth* to a verb: *stoppeth*, *handeth*, etc. Archaic words like these stand out as thy sore thumb. They are of a different time and generation. When we use them it feels to the reader as though we are putting on a cloak, disguising ourselves, creating a voice that is untrustworthy—again, not because the story may not be true, but because it sounds like the speaker isn’t real. When we write, whether we write as ourselves or as someone we are pretending to be—like acting—we must sound like a real person.

Some of the thinking that is behind the use of archaic diction is that we feel that we need to sound poetic, so we use words that we are used to thinking of as being poetic. But the truth is that the reader comes to the poem wanting to be surprised by new uses of language, its music, its imagery, wanting to connect to a real speaker. Unfortunately, most high school English classes expose students only to writers who are no longer alive, who wrote at a time when poetry was expected to be formal in form and tone. We read [Shakespeare](#), the [British Romantics](#) like Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, [Victorians](#) like [Robert Browning](#), and other writers from the 19th and 20th centuries neglecting the fact that today the United States is home to a thriving poetry scene and network of publishers. According to [R.R. Bowker](#), over 10,000 new books of poetry were published in 2012. After the push by 19th-century poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, and by 20th-century poet Walt Whitman to write poetry that reflects the “common man” and common experiences, contemporary poetry’s dominant style shifted to a poetry that possesses a less formal, distant, or elitist tone. Pick up a literary journal or book of poems today and you will find poems that are conversational, friendly, confessional, reflective, meditative, or serious, but what they all contain is a speaker who is knowable, or as Collins explains, *authentic*. Of course, there are many schools and styles of poetry. [Language poetry](#), for instance, isn’t interested in a speaker’s voice or expression, but rather places more of an emphasis on the reader’s interpretation of how language is creating meaning in and of itself. A reference guide to schools of poetry can be found at [The Poetry Foundation’s](#) fine web site.

Part of the advantage of writing poetry in college is being able to expose yourself to new poets, living poets, including most likely the professor teaching this class. Do yourself the favor of reading widely and generously and you will see how many more ways of speaking and writing there are. Expand your repertoire. Ask your professor and other poets you hear read to make recommendations. Who should you be reading? What’s their newest favorite book of poems? Who are they excited about?

When you begin reading more poets, you will discover many ways of writing that you will want to experiment with. Don’t worry about sounding like other poets or imitating someone else’s style. This is another popular concern of beginning writers and it is, like worrying about finding your voice, completely unnecessary. Several writers and artists have said something akin to “Good writers borrow, great writers steal.” This isn’t implying you should plagiarize. Just that we build upon the shoulders of others and then we stand up tall ourselves. It’s unavoidable for others to influence us and inspire us—in fact, this is what we want as artists. Take in as much as you can and let it roam around and settle in your brain like compost. You will change it unconsciously into what suits you, what you need, and you will grow from it. And then, when you sit down to write your own poems, to thine own voice you will be-eth true.

Balance Sentimentality and Emotional Risk

Without emotional risk, a poem can lack tension, energy, and lose the chance of producing insight. If a speaker isn’t risking something in a poem, then why is it being written? It’s like getting into a car and driving nowhere. The poem is the vehicle we climb into as a reader and we want the driver to take us somewhere. Whenever we express ourselves and share our feelings, just as whenever we hop into a car and drive, we take a risk. A risk of being rejected, criticized, not believed. Expressing our true feelings makes us vulnerable and feel exposed just for that reason: because whether it’s love, anger, confusion, or joy, expressing how we feel *exposes* us and opens us to other people’s reactions. Being a feeling, thinking human is full of risk. In poetry, our aim is to bottle that risk in a condensed way and deliver it through a speaker to a reader.

William Wordsworth referred to a poem as “a spontaneous overflow of emotions ... reflected upon in tranquility.” His definition suggests that a poem contains two possible sources of tension: one triggered by the poetic event (either real or imagined) that caused a surge in sensual and emotional intensity almost like a chemical reaction; and a second source (either real or imagined) that transpires when the speaker applies reflection, thought, or ideas to the first event and the reaction. The second part takes place after

time distances an intellectual perspective from a frenzy of emotions. There is what we can call the first occasion for the poem—the event and the instantaneous reaction of the body—and then the second occasion: the speaker’s reflection which aims to make meaning of it all. In the first part, tension is caused by what could be considered a chemical reaction between the event and the speaker’s reaction; and in the second part it is a speaker’s thoughts, ideas, reflections which can cause tension. At one of these two points of entry, there must be some form of duality or complexity. If the poem arises from the first part, the poem will tend to be dramatic or *narrative* and focused on the sequence of events. If the poem arises from the second part of the equation, the poem will tend to be *meditational* or *lyric*, focused on the poet’s thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. Either way, the poem must still contain concrete, detailed images which anchor the sentiment of the speaker to an event, for if there isn’t the anchor, the poet risks drifting off into a world of oversentimentality.

Beginning writers, attempting to instill intensity in a poem, often lapse into *oversentimentality*, exaggerated or overly simplistic emotions without just cause for them. As Oscar Wilde wrote, “A sentimentalist is one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it.” Oversentimentality results in sappy, clichéd writing, and an inauthentic voice. *Sentiment*, a speaker’s emotional state, is not the same thing as oversentimentality. All speakers have some sort of emotional stance, or sentiment, in a poem—in fact, sentiment is required to produce a knowable speaker to whom a reader can relate. And this sentiment—this abstraction we as readers will be made to feel—must arise from the concrete particulars that justify the level of emotion produced.

In the following examples, the poem falls victim to oversentimentality:

1. When I found out about Charlie’s new girlfriend, it felt like my heart exploded into a billion pieces. I cried so much I thought my tears would drown me. I would never love again.
2. The poor, innocent, homeless boy tugged at my skirt. It wasn’t his fault he had no shelter, but the cruel winter and its roaring wind didn’t care about the fragile boy’s body or soul. It howled like a demonic coyote about to devour a frail fawn smelling delicate flowers for the first time.

Many times oversentimentality results from a focus on telling rather than showing, as is the case with the first example which tells us what the speaker was feeling rather than show us through actions or descriptions. The image of the heart bursting into a billion pieces is cliché and is used in place of a fresh image. The word “never” is extreme and unbelievable. In fact, when we write we want to avoid words with ultimatums as such—final, never, always, all, none. Usually they are simply not true and difficult to imagine.

In the second example, the writer uses extensive images to play on the reader’s emotions. Note the use of adjectives—small, innocent, cruel, poor, demonic, fragile, delicate. Remember adjectives tell instead of show. The example is so over the top that as readers we begin to feel emotionally bullied by the writer.

So, what to do? You cannot have a poem dodge sentimentality entirely; otherwise, your speaker will be robotic. But, one must be careful not to indulge in extremities and exaggeration either. There is a balance between the solipsistic rant, complaint, or laud and the raw, sarcastic, angry expression: for example, “Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb” (Ginsberg); “Boy, do I love America” (Dockins); “I hate them as I hate sex” (Gluck). It’s all about balance and anchoring the sentiment in concrete images and daring to expose a speaker or character’s vulnerability, their humanity.

Use Contrasts

To balance oversentimentality and emotional risk, take a cue from fiction technique and try to work in contrasts to maintain balance. If a character is a mean, selfish person, try to find or invent an occasion in his life when he was vulnerable. If a character is generous and giving, try to find or invent a time when she wasn’t. The contrasts will add tension and complication and make the character or speaker seem more human. You can see this contrasting and complicating approach made successful in film, television, and fiction where sometimes the main character may be despicable, but we readers or viewers can’t help but feel pity, empathy, or some sort of hope for him or her. In *Breaking Bad* Walter White is a selfish liar whose drug-making causes the deaths of numerous people, but when we see him hold his newborn, share a touching moment with his disabled son, undergo chemotherapy, or express over and over his reason for making meth—to support his family—we can’t help but soften our criticism of him.

Activity

Create a character that can be described as being one of the words in List A. Choose a word and create a list of ten images or actions that make the character such:

List A:

- Reliable

- Intelligent
- Athletic
- Generous

Then, create an event where the character does something that can be characterized as being one of the words in List B.

List B:

- Gullible
- Jealous
- Controlling
- Overly Indulgent

Alternatively, reverse the lists and create a character who is appalling but does something kind.

Let Objects Become Symbols

When your poems confront a speaker's intense emotion, whether from a real or imagined experience, one thing you can do to stay grounded in real emotion is to turn to images and objects which can become symbols for emotion. Return to [Jane Kenyon's poem "What Came to Me."](#) Here is an example of speaker who feels an overwhelming sense of grief, but the poem focuses on the gravy boat and that drop of gravy to evoke emotions. The object becomes a symbol of grief.

When experiencing loss or healing from grief, what do people do? We often turn to people, objects, and actions for comfort—the company of our children, a cup of tea, handfuls of birdseed in the birdhouse covered with snow. At the same time, objects can deepen the grief—a pair of empty slippers under the bed, untouched knitting needles in a basket by the couch, the still mobile of stars and planets dripping from a nursery ceiling. These images set a mood for the poem and evoke emotions without the poet having to turn to abstractions and oversentimentality.

Create Distance

When emotions run high, turn down the diction and distance the speaker from the emotion. Rather than rely on hyperbole to describe the overwhelming, indescribable sense of emotion, turn your camera's eye elsewhere, cool the feelings. Sometimes pulling away creates an odd contrast that makes the poem more emotional, as odd as that sounds. In [the following poem, Kim Addonizio](#) uses this approach:

Eating Together

I know my friend is going,
though she still sits there
across from me in the restaurant,
and leans over the table to dip
her bread in the oil on my plate; I know
how thick her hair used to be,
and what it takes for her to discard
her man's cap partway through our meal,
to look straight at the young waiter
and smile when he asks
how we are liking it. She eats
as though starving—chicken, dolmata,
the buttery flakes of filo—
and what's killing her
eats, too. I watch her lift
a glistening black olive and peel
the meat from the pit, watch
her fine long fingers, and her face,
puffy from medication. She lowers
her eyes to the food, pretending
not to know what I know. She's going.
And we go on eating.

“Eating Together”, from WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED LOVE: POEMS by Kim Addonizio. Copyright © 2004 by Kim Addonizio. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

For five lines, we interpret “going” as maybe implying that the friend is leaving for another appointment or going home. When the friend leans over and dips her bread into the oil on the speaker’s plate, the action can seem like an inconvenience or intrusion. But the mood changes as we discover the friend is losing her hair and is eating as though she is “starving.” We begin to put pieces together until we understand that what’s “killing her” is cancer. Still, even with this knowledge, the tone of the poem remains distant, the speaker objectively describing the scene and actions through imagery. The food is described as “buttery” and “glistening,” which gives the food beauty and a sense of indulgence. In contrast, the friend’s face is “puffy from medication,” which strikes us as being unnatural. Although the speaker never says the words “death,” “cancer,” “loss,” “miss,” or “love,” the cool tone and images create these emotions in us as though the loss of her friend’s life is so devastating that the speaker cannot bring it to words directly. Like the tone, she remains distant from the fact of her friend’s impending death, which can be seen as the poem ends not on “She’s going,” but on “we go on eating.” They go on eating as if nothing is different or wrong. They go on eating because that is life.

In a poem of the same title, [Li-Young Lee](#) also adopts a distant tone in the beginning that shifts midway to something warmer:

Eating Together

In the steamer is the trout
seasoned with slivers of ginger,
two sprigs of green onion, and sesame oil.
We shall eat it with rice for lunch,
brothers, sister, my mother who will
taste the sweetest meat of the head,
holding it between her fingers
deftly, the way my father did
weeks ago. Then he lay down
to sleep like a snow-covered road
winding through pines older than him,
without any travelers, and lonely for no one.

Li-Young Lee, “Eating Together” from Rose. Copyright © 1986 by Li-Young Lee. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of BOA Editions, Ltd., www.boaeditors.org.

For the first five lines, the focus on food sounds almost like a menu description or a recipe. The speaker’s tone is distant as we are given the images of food and who is eating. It isn’t until we reach the eighth line that states “the way my father did” that we feel a sense of absence and longing. The next line surprises us in that the father only disappeared “weeks ago.” We understand that this is a recent loss, and possibly death. The poem affirms that the speaker’s father “lay down / to sleep,” a metaphor for death. And that, further, he lay down “like a snow-covered road / winding through pines older than him, / without any travelers.” The snow evokes cold and the death that comes naturally in winter, and the pines place the father in a world that the old and ancient occupy, alone “without any travelers.” Yet, the poem ends with a tone of acceptance and satisfaction, an affirmation that the speaker’s father is “lonely for no one.” Though the speaker and his family feel loss, emphasized by the assonance of the emotional “oh’s” in the last phrase: “lonely for no one,” his father is content and “lonely for no one.” This last phrase offers complex feelings, both uplifting in acceptance and painful with mourning. There are two worlds now—life and death—and being “lonely for no one” translates differently in each world. Like Addonizio’s poem, Lee’s poem doesn’t contain the words “death,” or “sadness.” Only a cool tone that arises partially from the imagery produced by a speaker who stands outside the experience of the poem, the eye of the camera an observer rather than a confessionalist.

Activity

Write your own poem titled “Eating Together” in which you rely on images and a distant tone of voice to evoke a strong sense of emotion. Begin by thinking for five minutes about an emotional event you’ve experienced. This event could be anything as long as it affects your memory and emotions strongly. Then, write the poem without speaking about or referring to the event. Simply try to write a poem that details imagery related to the theme of “eating together.” How do your memories cause you to charge the language?

Your Voice

As readers and students, you may have heard someone refer to a writer and his or her “voice.” In many situations, we are able to spot a seasoned writer’s voice by noting the subject matter, diction, tone, form, and other aspects of style. It is similar to how we recognize a familiar voice in a crowded room, and then again, it is not the same at all. With writing we miss the timbre of a voice, the auditory sound as air jets pass the speaker’s unique body and vocal chords. Still, in writing, there are many ways to use grammar, syntax, and style to create a “voice.” Many young writers get caught up in the mission to find or discover his or her voice. But this is not such an important thing to worry about at any stage of writing—just write. Write about what you know. Write about what you don’t know. Experiment. Play. Don’t think, just write. Your style will naturally evolve, and if you write long enough, it might even change.

Your voice depends on a variety of elements that make up the poems:

Subject Matter: What do you write about? What don’t you write about? [Sharon Olds](#) writes frequently about her father; [William Heyen](#) about the [Holocaust](#); [Mary Oliver](#) about nature and animals. These subjects are not all that these writers choose to write about, but they do have a heavy, repetitive presence in their collections. What interests you and often becomes the focus of your poems? It’s okay for these to change, too. William Wordsworth wrote about nature when he was young, and much more about God as he aged.

Tone and Mood: Are your poems serious? Humorous? Dark? Inspirational? When we read Billy Collins we expect to smile and laugh. How do your poems make us feel, generally?

Diction: Perhaps the most influential element that creates voice and tone is *diction*, a term we use for “word choice” or the vocabulary used in a piece of writing. There is a range of diction—formal, informal, conversational, slang—and the words we choose reveal the emotional coloring of the speaker and the stance of the speaker in relation to the subject. There are no two words that mean the exact same thing—regardless of what a thesaurus tells you; synonyms are simply related, not exact variants. At your little sister’s recital, did she look cute in her costume? Adorable? Pretty? Sweet? Diction can also reveal a speaker’s range of knowledge, education, culture, and regional influence. Do you say sneakers or tennis shoes? Soda or pop?

Activity

Write a list of synonyms for the following words:

- Vulgar
- Obsolete
- Peeved
- Enthralled
- Picky
- Dizzy
- Grass

Then choose one of these lists and use your crayons to draw a series of images that fit each. What differences do we *see* in these “similar” words. What are the similarities? Next, translate your drawings into writing using concrete, detailed descriptions.

Syntax and Grammar: Working hand in hand with diction is syntax, which refers to the order in which words are arranged. We make decisions every day about diction, prepare for phone calls by deciding what to say and how. Syntax is *how* we deliver our thoughts. If we have to tell someone something important or participate in an intense or touchy conversation, we might even rehearse how we are going to say something to someone before we do. For example, what do you say when you break off a relationship or tell someone you can’t make it to their wedding? We think about what we say, what words we choose, and how we deliver them to our intended audience. There’s a difference between telling someone, “I don’t think we should see each other any more” and “I don’t love you.” What we choose to say creates our character in more than one way. Some of what’s related to syntax and grammar are sentence length, fragments, and active or passive voice.

Types of Images: Like subject matter, writers tend to favor certain images or image types. Read through Michael Burkard’s collected poems and you’ll find frequent uses of trains, rain, and shadows. Some poets’ bodies of work are filled with birds, or flowers, or astronomical metaphors, or images of the body. What images do you gravitate toward? Do you frequently use similes or metaphors?

Activity

Go through your poems and note any patterns of images. What do you notice? Make a list of similar images and sculpt them into a poem.

Form: By simply looking at a poem on the page we may be able to identify a poet. [Emily Dickinson's](#) short poems with stanzas and lines of equal length. [Norman Dubie's](#) willingness to mix different stanzas and line lengths—a couplet followed by a sextet (six-line stanza), followed by a single line that stands on its own. e.e. cummings's abandonment of punctuation and capitalization. Are there forms and structures you like to use? Do your lines tend to be long or short?

The combination of all these elements determines your style and contributes to the formation of your voice.

Activity

Choose a poet you like and identify what patterns you see in his or her poems in regard to the above elements. What does the poet frequently write about? What images are used? Is the mood and tone similar in his or her poems? What forms are frequently used? Next, try to imitate this poet's style by rewriting one of your own poems to adopt the techniques. What different types of moves are you making that you normally don't?

Persona

"A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence," wrote [John Keats](#), "because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body." In a letter to his brother, Keats famously wrote of the concept of "[negative capability](#)," which he described as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." A type of [cognitive dissonance](#), in which one can peacefully hold two opposing thoughts in the mind at once, Keats' negative capability is what allows us as poets to imaginatively and empathetically muse upon the subject of our poems, or to enter the world of another, to speak from an imagined experience as if it were our own. In a persona poem, the poet adopts the perspective of a character or speaker in a specific situation. The poet steps outside his or her own body and into the body of this imagined speaker.

Adopting a persona widens a poet's range of subject matter. It allows us to explore different subjects and points of view. Rather than only writing from our experience, we can invent a new character or speak from a person in history or in literature. In his book-length poem *Shannon*, [Campbell McGrath](#) speaks from the perspective of the [Lewis and Clark Expedition's](#) youngest member Shannon when he goes missing in the prairie for over two weeks. Based on history, McGrath fills in the events and details no one could ever know. Speaking as Shannon, he writes:

The rest of the day the country shimmers
In a haze, these buffalo
Have no fear of me
Their eyes loll & moon in the grass
& I must shout to start them from my path
& hurl a stick at one brute
Oblivious as if I were invisible
Or he aware of my absolute helplessness.

William Heyen, also inspired by history, in his book *Crazyhorse in Stillness*, speaks from many personas. In the following, he depicts the plight of the buffalo by writing in the voice of an anonymous man hired on the prairie around the time of the [Battle of Little Big Horn](#):

Job

I liked picking up the skulls best.
I could fling a calf's by one horn
maybe twenty feet into the wagon.
It didn't matter if it busted—
in fact, the smaller pieces the better.
But a bull's skull took two of us
to twist it off its stem and lift it.
You each grabbed a horn,
or did it the smart way with a pole

through the jaw and an eyesocket.
All in all, it was good work,
but ran out, but you had the feeling
of clearing something up, a job
no one would need to do again.

Copyright ©William Heyen “Job” is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.

Should you not be so ambitious to write a hundred-page persona poem, or a full collection based on a handful of specific characters in American history, consider writing from the voice of a character with your main focus on theme or circumstance. Here is poem by [Traci Brimhall](#), whose poems in the book *Our Lady of Ruins* speak from the personas of multiple women ravaged by war:

Our Bodies Break Light

We crawl through the tall grass and idle light,
our chests against the earth so we can hear the river
underground. Our backs carry rotting wood and books
that hold no stories of damnation or miracles.
One day as we listen for water, we find a beekeeper—
one eye pearled by a cataract, the other cut out by his own hand
so he might know both types of blindness. When we stand
in front of him, he says we are prisms breaking light into color—
our right shoulders red, our left hips a wavering indigo.
His apiaries are empty except for dead queens, and he sits
on his quiet boxes humming as he licks honey from the bodies
of drones. He tells me he smelled my southern skin for miles,
says the graveyard is full of dead prophets. To you, he presents
his arms, tattooed with songs slave catchers whistle
as they unleash the dogs. He lets you see the burns on his chest
from the time he set fire to boats and pushed them out to sea.
You ask why no one believes in madness anymore,
and he tells you stars need a darkness to see themselves by.
When you ask about resurrection, he says, How can you doubt?
and shows you a deer licking salt from a lynched man’s palm.

“Our Bodies Break Light”, from *OUR LADY OF THE RUINS: POEMS* by Traci Brimhall. Copyright © 2012 by Traci Brimhall. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Activity

Choose a character from history and write a dramatic monologue in his or her voice. Either conduct some research to position yourself in a particular event, or place the person somewhere you know very well—your college dorm room or dining hall, your childhood bedroom, a favorite hangout, at your neighborhood deli, on your town’s Main Street or on one of your city’s main avenues. Give the speaker a concern—what does the speaker want, fear, need right now? Describe what he or she sees. Do not worry about being factually or historically correct. Rather, just pretend to be the person: human, complicated, flawed. Consider writing a diary entry for the speaker.

Alternatively, pretend to be someone you know well—a sibling, a friend—and place him or her in a specific situation that you yourself have never been in. Write a poem in his or her voice.

Alternatively, choose a speaker who you have nothing or little in common with: a terminally ill cancer patient, a middle-aged mother of three who works at a department store, a baseball card collector. Then, conduct some research and find a way to enter the speaker’s experiences.

Point of View

When we write we do so using one of three points of view:

First Person • I/We • *I went to the store to buy milk.*

Most poets begin writing in first person, taking their own experiences as subject matter. The first-person point of view is present in memoir, the personal essay, and in autobiography and it allows us to be very close to not only the speaker's observations, but also with his or her thoughts. This is the point of view used in a persona poem or a dramatic monologue.

Second Person • You • *You went to the store to buy milk.*

When we use this point of view, we may be addressing a particular person in the poem, or we may be addressing the reader. We may even be talking about the speaker, attempting to make the reader imagine being the “I” which is really the “you.” This perspective can make the reader a character and it can also create a deep sense of connection between the reader and the speaker.

Third Person • He/She/It • *Her daughter went to the store to buy milk.*

From third-person perspective, we can control the distance from which we observe the character by being an omniscient, limited omniscient, or an objective observer.

Omniscient Toby fastened his seatbelt and looked out the passenger side window. His mother, worrying about being late for the match, blasted the gas. Toby squeezed his hands into fists. He didn't want to go. He thought himself better off at the playground. On the swings where he left her, Susan rebraided her hair. By the next day she'd forget what Toby had told her.

The omniscient speaker is powerful and godlike. As you see in the example above, the omniscient speaker isn't limited by space or time. We can enter the thoughts of all characters—Toby, his mother, and Susan. We can be in the car, on the playground, and we can fast-forward to tomorrow. The omniscient speaker is flexible and can go anywhere, anytime.

Limited Omniscient Toby fastened his seatbelt and looked out the passenger side window. His mother, worrying about being late for the match, blasted the gas. Toby squeezed his hands into fists. His mother figured that he didn't want to go. But she didn't feel comfortable with him and Susan being unsupervised at the playground—especially with how much “in love” he might be thinking he was.

In this example, we are limited to Toby's mother's thoughts. We can observe Toby but we cannot enter his thoughts. As readers we ride alongside with Toby's mother, struggling as she does, experiencing what she does, discovering things only when she does. We are limited to her interpretations of the world—even if they are incorrect.

Objective Toby fastened his seatbelt and looked out the passenger side window. His mother blasted the gas. “Now we're going to be late,” she said. Toby squeezed his hands into fists and rolled his eyes. Through the rear window, on the swings where he left her, he could see Susan rebraiding her hair.

Here, the most distant of the perspectives, we can observe only what a witness could sense with his nose, ears, mouth, eyes, and skin. Any judgments we make must arise from the text and where the speaker directs our attention.

When you revise, try switching the point of view to see what difference it makes in the poem. If a poem is first person, try it in third. If it is objective, make it omniscient. The changes might alert you to new possibilities or make something stand out to you that didn't before. If you don't like it, you can always change it back.

Activity

Revise one of your poems in three ways using first, second, and third person points of view. What differences do the different perspectives make in your poem? What are the advantages/disadvantages in each?

Psychic Distance

In addition to point of view, another element that influences voice in our writing is *psychic distance*, or how intimate a *narrator*, what we call a “speaker” in fiction, is to the subject. For us as poets, it's advantageous to consider the role of psychic distance in our poems, as well, since it affects tone.

In his book *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner succinctly demonstrates differences in psychic distance, moving from farthest to closest:

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.

5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul...

In these examples, we see diction and point of view change tone and determine the distance from which we read the character of Henry. In the first example, Henry is just “a man,” an unnamed figure in winter in 1853. With each subsequent example we take steps closer moving into Henry’s thoughts and feelings and finally into Henry’s body.

Just as it can be useful to experiment with different points of view in our poems, it can be insightful to try on different levels of psychic distance.

Activity

Write a poem three different ways altering the speaker and his or her psychic distance. For example, write about a high school football game from the following perspectives: football quarterback; coach; newspaper reporter. Or about a car accident: driver; witness; police officer. Or at a restaurant: customer’s five-year-old child; parent; server.

Making Friends with Fictioneers

Although poetry and fiction are different in many ways, they do have points of intersection where mastering the skills of one can improve the other. Because it is so integral to narration, point of view is an aspect of writing that is more complex in fiction than it is for poetry. The same may be said of character; in fiction, the way a character changes is central to the form. But as different as they are, there are similarities and intersections where each genre’s elements can benefit the other. For fictioneers, the attention paid in poetry to condensing language and making it musical can contribute to stronger prose. Likewise, some of the approaches our fictioneer friends use, particularly for point of view, character development, and setting are especially helpful for poets when thinking about persona/character, voice, and tone.

Tips for Characterization, Burroway Style

In her classic text *Writing Fiction*, Janet Burroway lists tips for characterization that may be helpful for poets, too, when pinning down and developing a poem’s tone and voice. One of the tips she provides:

1. If the character is based on a real model, including yourself, make a dramatic external alteration.

She suggests changing the color of your character’s hair, or altering the gender. If we shift this advice to a poem’s speaker instead of a story’s narrator, we may alter more than just external appearances; we may alter memories, experiences, or stances, too. Just enough to give ourselves some distance where we can privilege the language instead of the facts.

Many beginning poets fall into the trap of writing directly from the facts of their own lives from which they refuse to deviate. Because the writer has chosen what to write about, or whom, the poem fails to grow organically, take risks, or create leaps and surprises. As Richard Hugo says, this type of poet is choosing to believe that “all music must conform to truth” rather than “all truth must conform to music.” “One mark of a beginner,” he writes, “is his impulse to push language around to make it accommodate what he has already conceived to be the truth, or, in some cases, what he has already conceived to be the form.” If you’re writing about your Uncle Matt who is a recovering alcoholic, whose daughter is your cousin you sit with on the bus every day on your way to school, it is going to be difficult to give precedence to the language in the writing process, and instead, thoughts and adherence to facts will make the writing seem forced and contrived. Worst of all, you will shut down opportunities to give yourself over to imagination and create art.

To counter this impulse, Hugo suggests inventing a town populated with residents from which to write. The town is fictional, but it is derived from your experiences and your imagination. In your town, your Uncle Matt can become Louie the neighbor or Mrs. Stover the English teacher, thereby creating enough of a distance so you can feel free to imagine as you write and go where the music of language takes you.

Another tip that Burroway provides:

2. Know what your character wants, both generally out of life, and specifically in the context of the story. Keeping that desire in mind, “think backward” with the character to decide what he or she would do in any situation presented.

In the context of poetry, this advice works well for persona poems. If you’re undertaking a persona and wearing a “mask” as a speaker, clearly you, speaking as that persona, should be a fully developed, complex human. If the persona is someone you know well, place that speaker in a situation you do not know well. If the persona is someone you’ve researched or invented, place that speaker in a circumstance you do know well. Always, some element of the strange and new for the poet will make for fresher writing. As Robert Frost has said, “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.”

A third tip that Burroway provides is based on Aristotle's concept of "consistent inconsistencies," or conflicts within a character:

3. Identify, heighten, and dramatize consistent inconsistencies. What does your character want that is at odds with whatever else she wants? What patterns of thought and behavior work against his primary goal?

Complexity, complexity, complexity. When writing a persona poem, the voice should be based not on what the speaker *should say* or *think*, but on what the speaker potentially *would say* or think. Keep your writing surprising, and as Hugo says about language, don't be a bully!

Who speaks? To Whom? In what form? From how far?

In fiction, these questions help a writer determine who the narrator is in a very precise way. The questions can also be useful in poetry to help us carve out a precise speaker and help develop a form. The following is based on the chart provided by Burroway in *Writing Fiction* with some alterations to make it more apt for poetry:

Who Speaks?

The Poet	The Poet	A Character
In: Third Person	In: Second Person	In: First Person
Omniscient	"You" as Character	In: Second Person
Limited Omniscient	"You" as Reader	In: Third Person
Objective		

To Whom?

The reader, a character, the self

In What Form?

Dramatic monologue, narrative voice, lyric voice, meditative voice, prose poem, journal entry, letter, etc.

At What Psychic Distance?

Complete Identification versus Complete Opposition

If anything be taken from this chart, it is that a poet is offered a range of voices from which to speak. There are also different points of view to take, and even opportunities to speak as someone else, either real-ish or imagined, behind the mask of a persona. Experimenting with any of these can be fun and enlightening, and is highly encouraged.

Actors are Fictioneers Too

In her book *Respect for Acting*, [Uta Hagen](#) distinguishes between representational actors and presentational actors. *Representational actors*, constantly aware of their physicality, try to act *like* the character. They make faces, speak, and move like they imagine the character would. *Presentational actors*, on the other hand, believe the way to best capture their character's essence is to find something about the character in themselves. The presentational actor embodies the character and takes risks in portraying him or her. Janet Burroway offers similar advice:

4. If the character is imaginary or alien to you, imagine a mental or emotional point of contact.

As poets, we strive to be presentational actors by finding ways to internally identify with the persona so we may portray him or her as convincingly human as possible.

To better embody your character, or in our case, our persona, Hagen provides a list of questions for the presentational actor to ask of his or her role:

Who am I? (Character)

What time is it? (Context, year, day)

Where am I? (Country, neighborhood, room, etc.)

What surrounds me? (Animate and inanimate)

What are the given circumstances? (Past, present, future and events)

What is my relationship? (To objects, characters, and events)

What do I want? (Character's immediate and superobjectives)

What's in my way? (Obstacles to objectives)

What do I do to get what I want? (Actions, words)

Notice how specific and concrete (country, neighborhood, room, etc.) the answers aim to be. It is much like writing when we position ourselves in our speaker's space and state. We need to feel situated in a very specific way before we can create concrete images for the reader. Hagen's questions are effective for not only acting, but for writing poetry, as well.

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2.3.6: Architecture

Chapter Five: Architecture

In poetry, there are three units of architecture, or structure: words, lines, and stanzas. As with all forms of writing, words comprise the most basic level of form. But what makes poetry unique as a genre is **verse**—lines—which work as both a unit of sensibility and music. Lines assemble into stanzas, or “rooms” in Italian. Sometimes poems can have sections, too, where stanzas are confined yet relate to one another, and sometimes poems can break from line and stanza into what we call prose poems, which we will discuss later.

The Line: Rows

Originally, poetry was used as a way to remember stories, which were delivered orally by a speaker or “the poet” to an audience. The units created *verse*, which in Latin translates to “line,” “row,” or “furrow,” musical measures that were easier to remember. Poetry existed before writing; and even after writing was invented most people could not read. Poetry has been a way throughout human existence for people to pass on history, news, entertainment, and wisdom from one generation to the next. With the spread of literacy, the function of lines began to take on more complexity, increasing auditory and visual impacts. By the twentieth century, typeface allowed poets to place visual form at the center of their art.

It is apt that “verse” translates to “row” or “furrow,” words we also use when speaking of gardens and farms (and also to the lines on our foreheads when we brood!). Think of each line of poetry you write as a row in your garden that is the poem. Every garden is different and the plants in it do not simply lie atop the surface; roots go deep and flourish from the nutrients in the soil. In a poem, those nutrients are the knowledge and emotions of the poet which, like in a garden, we do not see. Instead we see emotions and ideas transformed linguistically into imagery and music. In this analogy, words are the plants and flowers that the poet/gardener has chosen, and they are rooted into the earth, into history, into what came before. Words cannot detach themselves from their meanings and nuances. Each is a seed fallen from a mother plant. Poetry, the garden in which generations of words may flourish, gives opportunities for words to evolve. It is why the poet is known as the “keeper of language,” giving words to the unspeakable, naming the unnameable.

In our gardens, the line is a unit of measurement different from that of sentences. A line can ignore syntax and grammar to create interesting effects. For instance, a line can end on a verb and suspend the object onto the next line. This move can increase speed, or the pace, of the poem, as the reader is propelled forward to complete the thought. The line break can also create an image or idea that can transform when the reader reaches the next line. For example, in Bruce Snider’s poem “Epitaph,” the word “alive” creates one meaning that changes with the turn to the next line:

... I could sense
him down there, satin-lined,
curled like the six-toe cat
we’d found bloated in the creek, alive
with lice and maggots.

As reader we think at first that the cat is alive, only to find that it is alive but with “lice and maggots.” The effect comes from the use of an **enjambéd** line, a line that does not end with punctuation. This enjambment is referred to as *hard* enjambment because it has so much of an effect and impact on the poem’s reading. Enjambed lines can suggest complex meaning, create images or emphasis, and control the music, or **prosody** of the poem. In contrast, when a line ends with a form of punctuation, or with a complete phrase, we refer to those lines as **end-stopped**.

Deciding where to break a line can be determined by a number of things: rhythm, rhyme, emphasis, pace, or the way a poem looks on a page. Classic forms predetermine the form a poem takes, and include rules concerning meter, rhyme, and repetition. Some forms like the Shakespearean sonnet include the element of a turn, or a **volta**, in which there is a marked change in the speaker in thought, emotion, or rhetoric. Forms are fun to experiment with and assert pressure on the writer in interesting ways that result in surprises that wouldn’t occur otherwise.

Today, most poetry is written in free verse, or *verslibrein* Latin, not requiring the poet to follow any prescribed rules of form. Robert Frost famously referred to writing free verse as “playing tennis without a net.” And as you saw in the previous chapter, Billy Collins has noted the way free verse poems have come to rely on tone of voice to hold it together.

Discussion

Do you tend to write in free verse or in classical forms? Why? How do you determine a line's length and what belongs on it? Can one play tennis without a net?

End-Stopped Lines and Enjambment

In the following poem, [James Wright](#) keeps his lines syntactically intact and uses almost entirely end-stopped lines. Read the poem via [the Poetry Foundation](#).

The pauses at the ends of Wright's lines are natural in speech and adhere to the formation of phrases, the units of sentences. Incorporating enjambment, Wright could've altered the music, meaning, and emphasis of this poem if he had started:

In the Shreve High football stadium, I think
Of Polacks nursing long beers in Titonsville.

You can see in this example how the speaker's thinking is emphasized more than in the original because now the verb, "think," falls at the end of the line. This formation also sets up a delay for the reader to find out what the speaker is thinking about. If this were the first line of the poem, we'd initially have more of a focus on the speaker and his thinking, his brooding. Instead, the first four lines of the original end with a place—stadium, Titonsville, Benwood, and Wheeling Steel. In addition, the punctuation enforces more of a pause at the end of the line than the break already does. We sense the separation of the places, yet their connectedness through the stanza that joins them, as well as the last line of the stanza which unites the Polacks, Negroes, and watchman through an action: "dreaming of heroes." The collective action suggests that the speaker, part of this larger community, is also dreaming of heroes.

The only line not end-stopped with punctuation in the poem happens in the last stanza: "Their sons grow suicidally beautiful," and this difference, as any change does, makes the line stand out. Even though there's no punctuation, this line is not forcefully enjambed, as Wright continues to adhere to syntactical units:

Possessive pronoun (Their)—noun (sons)—verb (grow)—adverb (suicidally)—adjective (beautiful)

And because he does, there is little if any jarring with the break to "At the beginning of October."

Overall, the end-stopped lines and syntactical intactness of the lines moves the poem slowly, one step it seems at a time until it reaches its sum: "Therefore," at which point the poem loosens its pace and speeds up just for a bit, as if the sons begin to "gallop" or run, as the line itself runs over into the next.

At the end of another one of Wright's poems, "A Blessing," enjambment is used to surprise the reader with an image that changes as the **penultimate**, or second to last, line gives way to the final line:

Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

The hard enjambment between "break" and "blossom" creates an initial image of breaking in which the tone is harsh, violent, a loss, a break in need of repair. But the last line changes the tone with the image of a body breaking into blossom rather than simply breaking.

In contrast to Wright's poem, the following poem by [Aimee Nezhukumatathil](#) employs mostly enjambed lines that ignore syntactically complete units in this poem about the explorers [Meriwether Lewis](#) and [William Clark](#):

Lewis and Clark Disagree

Because Meriwether ate the last berry
without consulting William. Because
the prairie dog only let *William* feed
it dried corn. Because the Nez Perce
gave one a necklace of purple quartz
and not the other. Because Osage oranges
gave Meriwether hives. Because a grizzly
chased William into an oak tree, left him

high for hours. Because “Someone” tucked
buffalo chips into Meriwether’s knapsack
when he wasn’t looking. Because after walking,
rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling,
cutting, all they really wanted was a name
for a fruit one found sour, the other, so sweet.

“Lewis and Clark Disagree” from Miracle Fruit, published by Tupelo Press, copyright © 2003 Aimee Nezhukumatahil. Used with permission.

The form is almost the exact opposite of Wrights’: ten enjambed lines followed by two end-stopped, then an enjambed line, then an end-stopped line. In this poem the lines break sometimes on the first word of the next sentence. If we were to layout the lines in terms of sentences, we would be left with an almost bullet-pointed list of reasons for why “Lewis and Clark Disagree” and they would look like this:

Because Meriwether ate the last berry without consulting William.
Because the prairie dog only let *William* feed it dried corn.
Because the Nez Perce gave one a necklace of purple quartz and not the other.
Because Osage oranges gave Meriwether hives.
Because a grizzly chased William into an oak tree, left him high for hours.
Because “Someone” tucked buffalo chips into Meriwether’s knapsack when he wasn’t looking.
Because after walking, rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling, cutting, all they really wanted was a name for a fruit one found sour, the other, so sweet.

Because, because, because, because, because. Instead, verse allows Nezhukumatahil to tone down the repetition of “Because” while also allowing her to manipulate rhythm and layer meaning. Take, for instance, the following lines:

... Because a grizzly
chased William into an oak tree, left him
high for hours. Because “Someone” tucked
buffalo chips into Meriwether’s knapsack
when he wasn’t looking. Because after walking,

The break after “left him” allows the image and idea of abandonment to linger before its meaning evolves into the complete thought “left him high for hours.” The next two lines use the break to emphasize the alliteration of “tuck” and “-sack,” which even continues beyond that couplet to the next with “walk.” “Walk” and “Tuck” also being verbs, we are propelled forward to the next line by action. As for meaning, we come to “tuck” and think: tucked what?

With lines, generally the first and last words will take on extra emphasis, and in “Lewis and Clark Disagree” they have multiple effects. Some lines begin and end where they do to emphasize meaning: “left him” and “when he wasn’t looking” suggest tension that feeds back to the relationship between Lewis and Clark; abandonment and sneakiness aren’t marks of kindness. We read “left him” and think how terrible! We turn to “when he wasn’t looking” and think, ooooooh sneaky.

Like Wright’s poem, this poem changes its pattern, moving from enjambed lines to end-stopped lines. The last sentence of the poem is strung out over four lines and arranged in a way so that the acoustics develop the feel of a burden or a long list:

... Because after walking,
rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling,
cutting, all they really wanted was a name
for a fruit one found sour, the other, so sweet.

Listen to how the rising pitch in the first line gives way to a list of actions that propels us into the penultimate line:

... walking, [↑]
[→] rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling, [a big pause]

cutting

There is a long pause between “pulling” and “cutting” produced from the break of momentum in the list of actions. Nezhukumatahil could’ve placed all the verbs on one line to create an entirely different feel:

walking, rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling, cutting

But instead, in order to keep the inflection and pitch varied, she rearranges words on a line differently, regardless of their syntactical relationships.

Activity

Choose a poem from [the Poetry Foundation](#) and erase the lines by placing the poem into complete sentences. Rewrite the poem experimenting with different line breaks. How much of a difference do your new lines make? What happens to tone? Images? Mood? Music?

Stanzas: Rooms

Once the lines of our poem begin to find their length of breath, the next structural concern is how to break the lines into stanzas. In classic forms stanza lengths are predetermined. A **ballad** is written in quatrains, or stanzas containing four lines; a **roundel** has three stanzas; and a **villanelle** five **tercets**, or stanzas containing three lines. But in free verse, the poem’s stanzas are determined by the poet. There are no rules when it comes to deciding what kind of stanzas to use in a poem and usually any reason that seems to intuit itself to the poet is justification. The decisions are based on personal taste with consideration to how it looks on the page, how it affects rhythm and pacing, and what it emphasizes in the poem. Like many moves in poetry, stanzas should be organic to the poem and not feel forced or hokey. And like many of the techniques of writing poetry, knowing what to do comes with practice and fine-tuning our attention to language and the effects of poetic elements.

Like rhythm and line length, there is a nomenclature that permits us to talk about stanza length. These terms are used to speak about metrical verse, as well as free verse:

Couplet: a stanza of two lines

Tercet, or Triplet: a stanza of three lines

Quatrain: a stanza of four lines

Cinquain, or quintain, or quintet: a stanza of five lines

Sextain, or sestet: a stanza of six lines

Septet: a stanza of seven lines

Octave: a stanza of eight lines

What Stanzas Do

There is no way around the fact that stanzas, which dictate the way space is used on the page, create unity and separation. Even if the motive is to break a poem into stanzas to make the poem easier to read on the page—a huge chunk of text can be intimidating and heavy—or even if the motive is to control the music of the language by adding longer pauses—breaking a poem into stanzas invites the ideas of division and unification into the poem.

Just like the rooms of houses, walls say “This is the den (let’s relax!),” or “This is the dining room (no clutter allowed!).” Rooms help us create space and define the tone of that space. When I was young, my sister and I shared a doorway with no door. Our bedrooms flowed into and out of each other, but the walls still defined our own individual space. We were connected as siblings, could see into each other’s rooms, but still had control over what we wanted in our private space. Like my childhood bedroom, stanzas in poems can suggest connection, or confine ideas, images, and sounds to their own space while still sharing the same roof. Punctuation and other devices in the last and first lines of a stanza suggest whether the doorway is open like mine and my sister’s bedrooms, or whether it contains a titanium door.

There are endless ways to organize stanzas and infinite decisions that can be made in the process of doing so. Usually stanzas are built on more than one idea, for more than one reason (like all aspects of a poem). Lines are part of stanzas, and words are part of lines. These three elements—words, lines, and stanzas—work together to cause all sorts of effects from creating music to drawing parallels between ideas and images. There is no way to provide a comprehensive review of what stanzas do, but the following examples will offer a small sampling of what stanzas *can* do.

Organize space and time

To label the past, present, and future:

In a room full of books in a world
of stories, he can recall
not one, and soon, he thinks, the boy
will give up on his father.

Already the man lives far ahead, he sees
the day this boy will go. Don't go!
Hear the alligator story! The angel story once more!
You love the spider story. You laugh at the spider.
Let me tell it!
(Li Young Lee, from "A Story")

In Lee's poem, the first stanza is delivered in the present tense and the second brings us to the future with "lives far ahead."

To illustrate differences in location:

The Mile

My grandmother crowns the hill,
her headlights lathing the dark,
a farm route

through rye then cotton
then the red and gold of wheat,
the scrub oak crowding

a little nameless river
where fog holds to low places.
Who would have seen the tractor

aimed down the highway by a boy
his first summer behind the wheel
with no lights but the holy

somnia of a cowboy radio?
The next car over the rise
is my father

blind into the fog.
There is so much to talk about
at this moment,

so many lines of cause and effect
trembling taut into that gully.
How does my father choose,

with his mother's ribs broken,
his new wife moaning from the ditch,
to carry the limp body

of someone else's child
a mile over night fields
toward the insinuation of a roof?

Everyone is bleeding and starlight
drizzles over the summer wheat.
The poem holds them there

long enough to trace the flight
of an owl
from a cedar's black minaret
its wings underlit by brake-lights.
Which of you, dear reader,
is in the next Oldsmobile
to clatter over the bluff
shouting help into your CB radio?
Which of you opens the front door
weeping
to wrap your unconscious boy
in quilts? Do you kill
the man
who carries him?
In most endings I am never
born. In most,
you buy my family's farm cheap
at auction. Who among you
is rushing the ambulance
past the county line at mile 67
when the tire blows? The story
moves through telephone wires
at the pitiless speed of rumor:
when my father reaches the house
with the boy expiring in his arms,
a white rectangle of light
and grief
seers his eyes forever.
In the cave of my mother's
body
I listen to the first fire.

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Here, Sweeney's stanzas bring us on a journey. We move with the grandmother over the hill, then through the grain fields, then beside a river. The lack of punctuation between the stanzas unifies the locations and makes the transitions feel like one journey. Had punctuation such as periods been used at the end of each stanza, there would be a stronger sense of isolation:

My grandmother crowns the hill,
her headlights lathing the dark.

A farm route
through rye then cotton
then the red and gold of wheat.

Then, the scrub oak crowding
a little nameless river
where fog holds to low places.

Indicate shifts in a poem's mode or voice

Stanzas can mark transitions between narrative and lyrical modes, descriptions and questions, and shifts in tone or perspective.

A shift in voice or address:

Dinner Out

We went to either the Canton Grill
or the Chinese Village, both of them
on 82nd among the car lots
and discount stores and small nests
of people waiting hopelessly
for the bus. I preferred the Canton
for its black and bright red sign
with the dragon leaping out of it
sneezing little pillows of smoke.
And inside, the beautiful green
half-shell booths, glittery brass encrusted
lamps swinging above them.

What would I have?
Sweet and sour?
Chow mein with little wagon wheel shaped
slices of okra and those crinkly noodles
my father called deep fried worms?
Fried rice?

Among such succulence, what did it matter?
We could eat till we were glad and full, the whole
family sighing with the pleasure of it.
And then the tea!
All of this for about six bucks, total,
my father, for that once-in-awhile, feeling
flush in the glow of our happy faces
and asking me, "How you doing, son?"

Fine, Dad. Great, really, in the light
of that place, almost tasting
the salt and bean paste and molasses, nearly
hearing the sound of the car door
opening before we climbed in together
and drove and drove,
though we hadn't far to go.

From Gaze by Christopher Howell (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions,). Copyright © 2012 by Christopher Howell. Reprinted with permission from Milkweed Editions. milkweed.org

In each stanza we hear a shift in voice. The first opens in a narrative mode as we are given a place and time, a description of the street on which the restaurant the speaker and his dad go to eat. In the second stanza, the voice shifts into an interrogative mode, asking questions about what will be ordered. Though the third stanza also begins with a question, this is a different type of question than what is posed in the second stanza. Here, the voice becomes lyrical and introspective: "Among such succulence, what did it matter?" In the last stanza the voice shifts to answer the question posed by the dad in the end of the third stanza and in this way, the first line of the last stanza directly addresses the dad. In Howell's poem each stanza is used to mark a slight shift in voice.

A shift in thought or a resolution:

You are the bread and the knife,
the crystal goblet and the wine.
You are the dew on the morning grass

and the burning wheel of the sun.
You are the white apron of the baker,
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.

However, you are not the wind in the orchard,
the plums on the counter,
or the house of cards.
And you are certainly not the pine-scented air.
There is just no way that you are the pine-scented air.

It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge,
maybe even the pigeon on the general's head,
but you are not even close
to being the field of cornflowers at dusk.

(Billy Collins, from "Litany")

As in Howell's poem, in Collins' poem there is a shift in the voice's pitch. But in "Litany," the stanzas emphasize moves in the thought process that build upon the ideas established in the preceding stanza. You can follow these turns of thought by the transition words that begin them: "You are"... "However, you are not..." "It is possible that you are..."

Create emphasis

On individual images:

Passover: The Injections

Clouds pass over, endless,
black fruit dripping
sap from the branches
of lightning.

We lie down in the field,
thousands of us,
never mind the rain.

Soldiers come toward us,
groups of three or four.
The wind opens their long coats.
Underneath, their uniforms are black.

They bend over to the babies.
The babies cry,
for a little while.

"We are living in Biblical times,"
a woman says.

"Passover: The Injections", from The Candle: Poems of Our Twentieth Century Holocausts by William Heyen. Copyright © 2016 by William Heyen. Used by permission of Etruscan Press.

Rarely is there one reason for the way stanzas are arranged. In the above excerpt, the stanzas isolate images, but they also organize space and actions. Each stanza is end-stopped, further emphasizing the divide between the fields, the prisoners, the soldiers.

On Enjambment

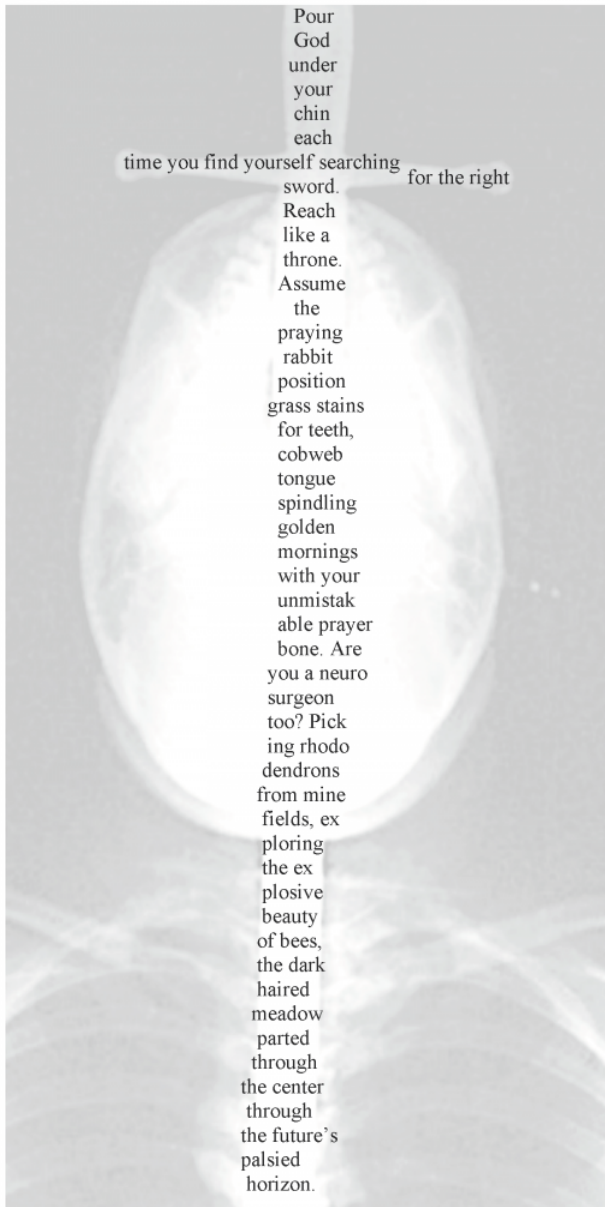
Even the tumbleweed
is a stowaway sneaked in
with the grass seed, given
an easier-to-say name. It became

American. We are lonely
when it stumbles by, but it's just
a weed. We made it
a thing sadder than itself,
like a nursing home lunch.

(Bethany Schultz Hurst, from "Settler")

The stanzas used by Hurst accentuate the way the enjambment affects images and sounds. Each stanza break makes the line break even harder. When we end the first stanza, we are left with the idea of sharing or giving something away. There is connection: "Even the tumbleweed / is a stowaway sneaked in / with the grass seed, given." It sounds thoughtful. It sounds like we are receiving—"given." But moving to the second stanza, the meaning changes: "given // an easier-to-say name." This happens again in the transition from the second to third stanzas with the meaning of "just" changing from the idea of justice or fairness—"but it's just"—to something different: "but it's just // a weed." The beginning of both the second and third stanzas undercut the sentiment we are left with at the end of the preceding stanza and the way the stanzas are formed emphasize this change.

[Create an image with the words on the page](#)



S. Marie LaFata-Clay, "Prayer Bone".

Draw attention to other patterns like repetition

In the following examples, one poem ends each stanza similarly and the other begins each stanza similarly:

Age

They grow ethereally, the wild
Roses on the graden-trellis:
O—silent soul!

The crystal sun grazes through
The cool vine-leaves:
O—holy purity!

With courteous hands an old man offers
Ripened fruit.
O—glimpse of love!

Georg Trakl, trans. Stephen Tapscott, “Age” from Georg Trakl: Poems, Oberlin College. All rights reserved.

If you rub too eagerly
and the head falls to your feet,
you can hollow its skull
and fill it with seeds.

If the eyes are dull
like your clay-covered fingerprints,
it’s best to bend it to a turtle’s shell
and fill it with water and hot stones.

If the mane starts to curl
like a hawk’s talons
before it flies, bite your tongue,
and push the lion to the hearth.

(Tom Holmes, from “The First Potter’s Advice”)

As we go deeper into the craft of poetry the more we find elements to be connected. Stanzas cannot stand independently from choices made about music, line, and diction. Building on the components learned in this chapter, the next two chapters will introduce you to the particulars of sound and then some forms.

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2.3.7: Acoustics

Chapter Six: Acoustics

Even before you were born, in your watery womb home, your body recognized patterns of sound. It began with the beat of your mother's heart, the swishing of her blood. Rhythm is primal. It is comforting, and it can be startling. When rhythms break, they wake us. When rhythms extend, we become entranced. Rhythm is integral to poetry and a mark of what poetry actually is. In learning to interpret poetry's structures and sound patterns, in free verse, our ears attune finely to tone, cadence, pitch, rhythm, and silence. In formal verse, we employ a particular language to help us talk about rhythm.

Meter: Length and Rhythm

In metrical verse, lines can be divided into length and rhythm which we refer to as **feet**, and each foot's syllable into a **stress**. Each foot contains either two or three syllables (see below). You may have seen the symbols used to indicate this: ~ ' :the curve marks an unstressed foot, the slash a stress. In the following words, the first syllable is stressed and the second is not: **Tennis. Fiction. Music.** In the following words, the first syllable is unstressed and the second is: **Unlock. Tonight. Against.** Using this method of dividing a poem's lines into feet and stresses is called **scansion**.

Metrical Lines

Monometer: A one-foot line

| *Therefore*

Dimeter: A two-foot line

| *Therefore*, | *dolphins*

Trimeter: A three-foot line

| *Therefore*, | *dolphins* | *broke through*

Tetrameter: A four-foot line

| *Therefore*, | *dolphins* | *broke through* | *happily*

Pentameter: A five-foot line

| *Therefore*, | *dolphins* | *broke through* | *happily* | *and leapt*

Hexameter: A six-foot line. Also called Alexandrine when purely iambic.

| *Therefore*, | *dolphins* | *broke through* | *happily* | *and leapt* | *into*

Septameter: A seven-foot line

| *Therefore*, | *dolphins* | *broke through* | *happily* | *and leapt* | *into* | *daylight*

Octameter: An eight-foot line

| *Therefore*, | *dolphins* | *broke through* | *happily* | *and leapt* | *into* | *daylight* | *in a flash*

Metrical Feet

Iamb ~ ' a light stress followed by a heavy stress

- and leapt

Trochee ' ~ a heavy stress followed by a light stress

- dolphin

Dactyl ' ~ ~ a heavy stress followed by two light stresses

- happily

Anapest ~ ~ ' two light stresses followed by a heavy stress

- in a flash

Spondee — — two equal stresses

- broke through

If we put these terms together, we can begin to scan lines:

Iambic tetrameter:

Whose woods | these are | I think | I know

His house | is in | the vil | lage* though

([Robert Frost](#) from “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”)

*Note that feet can break in the middle of words.

Iambic pentameter:

The world | is too | much with | us late | and soon

(William Wordsworth from “The World Is Too Much with Us”)

Trochaic Octometer:

Once up | on a | midnight | dreary, | while I | pondered, | weak and | weary,

Over | many | quaint and | curious | volume | of for | gotten | lore—

([Edgar Allan Poe](#) from “The Raven”)

Scansion contains many words that allow us to speak in a specific way about verse. When a line of poetry adheres to a pattern the poem has undertaken, it is called **pure**. But often poems are what we call **impure**. These poems break from the pattern—not to switch to a different meter, which can happen as the examples above show—but to alter the pattern altogether.

Impure Dactylic dimeter:

Hickory | dickory | dock

Iambic trimeter:

The mouse | ran up | the clock

In the above example, the first line is impure. Here is another example of an impure rhythm, but one that follows another named pattern: **catalectic**:

Trochaic tetrameter:

Tyger! | Tyger! | Burning | bright

In the | forests | of the | night

([William Blake](#) from “The Tyger”)

These lines by Blake are catalectic because the final foot is cut off. It also contains lines that end with a stressed beat in what we refer to as a **masculine** beat. If the last beat were unstressed, we’d refer to it as **feminine**.

The art of scansion is both scientific and subjective. The specialty language allows us to examine poetry in a calculated way, but there are times when the degree of stresses sound different to different ears.

There are many good sources on scansion and I want here to simply provide the basic language you may use to speak about poems, and to understand the detailed rhythms of your own poems. Scansion can be useful in discovering where language goes slack by identifying words that produce less energy like prepositions. It can also allow you to identify places in poems that move you, allow you to hear what patterns you are drawn to as a reader and writer.

Music and Rhyme

In addition to line length and rhythm, we also categorize lines by rhyme, especially in formal verse where an extended pattern is maintained. You, of course, have been rhyming from an early age. Children’s books written by writers like [Shel Silverstein](#) and [Dr. Seuss](#) have delighted both children and adults with their rhyming stories. Rhyme makes language memorable and pleasurable.

In both formal verse and free verse, rhyming is elemental. In formal poetry it occurs more frequently as **end-rhyme**, when two or more words that end lines rhyme. In free verse, the rhyme is more likely to be **internal**, not necessarily occurring at the end of lines.

Let's take a look at an excerpt from [William Wordsworth's](#) poem "The Daffodils":

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Here we can see the first and third lines rhyme; the second, fourth and sixth; the fifth and sixth. There is definite **rhyme scheme**. When we refer to the rhymes in this stanza, we diagram the rhymes with matching letters like this: ABABCC.

I wandered lonely as a cloud (A)
That floats on high o'er vales and hills, (B)
When all at once I saw a crowd, (A)
A host, of golden daffodils; (B)
Beside the lake, beneath the trees, (C)
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (C)

The letter changes whenever the rhyme changes, and whenever a new rhyme is introduced you add a new letter.

In the poem "They Feed They Lion," rather than end-rhyme, [Philip Levine](#) utilizes internal rhyme. Read the first stanza via [this link](#).

In this example, Levine uses rhymes that are both internal and slant or off rather than exact: sacks, black, shafts; butter, tar. Even the numerous occurrences of "out" paired with "creosote" creates a kind of slant rhyme. Here is another example:

Not my hands but green across you now.
Green tons hold you down, and ten bass curve
teasing your hair. Summer slime
will pile deep on your breast. Four months of ice
will keep you firm.

([Richard Hugo](#), from "The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir")

In this example, the second line contains a slant internal rhyme: "ten" and "ton," which also rhyme with "hands" in line one. These sounds are tightly woven and where there isn't rhyme, per se, there is **assonance**, similar vowel sounds, or vowel rhyme: green, tease, deep; and slime, pile, ice.

Activity

Turn to the entire Levine poem "They Feed They Lion" and perform a close reading with your ears. Note places of assonance and rhyme. How do these patterns affect your reading of the poem? How do these sounds work to create the poem's tone of voice?

Like assonance, a term we use to describe vowel sounds, we also have terms that refer to the sounds that consonants make. **Alliteration** is a term used to describe a series of sounds consonants make at the beginning of or in the middle of words. In the following excerpt from "Shine, Perishing Republic," [Robinson Jeffers](#) employs several uses of alliteration:

While this **America** settles in the **mould** of its vulgarity,
Heavily thickening to **empire**,
And **protest**, only a bubble in the **molten mass**, **pops**
And sighs out, and the **mass** hardens,

I sadly **remember** that the **flower** fades to **make**

Fruit, the **fruit** rots to **make** earth.

Out of the **mother**; and through the spring exultances,

Ripeness and decadence; and home to the mother.

In these first two stanzas of the poem, Jeffers' use of **m**, **p**, and **f**, create three strains of alliteration. In addition to alliteration, we can further label the **f** sounds as an occasion of **consonance**, what [Edward Hirsch](#) defines as “the audible repetition of consonant sounds in words encountered near each other whose vowel sounds are different”—flower-fades-fruit: fow-fay-frew.

Activity

The poet [Mary Ruefle](#) writes what she calls “erasure” poems where she will use white out to erase portions of—most of—a text to create her own poem. Find an old novel or purchase a book of prose at a book sale and try her approach. Choose to keep words you like the sounds of. Make chains of alliteration and assonance. Devote the next page to rhyme. Erase half words if you feel like it. You can also access digital versions of books made to disappear as you click away on the [Wave Books web site](#).

Line Length

If you simply browse the poems included in any anthology, you will see all types of shapes on the page. The length of the line is one of the most important decisions a poet makes about a poem, and the decision usually comes to define a poet's style. [Robert Creeley](#)'s poems use short lines. [C. K. Williams](#), long. Most poets write somewhere in between. The decision of how long to make lines can be driven by a number of factors, but mostly it is chosen by prosody, the musical component of the language that projects the speaker's voice and breath. As we've seen in the last chapter, where we choose to break lines also has a tremendous affect on the poem's tone and meaning.

One of the elements that determine line length is the character of the language in which you write. English contains many iambic patterns that often sound most right on a line between four and five feet long. Lines one foot long are barely poems at all; it is difficult to create tension or musical phrases with only two beats per line. Lines with four feet are frequently used to tell stories as is the case often with Robert Frost's poems. Longer lines lend themselves well to conversational tones, like that of [Denise Duhamel](#)'s, or in lyric poems like [Larry Lewis](#)'.

Some poets like [Allen Ginsberg](#) and [Charles Olson](#), who wrote about it in his essay “Projective Verse,” considered a line to be a unit of breath. Olson writes:

And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination.

There can be no denial of the essential relationship between the poetic line and breath. Or between any carefully constructed writing and the pace at which it's read. Just look at Olson's passage and his use of commas, which causes us to stagger through the sentence.

Poetry is an oral art which comes fully to life when read aloud. Lines are instructions for how often and how long to pause. Like sheet music, the lines guide our pace, emphasis, and silence. If you were to read short-lined poems, however, taking a new breath at each line's start, you'd sound like a panting dog. So, there is some room for interpretation on Olson's assertion. Nonetheless, breath and line are intertwined, as you will see from the following examples.

As we read through these, note the different line lengths and their effects:

Here from this mountain shore, headland beyond stormy headland plunging
like dolphins through the blue sea-smoke
Into pale sea—look west at the hill of water: it is half the planet: this dome, this half globe, this bulging
Eyeball of water, arched over to Asia,
Australia and white Antarctica: those are the eyelids that never close; this is the staring unsleeping
Eye of the earth; and what it watches is not our wars.

([Robinson Jeffers](#), from “The Eye”)

In this excerpt from Robinson Jeffers' poem “The Eye” we see the different affects long and short lines have on the breath. The first lengthy line full of images beyond the human—the headlands, the mountain, the shore, the dolphin, the smoke—in a long line like this we are given a sense of being overwhelmed as the images keep building and drawing out the breath until we are breathless. Compare this line to what follows two lines below: “Eyeball of water, arched over to Asia.” If you read both out loud you can feel

how the length changes the way you use your lungs: long breath, short breath. The effect of the shorter line is like a quick glance—the eye open from the Pacific coast to Asia.

Activity

Click on the following link to take a look at the first four lines of Allen Ginsberg's poem "[Howl](#)."

Knowing that Ginsberg considered a line to be a unit of breath, it is easy for us to read the lines the way they were intended. In Ginsberg's long lines we sense overwhelming frustration, exasperation, and urgency. There is the sense that the speaker has so much to say that he cannot contain himself, that he cannot take a breath deep enough to capture all of his thoughts. What happens when you read the last line here out loud? Try it if you haven't. What happens is that you need to speak quickly, and this creates a voice of desperation—perfectly appropriate given the subject matter of Ginsberg's great generational poem "Howl." The title itself, taken from a line in [Walt Whitman](#)'s great poem "[Song of Myself](#)," reflects the tone that Ginsberg's lines create.

In the strange house
In the strange town
Going barefoot past the parents' empty room
I hear the horses the fire the wheel bone wings
Your voice

([Jean Valentine](#), from "The Messenger")

Rather than breaking the line after words or phrases to create a pause, many poets incorporate white space into the line itself. Here, the spaces in line four visually mimic the footsteps referred to in line three, as well as create the pacing—as though the steps being taken are slow. Notice that the phrase "Your voice," which is part of the list in line four is moved to line five. That means there must be some difference between the effect created between the phrases with white space and those created by line breaks. It seems that the pauses between the list in line four are slightly shorter, more staccato, than the pause created between "bone wings" and "Your voice." The more poetry you read, and the more poetry you write, the more you will begin to identify the subtleties of these techniques.

Lines

On our first date, instead of holding my hand, my future-husband looked

at my palm. *Here's your fame line your heart line the lucky M*

he said *you were in danger but you are coming out of it now.*

He said it like he meant it, the way the old women in the Philippines

had taught him. *Now make a fist these two little lines under your pinky*

these are the two kids you'll have.

My sister keeps waiting

for her third baby. She has three lines. Three kids, that's what the palm reader

at Rocky Point told her. *You'll get married next year*

and you'll have three beautiful daughters. My sister laughed and said

I'll get a second opinion because she was just a junior in high school

and sure she was going to college.

On our first date my future-husband

traced

the lines on my palm with his finger and I closed my hand around his

because it tickled. *If the pad near your thumb is fleshy,* he said,

it means you're very passionate. His own palms were chubby and pink,

his brown fingers tapered and elegant. He wore a silver and turquoise ring.

He said, *You'll get married only once*

but later there'll be an affair.

Now that we're married, he can't find that wrinkle of infidelity.

Our palms change, he tells me, especially our right palms

that mutate through our behavior. He examines the bunch of tiny xs

that look like windshield frost, the wishbones, the spider webs,

the triangle dragon teeth.

My sister will most likely have that third baby.

My husband sees those three lines though my sister groans,

Two are enough. Her oldest is already fourteen, and my sister

is finally able to start taking classes at the community college.

My husband says to make everyone feel better: *I was only kidding*

I don't really know that much about predictions.

That night we all go

to Rocky Point which isn't as fun as it used to be, which is going bankrupt,

my sister says, like everything else in Rhode Island. The rollercoaster

is broken down, the cars off the tracks, lying on their sides

like cows. And hanging from the booths' roofs, giant Tweety Birds and Pink Panthers,

the cuddly neon elusive ones that hardly anyone ever wins.

"Lines", from The Star-Spangled Banner by Denise Duhamel. Copyright © 1999 by Denise Duhamel. Reprinted by permission of Southern Illinois University Press.

One of the most conversational of contemporary poets, Duhamel speaks to us like we are a long-time friend. Her voice is energetic though the lines are long. And in this poem she varies line lengths drastically but keeps to an overall pattern so it still looks uniform on the page. Once again, like other poems we've looked at, the form reflects and enhances the subject: the lines on our hands that palm readers use to predict our future. As we read the poem, we read the lines as though we are scanning a palm. Ironically, poems are made of lines too! In addition to the visual echo, the spaces also create pauses that mimic the way a fortune teller speaks: slowly, interpreting, considering—"He said, *You'll get married once* / [space] *But later there'll be an affair.*" The space also creates suspense and drama. In this excerpt, there is one line on which only one word sits: "trace." It is the only line in the poem that contains one word. What is the effect? Why this word?

Activity

Follow the link to Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "[We Real Cool](#)." This short poem accomplishes a lot with its short lines and enjambment. Reflecting the theme of rebellion, each line ignores standards of syntax and ends on a word that actually starts the next sentence. The enjambment places a stress on the word "We" and therefore emphasizes the will of the speaker to identify the group. What else do you think this poem accomplishes with its lines?

If the poem is laid out so that each sentence falls on its own line, what happens to the poem's energy? Music? Tone? Or what if you place one-and-a-half sentences on each line? Try rearranging the lines differently again and see what the effect is.

Alternatively, try another excerpt from above. Break "[Howl](#)" up into short lines, Duhamel's poem into medium lines. Experiment with how line affects music and emphasis in meaning. Try it in one of your own poems.

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2.3.8: Experimenting with Forms

Chapter Seven: Experimenting with Forms

In this chapter I wish to introduce you not only to common forms, but also to lesser-known forms, all with the intention that you will experiment with forms while writing your own poetry. I was first introduced to many of these forms in [Robin Skelton's](#) wonderful book *The Shapes of Our Singing*, which I highly recommend.

Abecedarian

In this form, the poem works its way through the alphabet, each line beginning with the letter following the first letter of the previous line. There are no restrictions on meter or rhyme. The following example demonstrates the abecedarian form:

Lake Affected

April 11th and out my Michigan window: no surprise, really:
Blizzard. The small sidewalk trees sag under fluff and sky.
Cindy says she can't take it, this weather. She misses
Dallas, the blue bells, has had enough of the lake's snow globe
Extending its stay beyond this season's home opener, yellow
Flowers and late night light for late nights
Grilling. Her hand opens back toward Texas like a beauty queen's,
Her eyes bat their long lashes: Take me back old friend, holy hell,
I am sorry. But everyone has different needs
Jig-sawing their bellies. Pieces of life floating down like, well, you
Know. Kevin, I'm leaving messages like lightning on your machine.
Lying in bed this morning I couldn't sleep. Snow
Makes electric champagne of my nerves, pops me open, twists me until sweet
Nostalgia curls me up with a book, squeezes poetry from my skull, seduces me to
Ogle over young faces in old pictures, realphabetize my library, boil
Potatoes until my kitchen windows steam. I burned yesterday's leftover
Quart of coffee reheating on the stove. But I didn't care, all
Restless as I was and hungry for everything no longer
Snuggling in my shoes or my bed, which is to say, bodies from the past.
Time, oh time and time again time
Undoes more than the elastic seams on lingerie, but like that—
Very much like that, the things that make us sexy
Wear away. And when it snows like this I want to melt until
X-rays show me one white dot, unique, branching out, stuck,
Yearning for others like me that will have a ball balling with me something
Zesty as an orange, ready to be thrown at the world.

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Aubade

Partner to the serenade, which focuses on evening, the aubade is a poem about the morning or dawn. There are no restrictions on line, meter, or rhyme. Here is one by [Traci Brimhall](#):

Aubade with a Broken Neck

The first night you don't come home
summer rains shake the clematis.
I bury the dead moth I found in our bed,
scratch up a rutabaga and eat it rough
with dirt. The dog finds me and presents
between his gentle teeth a twitching

nightjar. In her panic, she sings
in his mouth. He gives me her pain
like a gift, and I take it. I hear
the cries of her young, greedy with need,
expecting her return, but I don't let her go
until I get into the house. I read
the auspices—the way she flutters against
the wallpaper's moldy roses means
all can be lost. How she skims the ceiling
means a storm approaches. You should see
her in the beginnings of her fear, rushing
at the starless window, her body a dart,
her body the arrow of longing, aimed,
as all desperate things are, to crash
not into the object of desire,
but into the darkness behind it.

"Aubade With a Broken Neck", from Rookery by Traci Brimhall; Copyright © 2010 Traci Brimhall, reproduced by permission of Southern Illinois University Press.

Ballad

Before written language, folk ballads were used around the world to transmit stories—often tragic—from one generation to another. The word “ballad” has its roots in the Latin word *ballare*, meaning “to dance,” evidence of the rhythmic qualities of the form and its frequent recital to musical accompaniment. Although written in many variations, the ballad is today most commonly written in quatrains and A B C B rhyme. The first and third lines contain eight syllables, while the second and fourth lines contain six. According to Robin Skelton, the most common rhyme scheme is iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter. The following is a ballad by [Muriel Rukeyser](#):

[Read Ballad of Orange and Grape on PoetryFoundation.org](#)

[Listen to Muriel Rukeyser read the poem here.](#)

Blank Verse

A form that lends itself well to a meditative voice, blank verse is written in iambic pentameter lines that do not rhyme. [The Poetry Foundation](#) contains numerous examples, including links to those written in 10-syllable lines traditional of epic poems such as John Milton's *Pardise Lost*.

Ch'i-Yen-Shih

In this Chinese pattern, each line contains seven monosyllabic words with a caesura after each fourth word. The rhyme scheme is comprised of the pattern A B C B.

Captured

In the low grass, a girl holds
a bright pink shell washed to land
by high white waves. Her toes grow
like a tree's roots in the sand.

Cinquain

[Adelaide Crapsey](#) established this unrhymed iambic form, which consists of a five-line stanza with the syllable count 2 4 6 8 2. Here is an example of one titled “[Amaze](#)” and another called “[November Night](#).”

Daina

This Latvian form consists of a quatrain of trochaic octometer lines with feminine endings. Although there are no end rhymes, alliteration and internal rhymes are common. The example below breaks form in the last line and adds a stressed foot for effect.

Catholic School

Every Friday early morning
we would march to church all wearing
navy beanies nuns pulled down our
heads like muffins. We preferred them

sideways, some French painter's fancy
style. But always Sisters reaching
over pressing God's will into
bodies, taming young girls from the wild.

Dodoitsu

This Japanese form is composed of four lines with the syllable count 7 7 7 5. There is no rhyme or set meter.

Service

An altar boy holds the stained-
glass door open as women
in satin-lined skirts enter
the church like saints.

Elegy

An elegy is a lament for the dead and contains the character of sadness and loss. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland explain that an elegy "mourns for a dead person, lists his or her virtues, and seeks consolation beyond the momentary event." It is considered a public poem that when done best, according Strand and Boland, sets the customs of death in a particular culture against the decorum and private feelings of the speaker.

The following is by the poet [William Heyen](#):

Elegy for Wilt the Stilt

October 12, 1999. Remember the date.
As of this autumn day at century's end,
God's fortunes in heaven have changed.
He's drafted and signed Himself a center.
Wilt the Stilt is dead.

Wilt the Stilt is dead before George Mikan,
first of the big men,
dead before Bill Russell,
before Kareem Abdul Jabbar,
before Moses Malone, before Shaquille O'Neal

who might have taken Him
to His own promised land.
God could wait no longer
for his franchise player,
so Wilt the Stilt is dead.

In Philly, his high school rims shiver with applause.
In Kansas, his college rims rattle with applause.
Globetrotter and NBA nets rip themselves in homage,
and in the silence of a hundred gyms
in the dead of night backboards

shatter in adulation and remembrance as, now
Wilt the Stilt ducks his head
under the transom of heaven,

as God reaches up to shake hands
with his new acquisition,
to welcome Wilt home among the constellations
of His cosmic league.
Wilt bows, vows to work hard,
to settle down with one woman,
to earn his minutes here with sweat,
to balance power and finesse,
even, on occasion, to pass the ball
out of the low post. God smiles,
cheerleaders leap, spread legs, and tumble,
for today the Stilt has joined them in death.

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Exquisite Corpse

This form, invented by the [Surrealists](#), is fun to write in a group. Each person writes two lines, then folds the paper so the next person writing can see only the second line; the next person writes two more lines and folds the paper so that only the second line is visible; and so on.

Activity

Work with a partner and play another Surrealist game called "If This, Then That." Each person writes without knowing what the other person is writing. The first person writes a phrase on one side of a piece of paper that begins "If..." and then passes the paper to his or her partner. Without looking at the "If" statement, the partner then writes a statement beginning "Then..." Here are some examples that make it hard to believe that these were random—but they were! You'll be surprised how the collective unconscious sometimes aligns:

If school is cancelled tomorrow... then girls will dance under umbrellas in the rain.

If turkeys made honey... then no would ever have to go to bed without supper.

If you heard a sound and didn't know what it was... then the neighbors would be knockin' at your door.

Ghazal

Typically dealing with subjects of love and separation, the ghazal is a form with Arabic roots consisting of rhyming couplets of the same syllabic length and a refrain. [As explained on the Academy of American Poets website:](#)

The ghazal is composed of a minimum of five couplets—and typically no more than fifteen—that are structurally, thematically, and emotionally autonomous. Each line of the poem must be of the same length, though meter is not imposed in English. The first couplet introduces a scheme, made up of a rhyme followed by a refrain. Subsequent couplets pick up the same scheme in the second line only, repeating the refrain and rhyming the second line with both lines of the first stanza. The final couplet usually includes the poet's signature, referring to the author in the first or third person, and frequently including the poet's own name or a derivation of its meaning.

Here is an example of one by [Patricia Smith](#):

[Read Hip-Hop Ghazal at PoetryFoundation.org](#)

Haiku

This well-known Japanese form is three lines long and comprised of unrhymed, unmetred lines with a 5 7 5 syllable count. Traditionally, the haiku's subject matter relates to nature or seasons.

Mother's Day

One Sunday in May
Mothers answer mothers' calls
We are all children

Italian Quatrain

The four lines are written in iambic pentameter and rhyme A B B A.

Mountain Road

We drove the silver van full speed
The branches snapped in windows
We dipped and bumped in rocky holes
From earth we felt like we'd been freed

Activity

Write an Italian quartet, then develop it into a Petrarchan sonnet (see below).

Katauta

In this three-line poem with the syllable count 5 7 7, the first line poses a question that the next two lines attempt to answer in an intuitive, immediate way. Try answering with the first image that pops into your mind.

What's in my future?
The budding heads of tulips
Fragrant, red-lipped, and sealed.

Pantoum

Originating in Malaysia, the pantoum was adapted by French poets. It consists of an unlimited number of quatrains in which the second and fourth lines of each are repeated in the first and third lines of the next. The first and third lines of the first stanza become the final stanza's second and fourth lines. There can be some variation. For instance, the first line of the poem may be the last.

The following is an example by Melissa Rhoades:

Dutch East India Company

Back home, my new wife makes fine lace. I keep
a scrap of her work in my brine-soaked breeches.
Black waters pitch and the hull creaks
as I head for spice stores at Malacca's beach.

The scrap of her work in my brine-soaked breeches
is soiled from these sickened months
of heading for spice stores at Malacca's beach.
The taste of molded hard tack licks my tongue
and soiled from these sickened months,
we had to leave nine scurvied men with the Boers.
The taste of molded hard tack licks all our tongues
and the Captain won't say when next we moor.

Although we left nine scurvied men with the Boers,
we're all bleeding gums, thin skin, and fleas.
The Captain still won't say when we moor
and some dirty dogs talk of mutiny.

But for all our bleeding gums, thin skin, and fleas
sweet land comes, a line on the horizon.
Now, no dogs talk of mutiny,
not with palm trees visible from our galleon.

Sweet land! Malaya fills the horizon.
Scrabble at the riggings, keen to anchor.

Palm trees look heavenly from the galleon.
Once ashore, we drink till we slur,
scrabbling around port, keen from anchor.
Sweat runs down our backs. In the shade
we sprawl out, still drinking in a slur.
At dusk, I thrust into a dark-skinned maiden,
sweat running down our backs in the shade.
Black Malacca reeks of nutmeg and mace.
Again, I thrust into the dark-skinned maid
and moan. Back home, my new wife makes fine lace.

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Pregunta

This Spanish form was practiced by poets of the court in pairs during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. One poet asks a question or series of questions in one form and the second poet, matching the form, answers. The topics usually related to love, philosophy, or morality.

Q: If two loves want one heart
And the heart thrums both loves’ strings
How long before one parts
From two and chooses a single fling?

A: Since no hearts be alike
If no love presumes a thing
You may wish to keep arms wide
And see what each day brings.

Activity

Alternatively, it might be fun to experiment with different topics and be loose and spontaneous with the answers and with the form. The Surrealists were great at inventing these types of games. Pair up and in the style of the [Surrealists](#), have one person write a question and the other write an imagistic answer without knowing what the question is.

Q. How do I know if I love her?

A. The shutters will fly off the house.

Q. How do I know when to tell her?

A. A row of blackbirds a choir on a wire.

Q. How will I know when to ask her?

A. Her open hand and the light lifting from it.

Prose Poem

The prose poem, which can be any length, isn’t broken into verse, but contains many of the elements of poetry: figures of speech, musical language, internal rhyme, repetition, condensed syntax, and imagery. There is some debate over the form, as there are some poets who do not consider the form a poem, per se, but something more akin to flash fiction, or at least a genre of prose rather than verse. Either way, it is a cross-genre form—half prose, half verse—and fun to experiment with.

An influential revivalist of the form was Robert Bly, who said in an 1997 interview that the form is part of an evolution in human democracy: from gods to heroes to everyday humans; from sacred culture to aristocracy to democracy; likewise, from sacred chants in which “all words are signs” to metered poetry to free verse to prose. Additionally in the interview, Bly spoke about his feeling of freedom and “safety” in writing prose poems: “The most wonderful thing about the prose poem is that nobody has set up any standards yet.”

The following poem is by Russell Edson, known as “the godfather of the prose poem.” As a father of the form, Edson provided one of the form’s common characteristics: strangeness. His subjects tend to be odd, surreal, and humorous. The figure of the ape is one

that appears frequently in his poems.

Ape and Coffee

Some coffee had gotten on a man's ape. The man said, animal did you get on my coffee?

No no, whistled the ape, the coffee got on me.

You're sure you didn't spill on my coffee? said the man.

Do I look like a liquid? peeped the ape.

Well you sure don't look human, said the man.

But that doesn't make me a fluid, twittered the ape.

Well I don't know what the hell you are,

so just stop it, cried the man.

I was just sitting here reading the newspaper when you splashed coffee all over me, piped the ape.

I don't care if you are a liquid, you just better stop splashing on things, cried the man.

Do I look fluid to you? Take a good look, hooted the ape.

If you don't stop I'll put you in a cup, screamed the man.

I'm not a fluid, screeched the ape.

Stop it, stop it, screamed the man, you are frightening me.

Russell Edson, "Ape and Coffee" from The Tunnel: Selected Poems of Russell Edson. Copyright © 1973 by Russell Edson. Reprinted with the permission of Oberlin College Press.

Here is another example by Devon Moore:

Motion Sick

I was five but the woman thought I was seven 'cause that's how old you had to be to be an unaccompanied minor, so that's what my daddy told me to say, so then I was an unaccompanied liar catapulting through the clouds and later I told my daddy, "I saw a lightning bolt," and he said, "Yeah, right," and I said, "Why?" and he said, "Cause I thought you said you saw an angel," and I said, "No, a lightning bolt," and we were quiet.

I was up in the clouds looking for angels and the nice stewardess offered me hot chocolate instead of pop, and maybe it was the turbulence or my open hands, but the next thing I know the scalding hot was all in my lap, and I was crying loud, but that's not the worst of it 'cause then I was standing in the front row butt naked from the waist down, just a simple small hairless vagina for all to see.

I was in the terminal on a layover, but I still thought every man I saw with black hair and a moustache might be my father, and I tried to go to them but the stewardess grabbed me back and said, "No, this is not your stop," so she sat me down on a chair and told me not to move and left me for what felt like hours and I had to pee so bad but I couldn't move 'cause I was still hoping that my daddy might surprise me and show up before his time.

I was chewing the bubblegum my mommy got me for popping ears when I started throwing up Dramamine and I might as well have been the plague or the grossest thing she'd ever seen 'cause the woman sitting next to me leapt out of her seat and pointed and said, "She's sick," which was true, but I cried anyways and then my new coat that had a detachable outer layer smelled like throw-up, so the stewardess put it in a plastic bag, which was the first thing they handed my father when he got to the airport.

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Roundel

The roundel is an English form consisting of eleven lines in three stanzas with no set meter. The first part of line one repeats at the end of the first stanza and again as the last line of poem. The half line also forms the rhyme pattern and is indicated here as R for "refrain": A B A R-B A B-A B A R.

Spring

The daffodils roaring from the ground, at the April
market, tables are lined with buds and green
and people stand in lines looking around
at the daffodils roaring from the ground.

In winter's sleep few colors seen:
no birds or bugs outdoors make sound.
Now, voices, friends, and new bags of seed
are garden bed and birdhouse bound.
Off with gloves and scarves and wool that's been
wrapped around us for so long for now we've found
the daffodils roaring from the ground.

Sestina

The sestina consists of five sestets culminating in a final tercet called an **envoi**, also called a **tornada**. The six words that end each of the lines in the first stanza repeat throughout the poem in the following pattern:

1. A B C D E F
2. F A E B D C
3. C F D A B E
4. E C B F A D
5. D E A C F B
6. B D F E C A
7. (envoi) E C A or A C E

In addition, the envoi also repeats the words that end lines B D F in the first stanza. These three words can go anywhere in interior of the final tercet's lines.

Here is an example by [Chad Sweeney](#):

Michigan Sestina

I've tried to understand this winter
that grows out from no root and no
seed, yet sways like a meadow toward the mind,
sways on its white stem and is
a figure of uncertainty over hills of sleep,
where aging factories gesture to a train

and mills are shuttered over river ice. The train
crosses a bridge from Michigan into winter,
its silos and tobacco fields framed by sleep,
inscrutable and nine hells down. No
horses center the pastures where the sky is
its own pasture, a drift of snow over the mind.

Three crows motionless on a fence, in the mind
are moving, crossing the windows of the train
like Japanese characters whose sense is
effortless, a calligraphy of winter
whose shifting figures evoke a *No*
theater, three masks in a theater of sleep.

But the land draws its own lessons from sleep,
a heap of frozen images in the mind,
Polish teachers in the birch grove and no
one to bury them, shoved from the train,
the faces of the dead occupy the whole winter,
one borderless nation of snow. Memory is
unable to bury them. What *was* and what *is*
and what *never was*—mounded together in sleep:

history erects a statue to winter,
a wolf leaves its tracks across the mind,
the train and the memory of the train
arrive on the same line, though no
station is there to greet them and no
one is getting on or off. Is
it irony draws this train
west toward Chicago with its cargo of sleep?
My forehead against the window doesn't mind
closing its one eye against winter,
the train moves deeper into memory, no
train and no winter, though one crow is
changed in sleep to the Japanese character for *mind*.

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Activity

Make a list of six words you absolutely love. Then write five sentences that include all of the words. Then, write five more. Then write ten more. Then use these six words to write a sestina!

Sonnet

Although there are several versions of the sonnet, each has fourteen lines and contains a **volta**, or a turn in thought, which can sometimes be indicated with the words "but" or "yet." In contemporary poetry it has become common for poets to compose sonnets with differing rhyme or meter, or with none at all.

Shakespearian: Comprised of an octet and a sestet, this sonnet is composed in iambic pentameter and rhymes A B A B–C D C D–E F E F–G G. The volta appears either between lines eight and nine or between lines twelve and thirteen.

Petrarchan: This sonnet contains two stanzas: one octet that rhymes as A B B A–A B B A, and a remaining sestet with varying rhyme schemes. The volta occurs between the stanzas.

Spenserian: This sonnet modifies the Petrarchan to contain a rhyme scheme of A B A B–B C B C–C D C D–E E.

Garrison Keillor featured [Billy Collins](#)' parody of the form on *The Writer's Almanac*.

[Listen to Billy Collins read it.](#)

Split Couplet

Composed of two lines, the split couplet contains a first line in iambic tetrameter and a second in iambic dimeter; the two lines should rhyme. Another variation is to write the first line in iambic pentameter.

Morning Run

A rabbit hops across my trail
A bouncy tail
A fawn leans into chamomile
Its sunny meal
The miles vanish beneath my feet
It brings me peace

Tanka, or Waka

This Japanese form, which focuses primarily on nature or strong emotions, consists of five unrhymed, non-metrical lines with the syllable count 5 7 5 7 7.

In Waka, lines one and two, as well as three and four, form complete sentences, as does the last line.

July

Grasshoppers alight
Onto the sunflower's face.
Honeybees buzzing
From lavender to basil.
The whole garden is alive.

Than-Bauk, or Climbing Rhyme

This Burmese form consists of three four-syllable lines, with rhyme falling on the fourth syllable of the first line, the third syllable of the second line, and the second syllable of the third line.

Relish your sleep
Wake, repeat, wake
Count sheep and dream

Never lose hope
There is no time
To mope around.

Activity

Experiment with different syllable lengths that integrate the same climbing rhyme pattern.

Villanelle

This French form consists of five tercets and a final quatrain. The first stanza's first and third lines repeat in an alternating pattern as the last line in the subsequent stanzas. In the final quatrain, the two lines that have been repeating throughout the poem form the final two lines of the poem.

The following villanelle was written by Victor James Daley. Its title is simply "Villanelle":

Villanelle

We said farewell, my youth and I,
When all fair dreams were gone or going,
And Love's red lips were cold and dry.

When white blooms fell from tree-tops high,
Our Austral winter's way of snowing,
We said farewell, my youth and I.

We did not sigh, what use to sigh
When Death passed as a mower mowing,
And Love's red lips were cold and dry?

But hearing Life's stream thunder by,
That sang of old through flowers flowing,
We said farewell, my youth and I.

There was no hope in the blue sky,
No music in the low winds blowing,
And Love's red lips were cold and dry.

My hair is black as yet, then why
So sad! I know not, only knowing
We said farewell, my youth and I.

All are not buried when they die;
Dead souls there are through live eyes showing
When Love's red lips are cold and dry.

So, seeing where the dead men lie,
Out of their hearts the grave-flowers growing,

We said farewell, my youth and I,
When Love's red lips were cold and dry.

"Villanelle" by Victor James Daley is in the Public Domain.

For more examples, please see the [The Poetry Foundation](#).

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2.3.9: Revision

Chapter Eight: Revision

Beginning writers tend to write first drafts and call them final drafts, but as we know by now, writing a poem—or writing anything, for that matter—is a process that takes time. On rare occasions a poem will pour forth finished in its initial draft, but the large majority of the time, each poem will need to be revised. Whether you change four words, four stanzas, or one period, we can understand it all as being part of the process of revision.

The origin of the word “revision” is the Latin *revisonem* meaning “a seeing again.” When we revise, we see our poem again, which is to imply that we see it differently. The more time that lapses between our writing of the poem and when we look at it again, the more objectively we will see the poem. Imagine writing a poem and not looking at it for ten years. Ten years is time enough to truly see the poem differently because you are literally a different person looking at that poem. You’ve had new experiences that have influenced your person and your understanding of poetry. What you wrote ten years ago is different than what you would write now. Write long enough and you will have the experience of returning to a poem and not even remembering writing it, asking, “Is this mine?”

When we write and revise poems, sometimes we grapple with the emotional tendency to protect or defend our work, which can hamper changes that could improve our poems. With distance, we see a poem objectively; we are therefore able to make changes that improve the poem because we’ve forgotten how much work went into the poem in the first place. Our memories and feelings that the poem may touch on have also changed, and so we may no longer consider certain parts crucial to the poem.

Waiting ten years to revise a poem you wrote yesterday may be the easiest way to bring a new eye to the poem, but it’s not very practical. As writers we need to also be our best readers, capable of seeing weakness and capable of the bravery it takes to make the big changes to our poems when necessary—even when that means cutting our favorite lines, even when it means slashing the stanza we labored over for a month. This chapter will address ways to improve your ability to see a poem anew and will provide you with methods and tools to make the most of revision.

Three Goals, Four Elements

In her book *The Practice of Creative Writing*, Heather Sellers identifies **energy, tension, and insight** as being essential goals for any good piece of writing. These three characteristics make writing entertaining to our wit, rewarding to our spirit, and pleasurable to our senses. When writing lacks these things, the language goes slack, the purpose becomes hazy, and the reader disengages from the text. All three characteristics are necessary in engaging the reader and holding the reader’s attention. We don’t ever want our reader to be bored or confused.

By identifying these three important characteristics, Sellers also illuminates the main goals writers have when revising. We ask questions and revise our poems in order to increase the energy, the tension, and the insight. And we do so by tending to four main elements: **clarity, language, structure, and speaker**.

To achieve energy, tension, and insight, the following questions may be asked in regard to each element:

1. Clarity

- Is it clear to the reader what this poem is about?
- Is it clear to the reader who the speaker is and to whom the poem is being addressed?
- Is it clear to the reader where the poem is taking place / what its setting (location, time) is?
- Can diction be more precise?
- Are images clearly seen?
- Does the procession of images / the order in which they occur make sense logically?
- Are there places where expansion is needed?

2. Language

- Does the poem contain any clichés?
- Is the language fresh and surprising?
- Are there any places where the energy of the language goes slack?
- Are there any Latinate, multi-syllabic words that can be replaced with more Germanic, sense-inducing words?

- Is the language musical and entrancing?
- Are there places where assonance and alliteration can be increased?
- Are there any places where assonance, alliteration, or rhyme make the poem sound too sing-songy?
- Am I using too many articles and prepositions, which sap energy?
- Is any repetition of words ineffective?
- If using end-rhyme, are there places where the rhyme feels forced instead of natural and organic to the poem?
- Are there occasions where the syntax is so artificial that it could be classified what we might call “Stereotypical Indian speak”? (E.g.: You write poem good.) How about “Yoda speak”? (E.g.: Writing a poem are you?)
- Are there any uses of archaic language?
- Have I examined each word and verified that it is needed?
- Are there any nouns that would better as verbs?

3. Structure

- Do the lines create a pace appropriate to the poem’s subject?
- Do line breaks make the most out of image and emphasis?
- Do the lines maintain energy or cause it to slack?
- Does each character in the poem belong?
- Is the opening of the poem surprising, alluring, and energetic? Does it make the reader want to keep reading?
- Does the ending of the poem “click shut” like a box?
- Is there any content that can be removed?

4. Speaker

- What is the emotional center of the poem? Is it complex enough to create tension?
- Is the speaker’s voice genuine in tone, or do some lines sound artificial?
- Are line lengths appropriate to the speaker’s personality and voice?
- Is it clear what’s at stake / what the risk is for the speaker of this poem?
- Is the tense (past, present, etc.) the most effective for the poem to produce energy?
- Are there places where the persona of the poem is explaining context instead of living in it?

Activity

Diagram the intent of each line of one of your poems by writing what you hope the reader will experience from each line beside the line. How does each line advance the reader’s experience of your poem?

A Revision Example

Sometimes where a poem ends up is not where you thought it would. As Naomi Shihab Nye has said, sometimes you start to write about church and end up at the dog races. You just never know—and that’s the fun of it.

The following is an example of my own poem “19-19” and its stages of revision.

When I lived in Washington State, I often traveled to neighboring states. One weekend I was in Sandpoint, Idaho, eating lunch at a downtown pub, when I was caught by a black-and-white photograph of a girl’s basketball team. The girls, maybe eight of them, wore long skirts, bobby socks, and saddle shoes. Half of them lay on their stomachs in the front row with their ankles crossed behind them. The caption beneath the photograph, which appeared in a local newspaper in 1914, summarized the day. The girls had played a game that went into overtime, but the officials ended the game at a tie because there was a dance that night. This photograph became the trigger for my poem. Here is its first draft:

It would take another period
Before a draw was declared
And the girls would get to go
To the dance. Fathers in bleachers
Cheering them on, perhaps, wishing
For sons. But the boys team lost
That night. The caption told me so.
Those words rolling along
The enlarged page on the wall

In the bar in that black and white
 From 1914. This was before the war.
 Five girls lying
 On their bellies,
 Feet crossed at their ankles, white
 Bobble socks. All five hold basketballs
 Under their chins.
 Referees declared it
 A tie. 17-17. Didn't want the girls
 To strain themselves the caption
 Says. Go to the dance
 Chaperoned instead. How fun
 It must've been to be a girl
 That night. Dancing in the arms
 of number 24 on the boys team,
 challenging him
 to a game of ball
 on the pavement the next
 afternoon. How fun to be the girl
 who asked the night before the bomb
 dropped.

When I look back on this poem, I can see the mental and artistic moves I was making in an effort to discover the bigger something to write about. I was clearly loosened up, non-judgmental. There is word play—"whishing"—as well as a feminist tone of sorts that begins with the thought that maybe the fathers of these girls wished (whished!) they were sons, which grows into: "Didn't want the girls / To strain themselves the caption / Says." I was very interested in what the climate would have been in regard to gender stereotypes. The poem reports on the actual photograph and my encounter with it, describing the girls in the photograph. Then there is an imaginative leap into what it might have felt like being one of these girls, and then the realization (as the writer) that 1914 would have been before the first World War. The poem is laced with sexuality and reproduction—the break on "period," the focus on couples at the dance. It also contains references to history, war, and gender issues. In addition, it is also has a setting and time.

After writing this poem I remember taking a break, and when I returned to the computer I read the poem, printed it out, read it again, and started to crumple it up (I don't know why—I never do this). The poem seemed flat and cliché, forced, but as I crumpled it up I thought about the line "This was before the war," and I smoothed out the paper. That line—"This was before the war"—was musical. And I liked how the last two lines surprised with their hard enjambment: "the night before the bomb / dropped." I thought of the newspaper and the way we not only report information, but how we tell stories that begin to create history and identity. I thought about gossip and the way we spread those stories. And I thought of the way we imagine grandparents, grandchildren on their laps, telling family stories. I turned back to the computer and started to rewrite the poem from scratch. The following is the revision, with notes elucidating some of my thinking behind the decisions I made:

17-17	My aim here was for the title to allude to both the game's tie and to echo the sound of a year.
The game went into overtime that night.	The first line immediately sets the time and place, as well as the occasion for the poem.
The moon didn't stay to witness. On top	I pull the camera's eye outward, from the game to the moon and then inward to the mountain.
Of Mount Thoradour she couldn't wait to lose	Initially a word used to refer to the game, I heard in the language how "lose" is also frequently a term used when referring to one's virginity. The phrase echoes the themes of sport and sex already on my mind exposed in the poem's first draft.

Her virginity. This was before the war.	
Before he would leave her	Moving line by line, I tried to surprise myself with each turn of line. In this case, “leave her,” like “lose” sounded like it go a different direction. I imagined how a man leaves his wife and children.
And a round belly, alone, until he returned,	
His left arm’s ghost dangling along his side like a medal.	Stanza two and no figure of speech yet? Time for a simile.
He was lucky, he’d tell her, the scent of her hair	This stanza zooms into the intimate moment between the couple. It also expands the senses to include smell.
Against his bruised cheek. The scent of her	
Like oranges for the first time again. This	The third stanza returns us to that one night, thinking about how so many lives circle one event. I kept diction in mind here, again stressing the sexual currents in the poem. And broke the line on “score,” another word associated with both games and sex.
Was before the dance where her little sister, who scored	
Four points in the game that night would sprain	
Her ankle while dancing with George Thyman,	Sounds like “hymen.” That blatant. The next line’s image continues along this theme.
Her knee scraped red dripping from the split skin	
But this was before photographic color. It kept her	The poem took this turn beyond my control. I guess I was thinking about newspapers.
Sister out for the rest of the season. The black	
And white their father took still hangs on the wall.	
Whenever her daughter sees the picture, her aunt’s	I breach time and start to imagine the impact one night can have on a life.
Long caterpillar body flying up toward the basket,	
Her daughter remembers her mother pointing	In this stanza I can see myself holding my place in a sense, integrating the poem’s logic, telling the story. You can see the language become clunky, but that’s okay. The stanza lands an anchor for me so I can leap again in the next stanza.
To the photograph telling her that this was the night	
She decided to be, a spirit in her mother’s womb.	
They had to get married to legitimize the child.	
Her sister came on crutches with Barry Lourdes.	
This was before women could vote, before blacks	Here I really take advantage of the repeating motif of time and history, using the phrase “This was before.”
Had rights. The last witch trial in New England	
Had not yet taken place or precedent in the lives	

Of witches' daughters. That night	And we return again to that night. The camera moves in and out through time and space, from large to small, from large populations in history to an individual in history.
On the court, ball circling the rim of the basket, faltering,	The largeness of the previous lines calls for contracting back to the image of something specific.
Then rolling in, the whole world	
Felt right. She will remember this as she buries her sister.	
She will remember this as she buries her face	Again, listening to the language, I sense how "bury" is associated with not only body but "face," as well.
In her sister's husband's empty sleeve, her niece	And this touches back to the soldier in stanza one.
Embracing the idea of the basketball that made everything	
Mean, everything possible, everything relate.	
This was before the war.	

As you see, much of the redrafting of this poem happened by listening to the language and making leaps while maintaining connections as I wrote. In the actual writing process, it is usually sound that drives my poems. Here, I needed to work slower and to pay attention to the logistics of the narrative as I invented family members through time and space. This attention to explaining resulted in using a lot of Latinate words whose main intent is to relay meaning.

This second draft lay out the narrative. After reading this draft out loud, I immediately moved to a third draft to smooth out the sections where the language became clunky or Latinate. The poem went through one more revision, and then a workshop after it was basically finished. I remember several comments made in that workshop, but the suggestion that I took was to add a section in which we find out what happened to the missing mom. My professor had an issue with the metaphor of the body as a caterpillar scoring a basket, but I kept it as was because it made sense to *me*. The final version below was published in the literary journal *Crazyhorse*.

19-19	1919 sounded more like a probable date given the subject matter.
The game went into overtime that night. The moon didn't	Pulling the moon up to the first line creates personification and contrast.
Stay to witness, having other places to be. On top	I remember I was at a stage in my writing when I wanted to push strangeness and imagination. Here, the moon becomes a character in the narrative, too. The addition also creates a rhyme with "virginity" adding musical elements to the poem.
Of Mount Thoradour she couldn't wait	
To lose her virginity. This was before the war.	
Before he would leave her	
Pregnant with Sierra, alone, until he returned,	Using names helps the reader stay grounded in a poem with many characters and references to them.
His left arm's ghost dangling from his side like a medal.	
He was lucky, he'd tell her, her hair	
Against his bruised cheek. The scent of her	

Like orange groves for the first time again. This	
Was before the dance where her little sister, who scored	
The tying points in the game that night would break	
Her ankle while dancing with George Thyman,	
Her curious white bone pushing through the skin	
Of this world before being forced back,	
Sewn tight under the ivory-dry cast.	I wanted to zoom in on something and add an element of surprise and strangeness while echoing the theme of oppression in regard to women.
But this was before color. The black and white	
The newspaper took still hangs on their father's wall.	
Whenever Sierra sees the picture: her aunt's	
Long caterpillar body balancing up toward the basket,	
She remembers her mother pointing to the photograph saying	
<i>This was the night when the door to my womb unlocked.</i>	The dialogue allowed me to smooth over the clunky language in the last draft, and make the moment of conception magical.
When they married for Sierra, her sister came	
On crutches with George Thyman. This was before	
The last witch trial had taken place. In dense forests	Camera zooms in and voila: images.
Skirts still fanned cautiously around dark fires.	
And this was before the reunion, before Sierra's	I felt that adding a reason for Sierra's mom's disappearance would help the narrative. Plus it allowed me to integrate the theme of female oppression and violence even further into the poem.
Mom would pull her blue Ford over to the side of the road	
To wait out the storm. It was before the police would find her car	
The next morning, empty, blood still wet on the steering wheel's rim,	
Black windshield wipers, broken, lying in the back seat.	
This was when murder first entered the town of Pulaski.	
The newspaper ran a story on the accident: Sierra's face	
In color on the cover next to a reprint of her missing mother.	
This was before the picture of her aunt that night on the basketball court	
Would fade. That night on the court, ball rising from the arch of her	
Fingers, circling the rim of the basket, wavering,	
Then falling in, the whole world	
Seemed right—she will remember this feeling	

When she buries the ghost of her sister's body in an empty casket.	
She will remember this as she buries her face	
In her brother-in-law's empty sleeve, her niece embracing	
The idea of the basketball	These lines are a rewrite of language that didn't sound right to me: "everything / Mean, everything possible, everything relate."
That made everything possible, everything feel	
Secure. The way it fell through the chute, guided	The change to the ending came from following the lead of musical language. In developing the image I thought "guided by the net," but as I like to, I looked closer—"holes in the net."
By holes in the net. This was before the casket hit the ground.	That the casket enters is a poetic moment that I can only assume happened because of sound—net, basket, casket—and the love of the line "This was before." I was definitely in the zone.
This was before the war.	

Creating Your Own Aesthetic

The revision process of "19-19" reflects my own poetics at the time that I composed and revised it. If the first draft was given to any other poet, the revision would be completely different. As you begin to revise your poems, the most useful approach you can take is to be aware of the decisions you are making and understand why you are making them. I hope you will see the above examples as one of many ways one may approach a poem.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

2.4: About Drama

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- describe the elements of drama.
- identify drama-specific literary devices.
- perform drama-specific literary analysis.
- write a literary analysis essay on a play.

2.4.1: What is Drama?

2.4.2: Elements of Drama

2.4.3: Reading and Responding to Drama

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2.4.1: What is Drama?

What is Drama?



Sarah Bernhardt performs as Hamlet, holding poor Yorick's skull (1899) - public domain

Drama as a Genre

Like fiction, **drama**—sometimes referred to as a **play**—features characters caught up in a **plot**, or series of events in a storyline. Just like in fiction, the plot is the trajectory of the story. Plays and novels are actually very similar in this way. In fact, some plays have been based on novels, and novels on plays. Yet, whereas the narrator of a novel can spend pages painting a picture of the story's circumstances for the reader, a play is restricted to the space of the stage and the time frame of a couple of hours. This adds unique considerations for a **playwright**—or author who writes plays—to consider. What strategies are available to the playwright to ensure that the play successfully conveys its intended effects and themes? And how can we most clearly settle upon one definition of drama, considering it manifests in different permutations across cultures?

African drama scholar Ruth Finnegan stressed that, when defining drama across cultures, "[m]ost important is the idea of enactment, of representation through actors who imitate persons and events" (486). In addition to this definition, plot, setting, dialogue, and action are probably the most clearly defining characteristics of drama as genre. These elements will be covered in greater detail in the Elements of Drama section.

A Brief History of Drama

Greece

Most historians agree Western drama originated in Greece as an evolution of religious ritual, probably around the 5th century BCE as an evolution of poetry and song (qtd. Miller 126-7). While more controversial, many scholars believe the first plays probably began when singers in a festival celebrating the Greek God Dionysus/Bacchus began acting out characters in worship

songs (Miller 127). Eventually, this developed into increasingly elaborate productions, growing from one actor to several, incorporating props and costumes. By the 4th century BCE, drama had become a valued cultural practice in Greece and was in fact considered a civic duty that would help Greek society remain rational through the purgation of negative emotion, which Aristotle called **catharsis** (Scodel 40). By seeing actors acting out intense emotions and brutal acts, it meant Athenian citizens could vicariously experience those emotions, emptying themselves of such emotions so they could focus on their civic duties like voting. Eventually, Athenian citizens would gather every year to watch playwrights akin to celebrities compete against one another (Scodel 40). Many critics argue Greek drama was one of the heaviest influences on William Shakespeare's works, and most poets of the Western world.

India

Some scholars contend drama did not begin in Greece, as popularly assumed, but in India. Or perhaps that drama was not necessarily a spreading phenomena, but a simultaneous evolution in both India and Greece. Regardless, around the same time of the origins of Greek drama arose the Sanskrit Indian *prakarana* (Walker 7). *Prakarana* is a play in five acts. This *prakarana* theatre is widely regarded to have begun the spread of drama in the East in the same way Greek drama spread through the West.

Common Genres of Drama

- **Comedy:** probably the first drama subgenre, comedy traditionally features lower-class characters, emphasizes silly or bawdy themes, and often ends in marriage.
- **Tragedy:** what Aristotle considered the artistic height of drama, Tragedy depicts a protagonist's downfall due to his or her own tragic flaw, or **hamartia**. Readers can usually recognize a tragedy by its noble characters, elevated language (iambic pentameter), and scenes of suffering and death. They almost always feature death or many deaths and/or a funeral.
- **History:** recreates a historically significant event. May include elements of comedy, tragedy, or romance
- **Romance:** usually focuses on love between characters

Distinguishing Features of Drama

- Meant to be performed rather than read
- Emphasis on dialogue, character, and stage direction
- May include elements of music, dance, art, poetry, and prose
- Usually fictional, though may include nonfiction or be inspired by true stories or historical events

Supplemental Videos

- Crash Course Theatre #7: [Ancient Sanskrit Theatre](#)



Contributors and Attributions

Parts of this chapter adapted from [Writing and Literature: Composition as Inquiry, Learning, Thinking, and Communication](#) by Dr. Tanya Long Bennett of the University of North Georgia.

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2.4.2: Elements of Drama

Plot

As discussed in the Creative Nonfiction and Fiction chapters, plot is the most important element in a narrative. Similarly, it comprises arguably the most important element of a play. Plot is the events in the play and the order in which the events are told. There is no one correct way to structure a drama! However, the structure of a drama is only as effective as it is intentionally formed to elicit the desired response from its audience. A play usually has a beginning, middle, and end. It almost always has a character grow and develop over the course of the play. Let's look closely at one type of plot structure in order to see what plot might look like.

Case Study: Tragic Plot

According to Aristotle, an effective plot of a tragedy follows this order:

1. **Inciting incident: the background of the play that causes the central conflict.**
 1. **Example:** two brothers murder each other. Their uncle, the King, refuses to bury one of the brothers and makes a law against burying him. This puts the sister of the brothers in a bad place, because her religion requires her to bury them so they go to heaven.
2. **Rising Action: the conflict built through friction between characters.**
 1. **Example:** The sister defies her uncle the King and buries her brother against the king's orders and then refuses to apologize. The king then commands his soldiers to bury his niece alive for her defiance!
3. **Anagnorisis or Scene of Recognition: the protagonist realizes he has made an error that carries serious consequences.**
 1. **Example:** The King receives a warning from a wise elder that burying his niece is a terrible idea that has angered the gods. The king finally realizes he has been a stubborn bonehead (he has exhibited excessive pride, hubris) and has a serious character flaw (hamartia).
4. **Peripeteia or Reversal of Fortune: this is when the protagonist's luck runs out.**
 1. **Example:** the King's recognition of his error comes too late: just as he sends his soldiers to free the niece from her cave, she dies in her cave and the King's son—his niece's betrothed—has killed himself in sorrow.
5. **Scene of Suffering: a bunch of people suffer and/or die as a result of the protagonist's hamartia.**
 1. **Example:** Not only did the King's niece and son die, but a messenger tells him that his wife killed herself in grief.

The heartbroken King leaves the city in self-imposed exile. The audience feels pity and fear watching the King suffer, and this helps purge their feelings of pity and fear.

Not all plays or even tragedies follow this structure exactly. That being said, it can be helpful to analyze the ways in which a plot's structure is formed, as this can reveal deeper meanings. For example, what would have happened if the above mentioned King had recognized his tragic flaw (hamartia) in time to save his niece? This would have been a very different play: perhaps even a romance if the niece and king's son married and lived happily ever after. As in this example (based on *Antigone* by Sophocles), the structure of a play can have profound effects on its meaning or even genre!

Structure

Whether tragedy, comedy, history, or romance, all plays generally follow the structure of **act, scene, and line**.

A play can be anywhere from a few minutes to several hours. Usually a play will be divided into anywhere from one to five **acts**. These acts usually hinge upon a central plot point. Between each act, the curtain will fall; perhaps in the middle of the play there might be an intermission for audiences to use the restroom or buy drinks. A lot of literary production is driven by economics, after all: playwrights gotta eat, too!

The acts are further divided into **scenes**. The scene is usually set in a particular moment in time and setting.

When reading the play, actors reference **lines**. The lines are the dialogue that they speak to one another. A long time ago, poems and plays were often written in verse such as iambic pentameter, so poems and plays shared the concept of line structure. However, in contemporary plays, dialogue may be written in prose. Usually it will still have some kind of numbering system so that actors, directors, and readers can find their place.

When writing about a play, you should try to reference act, scene, and line number in your parenthetical in-text citation. For example (1.3.186) means Act 1, Scene 3, Line 186. However, not all plays have line numbers, or even scenes. So you may need to just reference act and scene (1.3) or just the act (Act 3).

Setting

To provide the story's setting, a play requires sets. If you've ever been involved with a play, you know that the set can be made up of detailed backdrops, specifically designed props, strategic lighting, and sometimes even background noise. A set, along with the characters' subtle indications of the scene, can generate a full setting in the audience's imagination. For example, the play *Hamlet* starts its setting on a creepy, dark, foggy, cold night in the fictional Castle Elsinore on Denmark. The setting is often

established on a **stage**, or the physical space upon which actors move. In order for a play to take place, there must be **actors** (people performing the play), an **audience** (people viewing the play), and **action and/or dialogue** as performed by the actors.

Character

While in short stories or novels a reader must wait until a character appears to know who the important characters are, in a play they are often the first aspect of the text encountered by readers. The character list usually appears in the first pages of the play. This is because, as a play emphasizes action over narration, the actors must know their parts!

Usually, the most important characters are listed first. Think most spoken lines, protagonists, antagonists, etc. However, the order in which the characters appear on the character list does not necessarily dictate the order of appearance. Like in creative nonfiction or fiction, writers develop characters over the course of the play. Different characters serve different roles such as protagonist, antagonist, or foil. There are a few types of character archetypes unique to drama which are described below. Note that not all of them will be in every play!

- **Protagonist:** the hero of the play. Usually the main character or the character with the most spoken lines, or the character around whom all the other characters seem to orbit. Hamlet would be an example of a protagonist.
- **Antagonist:** the villain of the play, usually opposite the protagonist. Claudius would be an example of an antagonist.
- **Foil:** this is a character meant to define another character through juxtaposition or comparison. For example, in *Hamlet*, Old Hamlet and Old Fortinbras and Hamlet and Fortinbras are often considered foils of each other. Fortinbras and Hamlet are both on paths of vengeance, yet each goes about their vengeance in different ways. While Fortinbras uses military strength, Hamlet chooses to use his intellect. While Fortinbras is decisive, Hamlet seems paralyzed by indecision. By examining the ways in which these two characters are similar and different, we can learn a lot about each of them and their significance in the play.
- **Wise elder:** in most plays, there is a wise old man or figure of wisdom who guides the protagonist. In *Hamlet*, it might be the ghost of his father, or Polonius can be a silly inversion of this archetype. In *Antigone*, it is probably Tiresias.
- **Love interest:** again, in most plays, there is usually a love interest of the protagonist, though not always. For *Hamlet*, this is Ophelia (though some scholars have argued Horatio!)
- **Messenger:** a character who delivers news

Dialogue and Action

One of the main differences between fiction and drama is that usually a play's plot is primarily forwarded through **dialogue** and **action**. **Dialogue** is comprised of the words directly spoken

by characters, while **actions** are the physical movements of the actors. In a novel, action is described in detail and dialogue is usually put in quotation marks. For example, consider the following example of **action** and **dialogue** from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde:

As the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skilfully mirrored in his art, a smile of pleasure passed across his face, and seemed about to linger there. But he suddenly started up, and closing his eyes, placed his fingers upon the lids, as though he sought to imprison within his brain some curious dream from which he feared he might awake.

"It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done," said Lord Henry languidly. "You must certainly send it next year to the Grosvenor. The Academy is too large and too vulgar. Whenever I have gone there, there have been either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse. The Grosvenor is really the only place."

"I don't think I shall send it anywhere," he answered, tossing his head back in that odd way that used to make his friends laugh at him at Oxford. "No, I won't send it anywhere."

Distinct from the novel form of dialogue evidenced above, in a play, any words which come after the character's name will be considered dialogue. Action is usually not described in great depth, and actors are to interpret what actions to take based on the dialogue. Consider this example from *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare:

MARCELLUS: *Holla,
Bernardo!*

BERNARDO: *Say,*

*W
hat
, is
Ho
rat
io
the
re
?*

HORATIO: *A piece of him.*

BERNARDO: *Welcome,
Horatio. Welcome, good
Marcellus.*

MARCELLUS: *What, has
this thing appear'd again
tonight?*

BERNARDO: *I have seen
nothing.*

In the above excerpt from the beginning of the play (1.1), Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio (soldiers) greet each other as they patrol the castle. When Horatio says "a piece of him," we might imagine the fog is so thick or the night so dark that only pieces of each character can be seen. Horatio might be holding up his hand in the torchlight. We might imagine the characters wandering about in the dark speaking to each other, a bit rattled, worrying if the mysterious "thing" Marcellus references will reappear. We learn later in the dialogue that "thing" is an apparition (ghost). None of the characters' movements are described, so we must infer what their actions are through their dialogue.

Although a novel's narrator can describe in detail the thoughts and impressions of its characters, a play's effects depend much more heavily on what the characters say and do. A play is a

performance, a spectacle, rather than words on paper. That is, drama is a story performed by actors. Some plays do include a narrator or a chorus, to introduce the scene or set the tone of the play, but the bulk of the production's effect is generated through the dialogue and its visual devices, and since the play's script dictates what the characters will say and often, through stage direction, its production strategies as well, the script is crucial to a successful performance.

Audience

While in other literary works the audience takes a more passive role, in plays the audience often becomes part of the show. When a character goes on an extended soliloquy, or extended speech when they are by themselves on the stage, they will often address the audience directly; the audience gets the insider view of their thoughts. Sometimes actors join audience members or extend the stage into the seats! Audiences in the old days also would get rowdy and interact with the actors and actresses, sometimes in outright chaotic ways. For example, during the first act of a play in 1883, actor John Ritchie was allegedly pelted by rotten eggs and tomatoes and "demoralized" ("AN ACTOR DEMORALIZED"). So when analyzing drama it's important to analyze how audience members might experience the play!

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"AN ACTOR DEMORALIZED BY TOMATOES" *The New York Times*, 1883 <https://www.nytimes.com/1883/10/28/a...-tomatoes.html>

Contributors

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2.4.3: Reading and Responding to Drama

How to "Read" Drama

For reasons discussed in this chapter so far, drama comes with a unique set of benefits and challenges for readers. Beginning students of drama often make the mistake of reading plays the same way they would a novel, becoming frustrated or lost as a result. Because it is meant to be performed and/or viewed as an audience member, readers must infer a lot about the setting and characters' internal feelings through the dialogue. This takes a bit more work than a novel, which often offers this kind of description for the reader. While ideally readers could either act out the play or see a play live, this is not always an option. So what is the best way to "read" a play?

ACT IT OUT LOUD.

That's right: as silly as it may feel, reading the play out loud in character will help readers better grasp the meanings of the play which may be missed when read silently. To reiterate, plays are meant to be performed. To be heard. To be seen. When possible, students should pair up with fellow classmates to take turns reading and acting out the parts. This is what makes plays fun: they are the most collaborative genre of literature!

Other tips for reading plays:

- Watch film versions of the play
- Go see live performances
- Listen to audiobook versions
- Summarize each act in your own words as you read
- Takes notes on each character: Who are they? What is their role (protagonist, antagonist, or supporting role)? What are the characters' relationships with each other?

Special Considerations For Reading Shakespeare & Other "Old" Works of Literature

Diction

As if reading plays was not challenging enough, many students find older literature's **diction**—or vocabulary choices—flummoxing. I use the term flummoxing here because it is a term that is not widely in circulation anymore. That is, it is archaic or antiquated. Or, to put it more simply, it's old. Shakespeare can be difficult to read for this reason: over time, like any language, English has evolved. Certain figures of speech, manners of speaking, and words commonly used in Elizabethan London (Shakespeare's time) are no longer used today. So if it feels like you are reading a foreign language when

reading Shakespeare or his contemporaries, you kind of are: Early Modern English.

- **Old English – 450 to 1066 A.D.**

- **Example:** "Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum,

þeodcyniga, þrym gefrunon,

hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum" (from *Beowulf*, author unknown).

- **Middle English – 1150 to 1500**

- **Example:** "Whan that aprill with his shoures soote

The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,

And bathed every veyne in swich licour

Of which vertu engendred is the flour;

Whan zephirus eek with his sweete breeth

Inspired hath in every holt and heeth" (from *The*

Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer)

- **Early Modern English – 1500 to 1690**

- **Example:** "Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,

And will not let belief take hold of him

Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us.

Therefore I have entreated him along

With us to watch the minutes of this night,

That if again this apparition come

He may approve our eyes and speak to it" (from 1.1 of

Hamlet by William Shakespeare).

- **Modern English – 1700 to present**

- **Example:** "You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings. I arrived here yesterday; and my first task is to assure my dear sister of my welfare, and increasing confidence in the success of my undertaking." (from the first page of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley)

Early Modern English is actually much closer to our modern English than one would think. It is much easier to understand than Old English for this reason. Basically, to use a Pokemon simile, if Old English is Charmander, and contemporary English is Charizard, Early Modern English is like Charmeleon. And it goes both ways: if I lost you with these Pokemon words you probably feel a lot like a speaker of Early Modern English would feel having to learn contemporary English!

The good news is, like learning a new language, there are helpful tools students can use to understand Shakespeare and other older or culturally or linguistically distant literature.

Use the [Oxford English Dictionary](https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/) combined with context clues to learn what words meant in the time period. Some words mean

the same thing. But other words have entirely different meanings. Try looking up how the words were used in the 1500s or 1600s to get a better understanding of how Shakespeare intended the word to be understood by his audiences.

Practicing Looking Up Diction

Let's try looking up a word which is difficult to understand in *Hamlet*.

*BARNARDO: Well, good night.
If you do meet Horatio and
Marcellus,
The **rivals** of my watch, bid them
make haste.*

(1.1.13 -
emphases mine)

In our modern understanding, "rival" means competitor. Like when playing Pokemon, you are introduced to a neighbor who also is given a Pokemon at the same time as you. As you raise your Pokemon, so does your rival, and you must continuously battle against your rival throughout the game. However, it seems like our modern understanding of this word does not quite work in the context of *Hamlet*. Why would Barnardo bid Horatio and Marcellus -- who seem not to be his competitors -- to make haste (AKA hurry up)? It seems like we are missing the definition of the word in Early Modern English.

So, let's use the Oxford English Dictionary to [look up the word "rival"](#) (1.1.13)

While there are a lot of definitions, many of them the same as the contemporary meaning, none quite fit as well as this one:

*A person having the same
objective as another, an associate.
Obsolete. rare.*

1604 W. Shakespeare *Hamlet* i. i.
10 The **riuals** of my watch, bid
them make hast.

("rival, 3" Oxford English
Dictionary)

As you can see, this definition is literally from *Hamlet*. And, knowing this meaning, it makes much more sense: Horatio and Marcellus are not Barnardo's competitors: they are his associates, fellow castle guards, who share his objective of patrolling and protecting Elsinore. Knowing this, we can better understand the relationship dynamics between characters.

- **Pro Tip #1: Use a dictionary.** Keep the Oxford English Dictionary open while reading and be willing to look up words you do not understand.

Syntax and Iambic Pentameter

Another confusing aspect of Shakespearean language is due to a poetic structure called **iambic pentameter**. This is the meter of epics dating all the way back to Greek antiquity. You might recognize iambic pentameter from poetry, too, like sonnets. Iambic pentameter is a poetic meter in which each line contains five sets of iambs, or about ten syllables. An iamb is essentially a two-syllable pairing of an unstressed and stressed syllable: think of it like da-dum, the sound of a heart beat. Since the word "pentameter" has the root of "penta" or five, we know then that the term means five sets of iambs. Take a look at the following first line of a popular Shakespeare poem (Sonnet 18) to see iambic pentameter in action, where each bolded portion represents a stressed syllable, and a non-bolded represents an unstressed syllable:

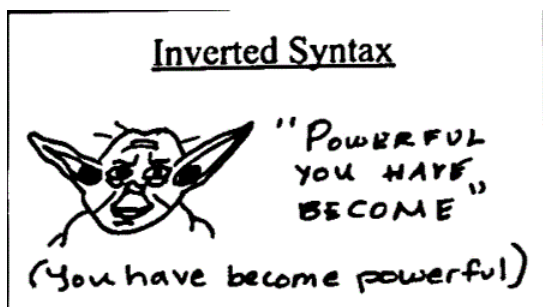
Shall **I** compare thee **to** a **summer's day**?

Poets and playwrights often wrote in iambic pentameter as a means to signal to audiences the genre of their work, the literary significance of their work, to indicate the class of the character speaking (iambic pentameter for the upper class, prose for a commoner), or just to make the play or poem sound euphonic. Whatever the purpose, writing a poem in iambic pentameter is difficult. Writing an entire play in iambic pentameter? And rhyming? Even more difficult, since ideas have to perform intense linguistic gymnastics just to conform to the structure.

In order to fit the iambic pentameter, writers sometimes mess with **syntax**, or the grammatical order of words. More specifically, this is called **inverted syntax**. This makes for some pretty sounding lines, but can be confusing at first. While contemporary English often goes subject-verb-object, Shakespeare's verse often switches this order around. This means it is easier to understand if you re-order the words to be in an order we are more comfortable with. So what can you do if you encounter words which seem out of order, to the point where you cannot understand what is being said?

Whenever you read a poem or play where the words seem out of normal order, think of Yoda. If it sounds like Yoda is saying it, it is probably a case of inverted syntax. Simply re-order the words to make them clearer.

Try the Yoda trick.



The Yoda Trick is essentially pretending it is Yoda who says the words in the play, and re-ordering the words to make more sense.

Re-Ordering Syntax Practice

Try the Yoda trick on the following line from *Hamlet*:

"To thine own self be true"
(*Hamlet* 1.3.78)

How would you re-order this to be more comprehensible?

"Be true to yourself."

- **Pro Tip #2: The Yoda Trick.** Anytime you encounter words that seem out of order, try reordering words to help you make sense of them.

Zeitgeist

Zeitgeist is a German word meaning "spirit of the times." Aristotle might use a similar term called **Kairos**, or the temporal and cultural context of a piece of rhetoric. Whatever term you prefer, it basically means that any work of writing is, in some way, a product of the time in which it was written. This means that, like language has evolved since the past, so has culture. For example, while Shakespeare's audience would have understood the many references to the Bible, Greek Mythology, and contemporary political events, modern readers might not be as familiar with these references. This can be super confusing. But, believe it or not, you practice learning cultural context all the time. For example, take a look at an excerpt from Tupac Shakur's song "Changes" (1992):

*And still I see no changes can't a
brother get a little peace
It's war on the streets and the war
in the Middle East
Instead of war on poverty they got
a war on drugs
So the police can bother me
And I ain't never did a crime I
ain't have to do*

*But now I'm back with the blacks
givin' it back to you
Don't let 'em jack you up, back
you up,
Crack you up and pimp smack
you up
You gotta learn to hold ya own
They get jealous when they see ya
with ya mobile phone
But tell the cops they can't touch
this
I don't trust this when they try to
rush I bust this
That's the sound of my tool you
say it ain't cool
My mama didn't raise no fool
And as long as I stay black I gotta
stay strapped
And I never get to lay back
'Cause I always got to worry 'bout
the pay backs
Some buck that I roughed up way
back
Comin' back after all these years
Rat-a-tat-tat-tat that's the way
it is uhh*

In this excerpt, there are several cultural reference points which are easily understood to most current readers, but would be completely lost to someone outside of the cultural context. The "war in the Middle East" is likely a reference to the Gulf War (1990-1991) which was taking place just before Tupac penned this song, so readers would understand the comparison to "war on the streets" (poor people of color confrontations with police) as a violent and unjust act of war on people because of their skin color. Similarly, the reference to the "war on drugs" is likely a reference to former President Ronald Reagan's war on drugs which (starting in 1982) is widely understood to have disproportionately affected people of color ("Racially Disproportionate"). And while Shakespeare would have no idea what a "mobile phone" might be, and the term might itself seem antiquated at the time of this textbook's publication (2019) when the term "cell phone" is more commonly used, the phrase is contemporary enough that we understand what Tupac means. We also might understand the value of the mobile phone as a signifier of wealth, especially in 1992 when mobile phones were luxury items compared to now. Other terms, like "strapped" and

"Rat-a-tat-tat-tat" are references to guns. Through understanding these cultural references (direct) and allusions (indirect), readers are able to understand the theme of the verse: expressing frustration with the oppressive force of racism which never seems to change, and the need for marginalized people to always be prepared to defend themselves from disproportionate violence.

So just like listening to a popular rap song using context-specific words and references might confuse an older audience, or my previous reference to Pokemon might confuse people who have never played Pokemon, or my reference to Yoda might confuse those who have never seen Star Wars, so too might Shakespeare's lingo be confusing to us because we miss the cultural reference points. The good news is that cultural context can be learned so that we can fully enjoy older literature.

Practicing Learning Cultural Context

Take, for example, the following lines from *Hamlet*, wherein Hamlet compares his uncle Claudius with his deceased father Old Hamlet:

*So excellent a king; that was, to
this,*

*Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to
my mother*

(1.2.139-140)

1. Who or what was Hyperion?
2. Who or what is a satyr?
3. After looking up these references, what do you think Hamlet is insinuating about his uncle Claudius compared to his father, Old Hamlet?

Elizabethan Cultural Reference Point: Greek Mythology

In this case, a simple Google search of the terms will help elucidate cultural reference points we might not understand. A cursory search reveals these are important figures in Greek mythology: a satyr is a gross, sexually perverted crossbreed

between a man and a goat. Hyperion was the glorious and dazzling God/Titan of the sun. So we can infer from this comparison that Hamlet is saying his dad was awesome and represented all things good and powerful, and his uncle is a nasty perverted animal. This tells us a lot about the plot and character dynamic between Claudius and Hamlet, and foreshadows, perhaps, that a confrontation will take place between the two of them.

Pro Tip #3: Research cultural contexts. Use Google or your library's databases to do a little bit of research on cultural context to give you a deeper understanding of the play.

Other recommended resources for understanding drama (Shakespeare in particular):

- YouTube videos, like Crash Course Literature
- No Fear Shakespeare provides a translation of Shakespeare into modern English. Be wary of using this resource, though, as you may lose important literary aspects. Just like listening to a song, movie, or meme in its original form and taking time to understand the cultural background, so too is it important to read a play in its original form.
- Folger's Shakespeare, which includes helpful annotations and footnotes to explain diction and cultural context
- Watching live or film adaptations of plays. Many of these can be accessed for free through your college or local library.

Works Cited

"Racially Disproportionate Drug Arrests." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/2000/usa/Rcedrg00-05.htm> Accessed 11 October 2019.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

2.5: About Literary Criticism

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students should be able to:

- define, identify, discuss, and apply concepts of basic literary theory.

2.5.1: Literary Criticism

2.5.2: What is Literary Criticism?

2.5.3: Formalism

2.5.4: Psychoanalytic Criticism

2.5.5: Criticism and Gender

2.5.6: Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies Criticism

2.5.7: New Historicism

2.5.8: Ecocriticism

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2.5.1: Literary Criticism

By reading and discussing literature, we expand our imagination, our sense of what is possible, and our ability to empathize with others. Improve your ability to read critically and interpret texts while gaining appreciation for different literary genres and theories of interpretation. Read samples of literary interpretation. Write a critique of a literary work.

Texts that interpret literary works are usually persuasive texts. Literary critics may conduct a close reading of a literary work, critique a literary work from the stance of a particular literary theory, or debate the soundness of other critics' interpretations. The work of literary critics is similar to the work of authors writing evaluative texts. For example, the skills required to critique films, interpret laws, or evaluate artistic trends are similar to those skills required by literary critics.



A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8adK...b_channel=eHow

Why Write Literary Criticism?

People have been telling stories and sharing responses to stories since the beginning of time. By reading and discussing literature, we expand our imagination, our sense of what is possible, and our ability to empathize with others. Reading and discussing literature can enhance our ability to write. It can sharpen our critical faculties, enabling us to assess works and better understand why literature can have such a powerful effect on our lives.

"Literary texts" include works of fiction and poetry. In school, English instructors ask students to critique literary texts, or works. Literary criticism refers to a genre of writing whereby an author critiques a literary text, either a work of fiction, a play, or poetry. Alternatively, some works of literary criticism address how a particular theory of interpretation informs a reading of a work or refutes some other critics' reading of a work.

Diverse Rhetorical Situations

The genre of literary interpretation is more specialized than most of the other genres addressed in this section, as suggested by the table below. People may discuss their reactions to literary works informally (at coffee houses, book clubs, or the gym) but the lion's share of literary criticism takes place more formally: in college classrooms, professional journals, academic magazines, and websites.

Students interpret literary works for English instructors or for students enrolled in English classes. In their interpretations, students may argue for a particular interpretation or they may dispute other critics' interpretations. Alternatively, students may read a text with a particular literary theory in mind, using the theory to explicate a particular point of view. For example, writers could critique "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin from a feminist theoretical perspective. Thanks to the Internet, some English classes are now publishing students' interpretations on websites. In turn, some students and English faculty publish their work in academic literary criticism journals.

Over the years, literary critics have argued about the best ways to interpret literature. Accordingly, many "schools" or "theories of criticism" have emerged. As you can imagine—given that they were developed by sophisticated specialists—some of these theoretical approaches are quite sophisticated and abstract.

Below is a summary of some of the more popular literary theories. Because it is a summary, the following tends to oversimplify the theories. In any case, unless you are enrolled in a literary criticism course, you won't need to learn the particulars of all of these approaches. Instead, your teacher may ask you to take an eclectic approach, pulling interpretative questions from multiple literary theories.

Note: If you are interested in learning more about these theories, review either Skylar Hamilton Burris' "Literary Criticism: An Overview of Approaches" or [Dino F. Felluga's "Undergraduate Guide to Critical Theory."](#)

- [Schools of Literary Criticism](#)
- **New Criticism:** Focuses on "objectively" evaluating the text, identifying its underlying form. May study, for example, a text's use of imagery, metaphor, or symbolism. Isn't concerned with matters outside the text, such as biographical or contextual information. Online examples: "[A Formalist Reading of Sandra Cisneros's 'Woman Hollering Creek'](#)" and "[Sound in William Shakespeare's 'Tempest': A Formalist Approach](#)" by Skylar Hamilton Burris
- **Reader-Response:** Criticism focuses on each reader's personal reactions to a text, assuming meaning is created by a reader's or interpretive community's personal interaction with a text. Assumes no single, correct, universal meaning exists because meaning resides in the minds of readers. Online example: "[Theodore Roethke's 'My Papa's Waltz': A Reader's Response](#)" (PDF)
- **Feminism:** Criticism Focuses on understanding ways gender roles are reflected or contradicted by texts, how dominance and submission play out in texts, and how gender roles evolve in texts. Online Example: "[The Yellow Wall-Paper': A Twist on Conventional Symbols](#)" by Liselle Sant, "[Kate Chopin as Feminist: Subverting the French Androcentric Influence](#)" by Jane Le Marquand
- **New Historicism:** Focuses on understanding texts by viewing texts in the context of other texts. Seeks to understand economic, social, and political influences on texts. Tend to broadly define the term "text," so, for example, the Catholic Church could be defined as a "text." May adopt the perspectives of other interpretive communities—particularly reader-response criticism, feminist criticism, and Marxist approaches—to interpret texts. Online example: "[Monstrous Acts and Little Murders](#)" by Jonathan Lethem
- **Media Criticism:** Focuses on writers' use of multimedia and hypertexts. Online example: [The Electronic Labyrinth](#) by Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin, and Robin Parmar
- **Psychoanalytical Criticism:** Focuses on psychological dimensions of the work.
- **Marxist Criticism:** Focuses on ways texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge the effects of class, power relations, and social roles. Online example: "A Marxist/Feminist Reading of Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery'" by Peter Kosenko
- **Archetypal Criticism:** Focuses on identifying the underlying myths in stories and archetypes, which reflect what the psychologist Carl Jung called the "collective unconsciousness." Online example: "[A Symbolic Approach to Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'](#)" by Skylar Hamilton Burris
- **Postcolonial Criticism:** Focuses on how Western culture's (mis)representation of third-world countries and peoples in stories, myths, and stereotypical images encourages repression and domination. Online example: [Other Voices: The eJournal of Cultural Criticism](#)
- **Structuralism/Semiotics:** Focuses on literature as a system of signs where meaning is constructed in a context, where words are inscribed with meaning by being compared to other words and structures.
- **Post-Structuralism/Deconstruction:** Focuses, along with Structuralism, on viewing literature as a system of signs, yet rejects the Structuralist view that a critic can identify the inherent meaning of a text, suggesting, instead that literature has no center, no single interpretation, that literary language is inherently ambiguous

Powerful works of literature invoke multiple readings. In other words, we can all read the same story or poem (or watch the same movie or listen to the same song) and come up with different, even conflicting, interpretations about what the work means. Who we are reflects how we read texts. Our experiences inspire us to relate to and sympathize with characters and difficult situations. Have we read similar stories? Have we actually faced some of the same challenges the characters in the story face?

In addition, literary theories have unique ways to develop and substantiate arguments. Some theories draw extensively on the work of other critics, while others concentrate on the reader's thoughts and feelings. Some theories analyze a work from an historical perspective, while others focus solely on a close reading of a text.

Accordingly, as with other genres, the following key features need to be read as points of departure as opposed to a comprehensive blueprint:

Focus

Examine a subject from a rhetorical perspective. Identify the intended audience, purpose, context, media, voice, tone, and persona. Distinguish between summarizing the literary work and presenting your argument. Many students fall into the trap of spending too much time summarizing the literature being analyzed as opposed to critiquing it. As a result, it would be wise to check with your teacher regarding how much plot summary is expected. As you approach this project, remember to keep your eye on the ball: What, exactly (in one sentence) is the gist of your interpretation?

Development

You can develop your ideas by researching the work of other literary critics. How do other critics evaluate an author's work? What literary theories do literary critics use to interpret texts or particular moments in history? Reading sample proposals can help you find and adopt an appropriate voice and persona. By reading samples, you can learn how others have prioritized particular criteria.

Below are some of the questions invoked by popular literary theories. Consider these questions as you read a work, perhaps taking notes on your thoughts as you reread. You may focus on using one theory to "read and interpret" text or, more commonly, you may compare the critical concerns of different theories.

New Criticism/Formalism

- Character: How does the character evolve during the story? What is unique or interesting about a character? Is the character a stereotypical action hero, a patriarchal father figure, or Madonna? How does a character interact with other characters?
- Setting: How does the setting enhance tension within the work? Do any elements in the setting foreshadow the conclusion of the piece?
- Plot: What is the conflict? How do scenes lead to a suspenseful resolution? What scenes make the plot unusual, unexpected, suspenseful?
- Point of View: Who is telling the story? Is the narrator omniscient (all knowing) or does the narrator have limited understanding?

Reader-Response Criticism

How does the text make you feel? What memories or experiences come to mind when you read? If you were the central protagonist, would you have behaved differently? Why? What values or ethics do you believe are suggested by the story? As your reading of a text progresses, what surprises you, inspires you?

Feminist Criticism

How does the story re-inscribe or contradict traditional gender roles? For example, are the male characters in "power positions" while the women are "dominated"? Are the men prone to action, decisiveness, and leadership while the female characters are passive, subordinate? Do gender roles create tension within the story? Do characters' gender roles evolve over the course of the narrative?

New Historicism Criticism

How does the story reflect the aspirations and conditions of the lower classes or upper classes? Is tension created by juxtaposing privileged, powerful positions to subordinated, dominated positions? What information about the historical context of the story helps explain the character's motivations? Who benefits from the outcome of the story or from a given character's motivation?

Media Criticism

How does the medium alter readers' interactions with the text? Has the reader employed multimedia or hypertext? What traditions from print and page design have shaped the structure of the text? In what ways has the author deviated from traditional, deductively organized linear texts?

Cite from the Work

Literary criticism involves close reading of a literary work, regardless of whether you are arguing about a particular interpretation, comparing stories or poems, or using a theory to interpret literature. Do not summarize the story. The purpose of the document is not to inform the readers, but to argue a particular interpretation. You only need to cite parts of the work that support or relate to your argument and follow the citation format required by your instructor (see Using and Citing Sources).

Below is an example from "Sample Essays for English 103: Introduction to Fiction," Professor Matthew Hurt. Note how the writer uses block quotes to highlight key elements and paraphrase and summarizes the original works, using quotation marks where necessary.

"...Twain offers a long descriptive passage of Huck and Jim's life on the raft that seems, at first glance, to celebrate the idyllic freedom symbolized by the river and nature. . . A close reading of this passage, however, shows that the river is not a privileged natural space outside of and uncontaminated by society, but is inextricably linked to the social world on the shore, which itself has positive value for Huck. Instead of seeking to escape society, Huck wants to escape the dull routines of life."

The passage abounds with lyrical descriptions of the river's natural beauty. For example, Huck's long description of the sunrise over the river captures the peaceful stillness and the visual beauty of the scene:

"The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line — that was the woods on t'other side — you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness, spreading around; then the river softened up, away off, and warn't black any more, but gray; . . . sometimes you could hear a sweep screaming; or jumbled up voices, it was so still, and sounds come so far; and by-and-by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there's a snag there in the swift current which breaks on it and makes the streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the east reddens up, and the river, and you make out a log cabin in the edge of the woods, away on the bank on t'other side of the river, . . . then the nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh, and sweet to smell, on account of the woods and the flowers; . . . and next you've got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the song-birds just going at it!" (129-130)

Here Huck celebrates the beauty of the natural world coming to life at the beginning of a new day. The "paleness" gradually spreading across the sky makes new objects visible which he describes in loving detail for the reader. The "nice breeze" is "cool and fresh" and "sweet to smell," and the world seems to be "smiling in the sun" as the song-birds welcome the new day.

However, Huck includes a number of details within this passage that would seem to work against the language of natural beauty. After describing the gradually brightening sky, Huck notes that "you could see little dark spots drifting along, ever so far away — trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks — rafts." The sun rise reveals not only natural objects (the brightening sky, the "snag," the "mist"), but also brings into view man-made objects ("trading scows" and "rafts") that signify human society's presence in this natural environment. Similarly, Huck speculates that the picturesque "log cabin" on the distant shore is a "woodyard, likely, and piled by them cheats so you can throw a dog through it anywhere." Here the marker of human society takes on a sinister tone of corruption as Huck describes how unscrupulous wood sellers stack wood loosely to cheat their customers. Finally, although the breeze is "sweet to smell," Huck assures the reader that this isn't always the case: "but sometimes not that way, because they've left dead fish laying around, gars, and such, and they do get pretty rank."

These signs of society's presence on the river are largely negative. The woodyard is "piled by cheats" and the stacked fish pollute the "sweet" smell of the breeze. At this point, the opposition between "good nature" and "bad society" remains intact. The signs of human presence suggest a corruption of nature's beauty. In the paragraphs that follow, however, this opposition is subtly reversed. After Huck's account of the sunrise over the river, he describes how he and Jim watch the steamboats "coughing along up stream." But when there are no steamboats or rafts to watch, he describes the scene as "solid lonesomeness" (130). No songbirds, no sweet breezes. Without human activities to watch, the scene suddenly becomes empty and "lonesome," and nothing captures Huck's attention until more rafts and boats pass by and he can watch them chopping wood or listen to them beating pans in the fog.

Cite Other Critics' Interpretations of the Work

Criticism written by advanced English majors, graduate students, and literary critics may be more about what other critics have said than about the actual text. Indeed, many critics spend more time reading criticism and arguing about critical approaches than actually reading original works. However, unless you are enrolled in a literary theory course, your instructor probably wants you to focus more on interpreting the work than discussing other critical interpretations. This does not mean, however, that you should write about a literary work "blindly." Instead, you are wise to find out what other students and critics have said about the work.

Below is a sample passage that illustrates how other critics' works can inspire an author and guide him or her in constructing a counter argument, support an author's interpretation, and provide helpful biographical information.

In her critical biography of Shirley Jackson, Lenemaja Friedman notes that when Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery" was published in the June 28, 1948 issue of the New Yorker it received a response that "no New Yorker story had ever received": hundreds of letters poured in that were characterized by "bewilderment, speculation, and old-fashioned abuse."1 It is not hard to

account for this response: Jackson's story portrays an "average" New England village with "average" citizens engaged in a deadly rite, the annual selection of a sacrificial victim by means of a public lottery, and does so quite deviously: not until well along in the story do we suspect that the "winner" will be stoned to death by the rest of the villagers.

Organization

The format for literary critiques is fairly standard:

- State your claim(s).
- Forecast your organization.
- Marshal evidence for your claim.
- Reiterate argument and elaborate on its significance.

In English classes, you may be able to assume that your readers are familiar with the work you are critiquing. Perhaps, for example, the entire class is responding to one particular work after some class discussions about it. However, if your instructor asks you to address a broader audience, you may need to provide bibliographical information for the work. In other words, you may need to cite the title, publisher, date, and pages of the work (see Citing Sources).

Literary critiques are arguments. As such, your instructors expect you to state a claim in your introduction and then provide quotes and paraphrased statements from the text to serve as evidence for your claim. Ideally, your critique will be insightful and interesting. You'll want to come up with an interpretation that isn't immediately obvious. Below are some examples of "thesis statements" or "claims" from literary critiques:

- In "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the protagonist is oppressed and represents the effect of the oppression of women in society. This effect is created by the use of complex symbols such as the house, the window, and the wall-paper which facilitate her oppression as well as her self expression. [""The Yellow Wall-Paper': A Twist on Conventional Symbols" by Liselle Sant]
- "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Gilman is a sad story of the repression that women face in the days of the late 1800's as well as being representative of the turmoil that women face today. [Critique of "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Brandi Mahon]
- "The Yellow Wallpaper," written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is a story of a woman, her psychological difficulties and her husband's so called therapeutic treatment of her ailments during the late 1800s. . . Gilman does well throughout the story to show with descriptive phrases just how easily and effectively the man "seemingly" wields his "maleness" to control the woman. But, with further interpretation and insight I believe Gilman succeeds in nothing more than showing the weakness of women, of the day, as active persons in their own as well as society's decision making processes instead of the strength of men as women dominating machines. [""The View from the Inside" by Timothy J. Decker]
- In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain creates a strong opposition between the freedom of Huck and Jim's life on the raft drifting down the Mississippi River, which represents "nature," and the confining and restrictive life on the shore, which represents "society." [""All I wanted was a change': Positive Images of Nature and Society in Chapter 19 of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" from Professor Matthew Hurt's "Sample Essays for English 103: Introduction to Fiction"]]
- In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," an unexpected visitor comes down from the sky, and seems to test the faith of a community. The villagers have a difficult time figuring out just how the very old man with enormous wings fits into their lives. Because this character does not agree with their conception of what an angel should look like, they try to determine if the aged man could actually be an angel. In trying to prove the origin of their visitor, the villagers lose faith in the possibility of him being an angel because he does not adhere to their ordered world. Marquez keeps the identity of the very old man with enormous wings ambiguous to critique the villagers and, more generally, organized religion for having a lack of faith to believe in miracles that do not comply with their master narrative. [""Prove It: A Critique of the Villagers' Faith in 'A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings'" from "Sample Essays for English 103: Introduction to Fiction," Professor Matthew Hurt]

Style

Literary criticism is a fairly specialized kind of writing. Instead of writing to a general lay audience, you are writing to members of a literary community who have read a work and who developed opinions about the work — as well as a vocabulary of interpretation.

Following are some common words used by literary critics. More specialized terms can be learned by reading criticism or by referring to a good encyclopedia for criticism or writing, including the *Writer's Encyclopedia*:

- Protagonist: The protagonist is the major character of the story; typically the character must overcome significant challenges.
- Antagonist: The protagonist's chief nemesis; in other words, the character whom the protagonist must overcome.
- Symbols: Metaphoric language; see "'A Symbolic Approach to Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'"
- Viewpoint: Stories are told either in the first-person or third-person point of view. The first person is limited to a single character, although dialog can let you guess at other characters' intentions. The third person allows readers inside the character's mind so you know what the character feels and thinks. Viewpoint can be "limited," where the character knows less than the reader, or "omniscient," where the reader can hear the thoughts and feelings of all characters. Occasionally writers will use multiple character viewpoint, which takes you from one character's perspective to another.
- Plot: Plots are a series of scenes, typically moving from a conflict situation to a resolution. To surprise readers, authors will foreshadow "false plants," which lead readers to anticipate other resolutions. The term "denouement" refers to the unraveling of the plot in the conclusion.

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2.5.2: What is Literary Criticism?

What is Literary Theory?

When students hear the word "theory," they might think first of the natural sciences, rather than of literature. In the sciences, theories are systems for understanding how an aspect of the world works: they can be used to explain past phenomena and predict future behavior. Some common conceptions of theory in the public consciousness might include the theory of evolution or the search for the unified theory of the universe.



This image of a magnifying glass resting on an old book is in the public domain.

The term theory does not have the exact same applications in science and literature. However, literary scholars do understand their subject through **literary theories**, which are intellectual models that seek to answer a number of fundamental interpretive questions about literature. In *How to Do Theory*, literary critic Wolfgang Iser suggests that the natural sciences (and the social sciences to a large part) operate under **hard-core** theories, whereas the humanities use **soft-core** theories. Simply put, hard-core theories lead to problem-solving and are governed by general laws and rules; they predict and rely on objective facts. Soft-core theories, on the other hand, do not problem solve but predict — they map ideas and are not necessarily governed by laws but by metaphors and images.

Thus literary scholars use theories that are more descriptive of ideas — which map ideas more than quantify them. Such scholars are guided by questions that may include the following:

1. What exactly do we mean by "literature"? What counts as literature, and what does not?
2. Can (and should) we determine the value or worth of literary works? If so, how should we go about this task? If not, why not?
3. To what extent does a given text reflect its author and/or the historical moment of its composition?
4. What are the political and social ramifications of literary texts and of the ways we study them?

These are very broad versions of the questions that literary scholars ask in their work, but you can probably already see that different scholars are likely to have very different answers to many of them. Thus we often talk about different "schools" of literary theory. Each school prioritizes certain concerns for talking about literature while de-emphasizing others. Thus one

critic might focus on the representation of women within a given story or poem (feminist theory), while another critic might concentrate on representations of unconscious desire in that same text (psychoanalytical theory). Though they're studying the same text, these two critics may come to very different conclusions about what is most interesting in that text and why.

Why Study Literary Theory?

In his essay "Disliking Books at an Early Age," literary scholar Gerald Graff talks about how he struggled as a child to see the point of literature. "Literature and history," he recalls, "had no apparent application to my experience." Even in college, Graff says, he "continued to find 'serious' reading painfully difficult and alien." This all changed for Graff when he encountered critical debates over the interpretation of Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1876). He read about critics who disagreed over the book's meaning, value, and attitudes toward race. He realized that the conversations he'd been having with his classmates about the book in class discussion "were not too far from the thoughts of famous published critics," which gave Graff a feeling of power and excitement about reading he'd never felt before.

We hope you will feel that same power and excitement about reading as you learn about critical debates in literary study and begin to contribute to them in your own papers. Literature isn't made up of inscrutable texts that can be deciphered only by a chosen few who have learned to speak in a secret code. Literature is written by people — talented people perhaps, but people nonetheless. And the concerns of literary critics are concerns that many people share: What does this work say about the human condition? How does it convey its message? Does it portray its subjects fairly? What political or social ideas does it advance? Literature has many potential meanings, and literary theory gives scholars different avenues to uncover those meanings.

By asking theoretical questions of the novels, stories, poems, plays, and essays that you read in your literature class, you can begin to grasp works that may seem ineffable—impenetrable—if you try to uncover a single, "correct" interpretation for them. In short, literary theory can give you a toolbox for approaching any literary text: a set of interpretive moves that can help you figure out where to start when your instructor asks you to comment on a work in class or develop a paper topic.

Theory as Lens

One helpful way of thinking about theory is to imagine it as a kind of lens, or perspective. By viewing literature through a lens, it allows scholars to focus on a particular aspect of the text. Through this perspective, scholars can gain a deeper

understanding of the significance of the text. For example, if we view *Hamlet* through the gender lens, we might examine the ways in which Hamlet is mocked by Claudius for his "unmanly" grief and how this reflects gender roles in Shakespeare's time. We might also examine the way Ophelia or Gertrude function in the text, or why Hamlet is so rude and sexist towards the women in his life.

By zooming in on a particular aspect of a text, students can focus on a topic that interests them. Focused essays—with clear thesis statements—are often better essays. But they are also often more enjoyable to write for students!

Think about what expertise you might have, or what issues are most important to you. Let's say you are a student who is really into sports, for example. You might examine the role of sports in *Hamlet* (there is fencing!). If you are passionate about nature or the environment, you might consider the botany of daffodils in Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" or the flowers Ophelia carries in *Hamlet*. Essentially, there is a way to apply a theoretical lens or perspective to any work of literature.

Therefore, rather than thinking of theory as restrictive, think of it as a way to explore literary texts in a way that is meaningful to you; a way that empowers you to gain a deeper understanding

and appreciation not only for literature, but for your own passions, dreams, and ideas.

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2.5.3: Formalism

John Donne (1572–1631), the great metaphysical poet, provides a metaphor that is useful for close reading. In "The Canonization" (1633) he writes:

We'll build sonnets pretty rooms;
As well a well-wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns, all shall approve
Us canonized for Love.

—John Donne, "The Canonization," *Poetry Foundation*

Another poet returns to the same metaphor 118 years later. Thomas Gray, in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), writes:

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

—Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," *Poetry Foundation*

Both Donne and Gray use the image of the urn in their poetry. An *urn*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, is "an earthenware or metal vessel or vase of a rounded or ovaloid form and with a circular base, used by various peoples especially in former times...to preserve the ashes of the dead. Hence vaguely used (esp. *poet.*) for 'a tomb or sepulchre, the grave.'" Donne and Gray use the urn poetically, or metaphorically, for the urn is an image, a container to hold poetic meaning. To Donne, the poet can "build sonnets pretty rooms; / As well a well-wrought urn becomes"; to Gray the urn becomes "storied" or an "animated bust" capable of containing stories and meaning. As an image, then, the urn becomes symbolic: poets argue that a poem is like an urn, a container for artistic meaning.

Let's add one final component to our *urn* image. Jump ahead another sixty-nine years from Gray's poem and read John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820). At the end of this poem, Keats writes:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

Donne's "**well-wrought urn**" became the title of a book by Cleanth Brooks—*The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947)—a central manifesto of the New Criticism. New Criticism is synonymous with close reading, so

the urn becomes an important symbol for the New Critics: the urn as artistic container of beauty and meaning represents the New Critical enterprise. A poem, a play, a novel, a short story is like a "storied urn" or "well-wrought urn," capable of conveying poetic beauty and truth. Even if the poem is "Jabberwocky"!

In all likelihood, you have already practiced **New Criticism**, the close reading of a poem, short story, or longer narrative that focuses on the unity of that work. When you examine a short story for its character development, a drama for its plot construction, or a poem for its imagery, you are reading as a New Critic, looking at the literary work through the lens of close reading. In a sense, New Critical close reading is at the heart of every form of literary analysis you do, regardless of the theoretical approach taken. Thus it becomes essential that you become proficient in close readings of texts, for this skill is the foundation of all forms of literary criticism. If you cannot read a text closely and analyze it, you will have difficulty reading from any critical perspective.

? practice questions

1. List the papers, if any, you have written in high school or college using the close reading approach.
2. Describe your experience writing such papers.
3. What challenges or questions do you remember having as you were working on these papers?
4. On which literary work have you decided to write your paper?
5. What are the fundamental questions you have about this work?

Focus on New Critical Strategies

The New Critics, as we discussed, regard a literary work as an *urn*—a well-wrought, storied urn, or a Grecian urn. As Keats writes, this urn contains not only beauty but also truth: a work of literature has some objective meaning that is integral to its artistic design. In other words, literature is the art of conveying truth about the world. Thus the New Critics view the study of literature as an inherently valuable enterprise; literary criticism, it follows, is fruitful because it clarifies art by assigning a truth value to this art. To quote the nineteenth-century poet and critic Matthew Arnold, as he writes in *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1865), literature reflects "the best that is known and thought in the world." To the New Critics, as you can see, literature—in particular the analysis of it—was a profound activity.

A central concern of the New Critics is to understand how meaning and form interweave into a total artistic effect, the well-wrought urn. A New Critical reading assumes that the literary work has an organic structure that leads to unity or

harmony in the work. An important concern for New Critics, consequently, is to show how meaning is achieved or dependent on the organic structure—the form—of the work. A New Critical reading, then, focuses on the various elements of literature that complement and create the theme.

Basic Philosophy of Close Reading

A New Critic's toolbox will hold those elements of literature that allow for the discussion of form and technique as it applies to meaning. Since New Critics perform a close reading of the text to illustrate how structure and theme are inseparable, they are eager to tell us both how to read and how *not* to read. They identify various fallacies of reading that must be avoided:

The Intentional Fallacy

The **intentional fallacy** occurs when readers claim to understand an author's intended meaning for a work of literature. The New Critics believed that a literary work belongs to the readers, to the public, which suggests that we should read the work isolated from what the author may have said about the work. In other words, the critic never knows specifically what the author intended. Indeed, an author may have conveyed meanings he or she did not intend at all, but those meanings are still present in their work. The literary critic, then, must concentrate solely on the extrinsic formal qualities of the poem, play, short story, or novel.

The Biographical Fallacy

Related to the intentional fallacy is the **biographical fallacy**, which, as you might suspect, is committed when you use an author's life as a frame of reference to interpret a work of art. The New Critics took painstaking measures to keep the focus on the work of art itself.

The Affective Fallacy

The **affective fallacy** is produced when the critic brings in his or her personal feelings about how a literary work moves them. While New Critics were aware that many readers found meaning in the emotional impact of literature, they were careful to distinguish between subjective emotional responses and objective critical statements about a literary work. Critics, then, should stick closely to the work of art, eliminating the author's intention from consideration, and they should also eliminate their emotional involvement in the reading experience. We discover later in our study that many critical theories—psychoanalytic and reader-response theories, in particular—are diametrically opposed to New Criticism: both psychoanalytic and reader-response theories highlight the way a literary work affects a reader's emotional and intellectual responses.

The Heresy of Paraphrase

Finally, the New Critics warned against the **heresy of paraphrase**, which happens when readers artificially separate

meaning from structure or form. You have probably fallen into this trap once or twice when you concentrated on summarizing a work's plot rather than analyzing its meaning. New Criticism teaches us not to assign a meaning to a literary work *unless* that meaning can be supported by a close examination of the artistic elements of the text. To say that Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is about the death of a migrant worker fails to acknowledge that the poem does not support such a reading. Humpty Dumpty, in fact, could be accused of the heresy of paraphrase, as Amy Chisnell explores in her student paper later in the chapter.

In review, a close reading, as defined by the New Critics, focuses narrowly on the literary work as a well-wrought urn. All we need for our interpretation is the literary work itself, where we examine how the artistry of the work leads to a larger theme that reflects the truth value of the work. Easy to state, more difficult to do! So let's now turn to see how a close reading can be connected to the writing process itself.

? practice questions

1. How do you react to such rules that define the philosophy of New Critical close reading?
2. What do you see as the strengths to such an approach?
3. What do you see as some of the limits to this approach?

The Writing Process and the Protocols of Close Reading

If New Critics provide us with so many strategies for *not* reading a text, they should present us with strategies *for* reading texts. And they do. They suggest protocols of reading that are the heart of traditional close readings of texts. In a nutshell, a close reading exposes a problem or issue that needs examination to bring unity to the work; a close reading demonstrates how a literary work's meaning is unified, balanced, and harmonized by its aesthetic—or literary—structure. Your close reading, then, often identifies a **tension** or **ambiguity**—the issue or problem—that can be resolved by showing that the literary work achieves unity even in the apparent tension or ambiguity. Consequently, the critic can often examine how language creates tension through **paradox** or **irony**. Paradox (when something appears contradictory or discordant, but finally proves to be actually true) and irony (when a perceived meaning or intention is eventually found not to be accurate) are a result of a writer's use of language in a *metaphorical* way.

Questions

1. Read Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"
2. Examine the last two lines of the poem (49–50).
3. Do you think the urn is speaking the lines at the end? Does it matter?

There is no more famous example of a professional critical reading than Cleanth Brooks's "Keats's Sylvan Historian:

History without Footnotes." (Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," Mr. Bauld's English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html.)

Brooks's reading of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" begins by disagreeing with T. S. Eliot, who believed the concluding lines of the poem—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—constituted a major flaw in the poem, for, as Brooks relates, "the troubling assertion is apparently an intrusion upon the poem—does not grow out of it—is not dramatically accommodated to it" (Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," Mr. Bauld's English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html). Eliot feels the urn's speech doesn't make much sense—and that the statement simply isn't true. Brooks sets out to counter Eliot and prove that the poem is unified around the central paradox of the poem: "What is the relation of the beauty (the goodness, the perfection) of a poem to the truth or falsity of what it seems to assert?"

Brooks contends that the poem is "a parable on the nature of poetry, and of art in general" and that the concluding lines must be taken in the "total context of the poem" (Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," Mr. Bauld's English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html). When read in this manner, the urn's speech was "'in character,' was dramatically appropriate, [and] was properly prepared for" (Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," Mr. Bauld's English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html). To support his contention, Brooks provides a stanza-by-stanza close reading in which he suggests that the paradox of the speaking urn is naturally part of each stanza and related to a key thematic concept: the poem highlights the tension between bustling life depicted on the urn and the frozen vignettes of the "Cold Pastoral." Brooks concludes, "If the urn has been properly dramatized, if we have followed the development of the metaphors, if we have been alive to the paradoxes which work throughout the poem, perhaps then, we shall be prepared for the enigmatic, final paradox which the 'silent form' utters.'" (Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," Mr. Bauld's English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html). In concluding his essay, Brooks warns readers not to fall into the trap of paraphrase, for we must ultimately focus on "the world-view, or 'philosophy,' or 'truth' of the poem as a whole in terms of its dramatic wholeness" (Brooks's emphasis) (Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," Mr. Bauld's English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html).

Brooks's reading of Keats's ode is an exemplar of New Critical reading. Remember, a close reading will examine a literary work and find some objective meaning (a theme) that is harmonized with structure, thus balancing theme and form.

Implementing the Reading Protocols: A Strategy

To perform a close reading, use the following strategy:

1. Identify a tension or ambiguity in the literary work, the "problem" that needs to be solved by a close reading. In other words, your interpretation will highlight a theme or meaning that resides in the work.
2. Demonstrate how the work sustains or achieves this meaning through its artistic "principle of composition," which might include an examination of the following:
 - imagery
 - character
 - plot
 - symbol
 - setting
 - point of view
 - language use (i.e. denotation, connotation, metaphor, simile, personification, rhythm)

Of course, the principle of composition is determined by the literary genre you are analyzing (i.e. short story, poetry, drama, novel). By showing that #1 is dependent on #2, you present a New Critical interpretation reflecting how meaning is integral to theme.

To review, New Criticism provides us with concrete strategies to use when we read and interpret works of literature. Such reading and interpreting, however, never happens after just a first reading; in fact, all critics—New Critics and the others we examine later in this text—reread works multiple times before venturing an interpretation. You can see, then, the connection between reading and writing: as Chapter 1 indicates, writers create multiple drafts before settling for a finished product (writing is never adequately "finished"); the writing process, in turn, is dependent on the multiple rereadings the writer has performed to gather evidence for the paper. It's important that you integrate the reading and writing process together. As a model, use the following ten-step plan as you write using New Critical theory:

1. Carefully *read the work* you will analyze.
2. *Formulate a general question* after your initial reading that identifies a problem—a tension—that is fruitful for discussion.
3. *Reread the work*, paying particular attention to the question you posed. *Take notes*, which should be focused on your central question. *Write an exploratory journal entry or blog post* that allows you to play with ideas.
4. *Construct a working thesis* that makes a claim about the work and accounts for the following:
 1. What does the work mean?
 2. How does the work artistically demonstrate the theme you've identified?

3. "So what" is significant about the work? That is, why is it important for you to write about this work? What will readers learn from reading your interpretation?
5. *Reread the text to gather textual evidence* for support. What literary devices are used to achieve theme?
6. *Construct an informal outline* that demonstrates how you will support your interpretation.
7. *Write a first draft.*
8. *Receive feedback* from peers and your instructor via *peer review* and *conferencing* with your instructor (if possible).
9. *Revise the paper*, which will include revising your original thesis statement and restructuring your paper to best support the thesis. Note: You probably will revise many times, so it is important to receive feedback at every draft stage if possible.
10. *Edit and proofread* for correctness, clarity, and style.

We recommend that you follow this process for every paper that you write from this textbook. Of course, these steps can be modified to fit your writing process, but the plan does ensure that you will engage in a thorough reading of the text as you work through the writing process, which demands that you

allow plenty of time for reading, reflecting, writing, reviewing, and revising.

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2.5.4: Psychoanalytic Criticism

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well

As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.

Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades

Past the near meadows, over the still stream,

Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep

In the next valley-glades:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

—excerpt from "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats (1819)

"Do I wake or sleep?" Keats's question is perplexing, one we have probably asked ourselves. For our dreams often seem as real as our waking life. We dream, we wake, and we try to recollect our dream, which somehow seems to tell us something that we should know. We may tell friends our dreams, especially those strange ones that haunt our imagination, and they may venture an interpretation for us by reading our dream. Dreams are stories of our mind, albeit often bewildering narratives in need of interpretation.

Learning Exercise: Dream Analysis

1. Keep a dream journal for a least one week, jotting down those dreams that you can remember most vividly.
2. Take one of your dreams and analyze it like a story: What is the plot? Who are the characters? What symbols seem to be operating in the dream-story?
3. Now try to understand your dream: What might be the theme of your dream-story?

Psychoanalytic Criticism

Psychoanalytical literary criticism, on one level, concerns itself with dreams, for dreams are a reflection of the unconscious psychological states of dreamers. Freud, for example, contends that dreams are "the guardians of sleep" where they become "disguised fulfillments of repressed wishes." To Freud, dreams

are the "royal road" to the personal unconscious of the dreamer and have a direct relation to literature, which often has the structure of a dream. Jacques Lacan, a disciple of Freud, was influenced by Freud's psychoanalytical theories and contended that dreams mirrored our unconscious and reflected the way we use language; dreams, therefore, operate like language, having their own rhetorical qualities. Another Freud disciple, Carl Jung, eventually rejected Freud's theory that dreams are manifestations of the personal unconsciousness, claiming, instead, that they reflect archetypes that tap into the "collective unconsciousness" of all humanity.

In this chapter, we explore three popular psychoanalytical approaches for interpreting literature — Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian. In general, there are three ways to focus a psychoanalytical interpretation:

1. Analyze the author's life.
2. Analyze the thematic content of the work, especially the motivations of characters and the narrator(s).
3. Analyze the artistic construction of a text.

Here is a quick overview of some psychoanalytical interpretations that demonstrate these approaches.

Analyze the Author's Life

In *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (1933), Marie Bonaparte psychoanalyzes Poe, concluding that his fiction and poetry are driven by his desire to be reunited with his dead mother (she died when he was three). This desire leaves him symbolically castrated, unable to have normal relationships with others (primarily women). Bonaparte analyzes Poe's stories from this perspective, reading them as dreams reflecting Poe's repressed desires for his mother. While such an interpretation is fascinating—and can be quite useful—you probably won't attempt to get into the mind of the author for a short paper. But you will find, however, that examining the life of an author can be a fruitful enterprise, for there may be details from an author's life that might become useful evidence in your paper.

Analyze the Thematic Content: The Motivations of Characters and the Narrator(s)

An example showing a psychoanalytic focus on literary characters is Frederick Crews's reading in *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (1966). Crews first provides a psychoanalytical reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's life: he sees reflected in Hawthorne's characters a thwarted Oedipus complex (no worries, we'll define that a bit later), which creates repression. Furthermore, Hawthorne's ties to the Puritan past engenders his work with a profound sense of guilt, further repressing characters. Crews reads "[The Birthmark](#)," for example, as a tale of sexual repression. Crews' study is a model

for psychoanalyzing characters in fiction and remains a powerful and persuasive interpretation.

Analyze the Artistic Construction

Jacques Lacan shows us how a psychoanalytical reading can focus on the formal, artistic construction of a literary text. In other words, Lacan believes that our unconscious is "structured like a language" and that a literary text mirrors this sense of the unconscious. In "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" Lacan argues that Edgar Allan Poe's tale is not necessarily about the meaning of the message in the stolen letter; rather, the tale is about who controls the letter, who has power over the language contained in the letter.

How to Write A Psychoanalytic Literary Essay

1. Choose three authors and/or literary works that you think might be fruitful for applying the three psychoanalytical approaches.
2. Now jot down two reasons why you think your author and/or work might work well with these theories.
3. Keep this material, for you may have already developed an idea for your paper.

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Contributors and Attributions

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2.5.5: Criticism and Gender

Feminist Criticism

Let's whet our appetite for literature in a different, maybe more peculiar way. Let's read a different text, this one from a cookbook, the *Amberg Centennial 1890–1990 Cookbook* (American Legion Auxiliary #428, *Amberg Centennial 1890–1990 Cookbook* (n.p.: n.d.)). The two recipes come from the section "Game."

Duck with Wild Rice

2 ducks	1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
1 onion, chopped	1 ½ teaspoons salt
1 (5 ounce) package wild rice	1 (8 ounce) can mushrooms and liquid
½ cup butter	½ cup flour
1 ½ cups half and half	1 (4 ounce) package slivered almonds, toasted
2 ribs celery, chopped	salt and pepper to taste

Boil duck, onion, and celery until tender. Remove meat from bones. Set aside. Cook rice. Set aside. Melt butter and sauté onion. Stir in flour and half-and-half to make cream sauce. Add parsley and seasonings. Add cooked duck, rice, mushrooms, and almonds to cream sauce. Bake mixture in a casserole at 350° for 30–45 minutes. Serves 6–8.

—Mrs. Charles T. Dekuester (Doris Van Vleit)

Bessie's Birds

12 birds (dove or quail)	1 cup beef consommé
1 cup uncooked rice	1 (10–¾ ounce) can onion soup
¼ cup chopped bell pepper	½ cup flour
¼ cup chopped onion	salt and pepper
butter or bacon drippings	

Sauté salted and floured birds in small amount of butter or bacon drippings to brown well. Put rice in bottom of buttered oblong casserole dish. Place birds on top of rice. Sprinkle peppers and onion on top. Pour consommé and onion soup over casserole. Cover casserole with aluminum foil and bake at 350° for 45 minutes. Serves 6.

Chicken may be substituted for the birds.

—Mrs. Hugh Guy (Viola Barette)

CLASS PROCESS

1. Put students in groups of three or four.
2. Have them read the recipes carefully.
3. Have them interpret the recipes as they would examine a story or poem.
4. What "themes" can they find in the recipe text?
5. Generate class discussion as you are guided by the discussion following the excerpt.

The recipes reflect a particular view of women and their role in the domestic space. In other words, the woman's domain is in the house; her workspace the kitchen, where she will cook for her husband (and by extension the children). Notice that each recipe privileges the male name, with the woman's maiden name—her original name and identity—put in parenthesis. Even the use of *Mrs.* denotes her married status, whereby *Mr.* does not tell us the married status of the male. We are in the realm of **patriarchy**, the condition that demonstrates male domination over women. The recipes are even more interesting, for the section of this cookbook is "Game," further suggesting particular gender roles: men, the sportsmen, go hunting for this game, while the women, remaining at home, cook up that game for the family. If we interpret these recipes as we might a piece of literature, we can identify particular themes that represent feminist criticism: women are inferior to men in patriarchy; women's space is the private place of domesticity, the man's space is public (in this case the rugged wild); the woman's identity is determined by her husband's identity (she, like Eve, is dependent on her husband's rib, so to speak).

Now let's look at a literary use of the kitchen as a domestic space. Here is the cast of characters and opening set description for Susan Glaspell's one-act play, *Trifles* (1916). The play was first performed by the Provincetown Players in Massachusetts, with Glaspell playing the role of Mrs. Hale. A year later, Glaspell turned the play into a short story, "A Jury of Her Peers," partly to reach a larger reading audience. The inspiration for the play came from a murder reported in the *Des Moines Register*. (Articles on case: www.midnightassassin.com/sgarticles.html.)

- GEORGE HENDERSON (County Attorney)
- HENRY PETERS (Sheriff)
- LEWIS HALE, A neighboring farmer
- MRS PETERS
- MRS HALE

SCENE: *The kitchen is the now abandoned farmhouse of JOHN WRIGHT, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the bread-box, a dish-towel on the table—other signs of incompleting work. At the rear the outer door opens and the SHERIFF comes in followed by the COUNTY ATTORNEY and*

HALE. *The SHERIFF and HALE are men in middle life, the COUNTY ATTORNEY is a young man; all are much bundled up and go at once to the stove. They are followed by the two women—the SHERIFF's wife first; she is a slight wiry woman, a thin nervous face. MRS HALE is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now and looks fearfully about as she enters. The women have come in slowly, and stand close together near the door.* (Susan Glaspell, *Trifles* (1916; Project Gutenberg, 2011, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10623/10623-h/10623-h.htm#TRIFLES>.)

The following excerpt is the opening of the short story "A Jury of Her Peers":

WHEN Martha Hale opened the storm-door and got a cut of the north wind, she ran back for her big woolen scarf. As she hurriedly wound that round her head her eye made a scandalized sweep of her kitchen. It was no ordinary thing that called her away—it was probably farther from ordinary than anything that had ever happened in Dickson County. But what her eye took in was that her kitchen was in no shape for leaving; her bread all ready for mixing, half the flour sifted and half unsifted.

She hated to see things half done; but she had been at that when the team from town stopped to get Mr. Hale, and then the sheriff came running in to say his wife wished Mrs. Hale would come too—adding, with a grin, that he guessed she was getting scarey and wanted another woman along. So she had dropped everything right where it was. (Susan Glaspell, "A Jury of Her Peers," in *The Best Short Stories of 1917*, ed. Edward J. O'Brien (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1918; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1996), etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/...ublic&part=all.)

CLASS PROCESS

1. Have the students read *Trifles*.
2. Ask the students to make a chart on a piece of paper: label the left side "men," the right side "women."
3. Students should then fill in the chart: what symbols are associated with the men and women?

When we turn to the *Trifles* example, we see how a writer uses this domestic space and its implications to create a symbolic statement about gender. The men all have first and last names and are given an occupation (attorney, sheriff, or farmer); the women are only known by their husbands' names — they are not even given first names. This naming becomes important in the play, for the suspected murderer Minnie Wright is referred to as Minnie Foster by Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, suggesting that she had lost her identity by marrying her husband, who was a cold and cruel man, even preventing her from singing in the choir or having a telephone in the house (see Gretchen Panzer's sample paper on voice in *The Great Gatsby* later in the chapter).

Furthermore, the setting of the play is important — all the action on stage takes place in the kitchen, a kitchen that is in disarray. The men, of course, view the messy kitchen as a fault of Minnie's: she just isn't a very good housewife and housekeeper, for that is her primary role according to the men. To be a housewife, in addition, means that women are only concerned with "trifles," insignificant things. Later in the play and the short story we find out that Minnie's canning—her preserves—have been ruined because the jars have frozen and burst. Again, the men see this as sloppy housekeeping, while the women view the preserves as Minnie's hard work to care for her family. The idea of "preserves" or "preservation" becomes a central theme in Glaspell's work, for Minnie must preserve her dignity as a woman, even if it means that she must murder her husband. The great irony of the play and short story is that the women discover the evidence—the strangled bird—that would be enough to convict Minnie of murder, but they withhold this evidence, thus implying that Minnie will be set free. The women create their own justice system, becoming a jury of their peers: women.

Feminism is a powerful literary theory that is dedicated to social and political change. "How to define feminism? Ah, that is the question," a befuddled Hamlet might ask. A useful definition can be found in Michael Kimmel and Thomas Mosmiller's *Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States, 1776–1990: A Documentary History* (1992). They focus on four central points:

1. There is evidence that women are treated differently and unequally.
2. Women are not treated equally in the private and public sphere.
3. If these points are true, then that's wrong and becomes a moral problem.
4. Thus feminism is a commitment to change. (Michael Kimmel and Thomas Mosmiller, *Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States, 1776–1990 a Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).)

CLASS PROCESS

1. On the blackboard or whiteboard, have the students generate examples for points 1 and 2 of the list. This should lead to a spirited discussion.

Two other definitions will be useful to you: Barbara Smith argues that "feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement" (from *A History of U.S. Feminisms* by Kory

Dicker (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), p. 7). Noted feminist author bell hooks adds, "Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganize society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires" (bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto, 2000)).

Feminist literary criticism is also about this commitment to equality, to change, and it works its way by arguing that literature is a powerful cultural force that mirrors gender attitudes. Feminist literary criticism can be categorized into three stages: patriarchal criticism, gynocriticism, and feminine writing.

Patriarchal criticism examines the prejudices against women by male writers. Such criticism analyzes the way that canonical authors—mostly men—create images of women. For example, Gretchen Panzer's sample paper in this chapter explores how F. Scott Fitzgerald silences Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, further reinforcing the notion that this great American novel depicts women in demeaning ways. (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2003)). This criticism is often focused on close textual study since it will examine how men and women are depicted in literary texts. Patriarchal criticism will be central to this chapter.

Gynocriticism is concerned with women writers, particularly in the ways that women writers have become included within the canon. In American literature, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are classic examples (Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, 2nd ed., ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000); Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000)). These texts, now part of the canon of American literature, have only been seen as such for the past twenty-five years or so. Another interesting example is the evolution of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, which reflects the insertion of women into the canon. The edition for 1968 (M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968)), which covers the Middle Ages, the seventeenth century, the Restoration and the eighteenth century, the Romantic period, the Victorian age, and the twentieth century, includes no women. That's right—not one single woman! The latest (eighth) edition of this anthology (Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996)), published thirty-eight years later, includes the following women writers:

- *Middle Ages*: Marie De France and Margery Kempe
- *Sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*: Queen Elizabeth, Mary (Sydney) Herbert, Aemilia Lanyer, Mary Wroth, Katherine

Philips, and Margaret Cavendish

- *Restoration and eighteenth century*: Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Frances Burney
- *Romantic period*: Anna Letitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Felicia Dorothea Hemans
- *Victorian age*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Christina Rossetti
- *Twentieth century*: Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Jean Rhys, Nadine Gordimer, Alice Munro, and Anne Carson

What does it mean, consequently, when there are no representations of women? Historically, if women didn't exist in the canon, then we did not—we could not—study them. But with the rise of the field of women's studies in the 1960s, which introduced the idea of feminist literary criticism, we now value the study of women and their accomplishments, as well as thinking about how gender is constructed and perpetuated generally. This evolution about women and literature is mirrored in the evolving contents of the Norton anthology, which also reflects the evolving canon that is more inclusive, particularly to women writers.

Feminine writing explores the notion that women may write differently than men, suggesting that there may be a "women's writing" that is an alternative to male writing. Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) (Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998)) traces women's writing into three stages. The first stage is **Imitation** or **Feminine** (1840–80), where women imitated men. The classic examples of this are Charlotte and Emily Brontë (of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* fame, respectively), who took on male names — Currer Bell and Acton Bell (Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York: Norton, 2001); Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York: Norton, 2003)). To give another famous example, George Eliot, who wrote the Victorian classic *Middlemarch*, was actually Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Bert G. Hornback (New York: Norton, 2000)). The second stage of women's writing is **Protest** or **Feminist** (1880–1920), which sees women becoming much more political as writers, reacting directly to male domination in society and literature. Kate Chopin is an example of this stage, as is Virginia Woolf. Finally, the third stage, **Self-Discovery** or **Female** (1920–), becomes more radical as women turn inward toward the female, toward the body, creating works that mirror a writing particular to women.

As you can see, to narrowly define feminist literary criticism is difficult, for there are a myriad of approaches to take. Feminism is often referred to in the plural—feminisms—because there is such diversity within feminism about core terms and

philosophies. A useful starting point is *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997)). You can examine the table of contents [here](#).

A look at this table of contents will show you the complexity of feminist literary criticism and provide you with some ideas to focus your feminist paper on.

YOUR PROCESS

1. Choose a literary work to examine: either a male or female writer.
2. Look through the table of contents of *Feminisms* and choose three chapter areas that might lead to a focus for your paper.
3. Write down several possible working thesis ideas for your paper.
4. Remember, you may decide to focus your paper on gender criticism or masculinity studies, which are defined in the Key Terms.

Gender Criticism

Gender criticism, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's articulation, is an extension of feminist literary criticism. It focuses not just on women but on the construction of gender and sexuality, especially LGBTQ issues, which gives rise to queer theory. Gender criticism suggests that power is not just top down or patriarchal, for example, a man dominating a woman. It suggests that power is multifaceted and never just in one direction. For example, in the nineteenth century while many women argued for suffrage (or the right to vote), at the same time those very women who were white could be dominating or holding power over African Americans in the American slave system. In the nineteenth century, many white women were pictured as angelic, ideal, and the angel in the house who protected men from the cruel world of commerce (see Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* (Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, The Victorian Web, <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/patmore/angel>). But that idealized view of women is incomplete given that we know from diaries and other historical evidence that white women could have sexual longing (shocking!), treat others barbarically, or even be sadistic and murderous. Thus identity is complicated and rich, involving much more than gender alone. It is the intersection of a variety of things—including geographical location, age, race, class, nationality, ability, and sexuality as well as gender—that make up our identities.

A key to gender criticism, consequently, is that gender is a socially constructed ideology that is reflected in our culture and political, social, economic, educational, and religious institutions and is coded in the very language we use. For example, the adjective *queer*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*

(*OED*) tells us, originally meant something "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric," the earliest use being from 1513 (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "queer"). Not until 1894, partly a result of the sodomy trial of Oscar Wilde, where he was convicted of being a homosexual and sentenced to prison ("Famous World Trials: The Trials of Oscar Wilde, 1895," University of Missouri–Kansas City,

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/wilde.htm>), did the word *queer* (as an adjective or a noun) come to be associated with homosexuality, and then in a strictly derogatory sense.

Like feminism, gender criticism examines how gender is caught between the notion of **essentialism**, the belief that women are naturally and fundamentally different than men based on their biological sex and that nonheterosexual identities are deviant from the biological heteronormative distinction between male and female, and **constructionism**, the belief that gender is not essentialist or based on biological nature but is constructed through culture. One of the most famous scenes from literature depicting this essentialism versus constructionism debate comes from Mark Twain's classic *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. At the end of chapter 10, Jim and Huck determine that the best way to find information so that the two can avoid capture is to have Huck put on a disguise and go into the nearby town:

"Next morning I said it was getting slow and dull, and I wanted to get a stirring up some way. I said I reckoned I would slip over the river and find out what was going on. Jim liked that notion; but he said I must go in the dark and look sharp. Then he studied it over and said, couldn't I put on some of them old things and dress up like a girl? That was a good notion, too. So we shortened up one of the calico gowns, and I turned up my trouser-legs to my knees and got into it. Jim hitched it behind with the hooks, and it was a fair fit. I put on the sun-bonnet and tied it under my chin, and then for a body to look in and see my face was like looking down a joint of stove-pipe. Jim said nobody would know me, even in the daytime, hardly. I practiced around all day to get the hang of the things, and by and by I could do pretty well in them, only Jim said I didn't walk like a girl; and he said I must quit pulling up my gown to get at my britches-pocket. I took notice, and done better." (Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1912; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1995), chap. 10, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Twa2Huc.html>.)

In the next chapter, Huck, dressed as a girl, meets Mrs. Judith Loftus. Huck tells her his name is Sarah Williams, and Mrs. Loftus asks Huck-Sarah to help her with a few tasks, such as throwing a piece of lead at a rat and helping with threading a needle. When she tosses an extra piece of lead to Huck-Sarah, his true identity as a boy is exposed. After Huck tells Mrs. Loftus that his name is George, she criticizes his attempt to fool her:

"Well, try to remember it, George. Don't forget and tell me it's Elexander before you go, and then get out by saying it's George Elexander when I catch you. And don't go about women in that old calico. You do a girl tolerable poor, but you might fool men, maybe. Bless you, child, when you set out to thread a needle don't hold the thread still and fetch the needle up to it; hold the needle still and poke the thread at it; that's the way a woman most always does, but a man always does t'other way. And when you throw at a rat or anything, hitch yourself up a tiptoe and fetch your hand up over your head as awkward as you can, and miss your rat about six or seven foot. Throw stiff-armed from the shoulder, like there was a pivot there for it to turn on, like a girl; not from the wrist and elbow, with your arm out to one side, like a boy. And, mind you, when a girl tries to catch anything in her lap she throws her knees apart; she don't clap them together, the way you did when you caught the lump of lead. Why, I spotted you for a boy when you was threading the needle; and I contrived the other things just to make certain. Now trot along to your uncle, Sarah Mary Williams George Elexander Peters, and if you get into trouble you send word to Mrs. Judith Loftus, which is me, and I'll do what I can to get you out of it. Keep the river road all the way, and next time you tramp take shoes and socks with you. The river road's a rocky one, and your feet'll be in a condition when you get to Goshen, I reckon." (Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1912; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1995), chap. 11,

<http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Twa2Huc.html>.)

Mrs. Judith Loftus views sexuality as essentialist—there are real, innate differences between a girl and boy, which perpetuate the stereotypes about gender. Another way to view her comments, however, is to acknowledge that gender is a performance, a role that we play or construct. If we read Judith's comments in this light, then *Huckleberry Finn* becomes a more enlightened text on gender than one might initially think.

Just as we think gender is constructed, queer theorists argue that sexuality is constructed and not just "natural" as well. Lady Gaga sings, "Baby I was born this way," but others, like Adrienne Rich, argue that sexuality exists on a continuum and is more fluid than a binary equation of straight or gay (Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 227–54). Rich suggests that "**compulsory heterosexuality**," the drive to make everything heterosexual, shapes our sexual socialization to such an extent that the only choice is to be straight (Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993)). Building from Sigmund Freud's ideas on sexuality, sex researcher Alfred Kinsey created the Kinsey scale, which suggests that human

sexuality exists on a 0–6 scale, with 0 being exclusively homosexual and 6 being exclusively heterosexual. In all his research, he discovered that most people were somewhere around a 3 (bisexual) and that few people were at either ends of the straight/gay spectrum ("Kinsey's Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale," Kinsey Institute, <http://www.kinseyinstitute.org/research/ak-hhscale.html>).

In addition, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a prominent queer theorist, suggests culture is so **heteronormative** (making heterosexuality the norm) that gay characters—and, particularly, the affection between men in literature—is rendered invisible and must be routed through a character of the opposite gender to be acceptable. A classic example comes from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850); Hester becomes the target as Dimmesdale and Chillingworth work about their male desire by competing for Hester (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; Project Gutenberg, 2005), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/33>). In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Sedgwick coins the term "**homosocial desire**" to refer to relationships between men that are not explicitly sexual, but could actually have erotic components if allowed to exist (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985)). Homosocial worlds include all-male contexts like boarding schools, the military, and sports (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985)). The recent idea of the "bromance" from films such as *I Love You, Man* (2009) is an example of homosocial expression. It is no accident that we often laugh when using the term "bromance" because it seems ludicrous, given the norms of masculinity in our culture, that men might love one another and express that love as women in female friendships often do. It would require heterosexual men to potentially break out of certain norms of how they are supposed to act. We'll discuss this more in a minute when we talk about masculinity.

This idea that some expressions or identities are invisible and then visible once you have a particular lens to see them (theorists call this ideology) is as important to feminist literary criticism as it is to gender and sexuality criticism. What if we look at Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* anew in a way that focuses on how men might care for and love one another as they are sequestered on this famous, frightening ship, the *Pequod*. Chapter 94, "A Squeeze of the Hand," finds the whalemens breaking up the spermaceti from a just-harvested sperm whale. Spermaceti is the wax or oil in the skull of the sperm whale, and this oil was valuable and used to make candles and various ointments. Suddenly, Melville's description of the squeezing of the whale sperm takes on an erotic meaning perhaps previously unnoticed. This interpretation changes the way we may traditionally read the book:

"Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness" (Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Harper, 1851; Power Moby-Dick, 1998), <http://www.powermobydick.com/Moby094.html>).

After this paragraph, Ishmael states,

"Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti" (Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Harper, 1851; Power Moby-Dick, 1998), <http://www.powermobydick.com/Moby094.html>).

Melville's text flirts with homoerotic desire, but that desire is short-lived as the narrator suggests that men must "lower" their desire to other outlets — "but in the wife."

Ultimately, gender and sexuality theorists go back in history and look at who might have been left out. Where are there absences in the canon such that gay and lesbian authors and characters might be included? And when gay and lesbian characters are present, how are they perceived?

What about a supposedly "straight" text that appears to have a queer subtext previously unseen? For example, Julia Ward Howe was a nineteenth-century author who wrote the famous "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and founded Mother's Day. However, she also wrote a secret novel, *The Hermaphrodite*, which featured a male gender-bending protagonist who loves both sexes but particularly another man (Julia Ward Howe, *The Hermaphrodite*, ed. Gary Williams (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004)). Once discovered, this book was a shocking addition to the profile people had created of Howe. Howe's text is considered a "recovered" text and has been brought back into circulation, a common phenomenon in the literature of marginalized groups where texts have disappeared only to be rediscovered and read.

YOUR PROCESS

1. Can you think of texts where a character is forced into certain roles, behaviors, and actions because of compulsory heterosexuality?
2. Is that character's sexuality more complex than you realized?
3. When you consider sexuality on a continuum, does it change how characters interact?
4. Could your observations lead to a focus for a literary analysis?

Contributors

This page adapted from "Writing About Gender and Sexuality - Applying Feminist and Gender Criticism" in *Creating Literary Analysis* by Ryan Cordell and John Pennington CC BY NC SA

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2.5.6: Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies Criticism

As you've seen throughout this textbook, the field of English or literary studies has changed significantly through the years. At one time, to study English meant to study only literature from England. In fact, it meant to study, almost exclusively, poetry from England. As we see in Chapter 4, the poetry that English students read for the majority of the field's history was almost exclusively written by men. It may not surprise you to learn that the majority of the men that English students read came from Western cultures and were white. The experiences of minorities (within Western culture) and non-Western people were largely excluded from the canon. When their experiences did appear in widely read books, poems, plays, and essays, their experiences were usually filtered through perspective of a white author.

Over the past decades, many literary scholars have begun working to change this reality. Drawing from a range of disciplines, including history, anthropology, and sociology, these scholars have demonstrated how the literary canon excludes the voices of minority and non-Western writers, thinkers, and subjects. They have exposed attitudes of prejudice within canonical works. They have also worked to recover and celebrate works by writers from previously ignored or denigrated racial and ethnic backgrounds. Though their subjects vary widely—from the African American experience in the United States to those of Indians living under British colonial rule—scholars interested in racial, ethnic, and postcolonial studies share a conviction that literature is not politically neutral. Instead, they argue that literature both reflects and shapes the values of the cultures that produce it and that literary critics have a duty to analyze and often critique the cultural values embedded in the texts we study.



Illustration by Edward Winsor Kemble for Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

Think, for instance, of the frequent debates that have arisen over Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Mark

Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1912; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1995), <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Twa2Huc.html>). For years, literary critics, scholars, students, and parents have debated whether the novel, written by a white American man, should be considered racist (and, if so, whether it should be taught in schools). These debates center on three major issues: (1) the novel's depiction of Jim, the runaway slave who is simultaneously the novel's moral center and a frequent object of ridicule; (2) the novel's frequent use of the pejorative N-word to describe its African American characters; and (3) the heavy dialect through which the speech of Black Americans is presented in the book. Schools have frequently debated banning Twain's novel, often in response to the concerns of parents or students (see Gregory Roberts, "'Huck Finn' a Masterpiece—Or an Insult," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 25, 2003, <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/Huck-Finn-a-masterpiece-or-an-insult-1130707.php>).

Though it has happened more slowly than many cultural critics would like, the literary canon has shifted in the past decades to reflect a wider sense of who writes literature and what we should learn from it. The fact that we study American literature at all reflects an earlier shift away from a strict focus on English writing. Moreover, students in American literature classrooms today study more writers of color than did students even twenty years ago. Some African American writers are now studied so frequently they could be called canonical, including Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. American literature classes often cover writing by Native American writers, such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Sherman Alexie, and by Hispanic, Chicano/a, or Latino/a American writers such as George Santayana, Isabel Allende, and Gary Soto. Moreover, British literature classrooms now routinely include works by authors from former British colonies, such as Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Jean Rhys (Dominica), Salman Rushdie (India), and Anita Desai (India). Finally, courses in world literature regularly teach minoritized and/or postcolonial writers who compose in languages other than English.

We recognize that these are incomplete lists. Indeed, even separating authors into these distinct categories can be problematic, as many writers span geographic regions, ethnic identities, or racial backgrounds. Nevertheless, these names can help get us started thinking about the diverse voices that literature classrooms now include. Of course, scholars working in these fields would point out that there is much work yet to be done to build a truly representative curriculum. Though minority and non-Western writers are now studied regularly,

they still occupy relatively small places in most literature classrooms and curricula.

YOUR PROCESS

1. What minoritized or non-Western writers have been part of your literary education to this point? Jot down a few examples.
2. Now think about how those writers shaped your understanding of our literary inheritance. How did reading those writers change your ideas about literature, culture, or history? How would your literary education have been different with a textbook of thirty years ago that largely excluded nonwhite voices?
3. How does your cultural background shape your response to these questions?

Scholars working in these fields often seek to challenge **Eurocentrism**, which is a worldview that considers European societies (and those closely related to them, such as white American society) as the model to which other societies should aspire. Taking a slightly different focus, the critic Edward Said coined the term **Orientalism**, which refers to a set of false assumptions and stereotypes that Western cultures maintain about societies other than themselves. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1994). These **Others** are sometimes portrayed as excessively bad (demonic others) and sometimes as excessively beautiful (exotic others), but neither view actually builds a true picture of non-Western societies or people. In other words, literary critics are wary of texts in which a foreign society is portrayed as ideal, just as they are when a foreign society is portrayed as depraved.

Looking at literature through the lens of social and cultural identity often requires that critics read beyond the surface meanings of texts and think about the ethnic, cultural, and social implications of the words on the page. For instance, let's consider Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America," which was published in her 1773 collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*:

On Being Brought from Africa to America.

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
 Taught my benighted soul to understand
 That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
 "Their colour is a diabolic die."
 Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
 May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.
 —Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to

America," in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (Denver: W. H. Lawrence, 1887), 17.

Wheatley was a slave, brought to Boston on the slave ship *Phillis* in 1761 and owned by John and Susanna Wheatley, who gave her an education, which was uncommon for slaves at the time. On the surface, Wheatley's poem seems to praise the system of slavery that brought her to America, noting that it was "mercy" that "brought [her] from [her] *Pagan* land." With that latter phrase she seems to disown her heritage as simply pagan, a "benighted" contrast to the Christian education she has received in the United States. We might even accuse Wheatley of **mimicry**, or attempting to imitate the language and (as you can see in the following engraving) dress of the ruling class.



Portrait by Scipio Moorehead as a frontispiece to Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects...* (1773).

However, scholars of African American literature might urge us to read the poem as a subtle critique of the American slave system. In her article "A Slave's Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley's Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol," Sondra O'Neale begins by insisting that "any evaluation of Phillis Wheatley must consider her status as a slave." O'Neale notes that a slave who wanted to write during this time period "first had to acquire the requisite language skills." Then "appropriate whites had to authenticate the writer's mental and moral capacity, and then the slave's master had to agree that the slave could publish the work. Moreover, the slave's offering was carefully censored to ensure

that it was in no way incendiary" (Sondra O'Neale, "A Slave's Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley's Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol," *Early American Literature* 21, no. 2 (1986): 144–45). In other words, Wheatley could not write a bald condemnation of slavery; her owners held absolute sway over both her writing and her person, and to be published, she had to write within the constraints imposed on her by white people invested in keeping the slave system intact.

For O'Neale, Wheatley "challenged eighteenth-century evangelicals in their cherished religious arena by redeploying the same language and doctrine that whites had used to define the African, thereby undercutting conventional colonial assumptions about race and skin color" (Sondra O'Neale, "A Slave's Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley's Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol," *Early American Literature* 21, no. 2 (1986): 145). In the poem, Wheatley refers to "*Negros*, black as *Cain*." In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many religious and political commentators taught that African people descended from the biblical Cain, who was cursed by God after murdering his brother, Abel. In the King James Bible, it says "the LORD set a mark upon Cain" to identify him to other people, and many white commentators argued that this mark was a dark skin tone (Gen. 4:15 (King James Version)). By associating black people with Cain, white people implied that Black people were inferior both physically and morally — marked as "other" than white people, whom they considered normal.

Wheatley's poem reappropriates these ideas into a critique of Christians who refuse to acknowledge the brotherhood of African people: "Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*." First, the terms "Christian," "Negroes," and "black as Cain" are presented in a close sequence, as Wheatley conflates her presumably white readers ("*Christians*") with herself and her people ("*Negros*, black as *Cain*"). In the next line she insists that Black Americans "May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train," where they would, presumably, stand shoulder-to-shoulder with white Christians. Wheatley notes, "Some view our sable race with scornful eye," and say "Their colour is a diabolic die," but she refuses this mischaracterization of her people. They are not "diabolic"—a "demonic other"—but instead equal in potential to white Americans. Though she cannot directly condemn slavery, Wheatley's poem simultaneously evokes and calls into the question prejudiced ideas about African Americans. By writing such refined poetry, Wheatley embodies the mental equality of Black and white people, and in these final lines she insists on that equality. If her readers grant this last concession, however—if they agree that Black and white people can indeed join the same "angelic train"—then the systems of denigration and oppression they support will be exposed as resting on false pretenses. In other words, we can read Wheatley's mimicry as subversive. She is an African American writer working within the strict limitations of the slave system to write and distribute poetry that subtly undermines that very system.

YOUR PROCESS

1. Read the following Wheatley poem, "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England." As you read, consider what underlying messages Wheatley might seek to convey, as in the poem we discussed previously. Jot down your ideas.

While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,

The muses promise to assist my pen;

'Twas not long since I left my native shore

The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:

Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand

Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights

Above, to traverse the ethereal space,

And mark the systems of revolving worlds.

Still more, ye sons of science ye receive

The blissful news by messengers from heav'n,

How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows.

See him with hands out-stretcht upon the cross;

Immense compassion in his bosom glows;

He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:

What matchless mercy in the Son of God!

When the whole human race by sin had fall'n,

He deign'd to die that they might rise again,

And share with him in the sublimest skies,

Life without death, and glory without end.

Improve your privileges while they stay,

Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears

Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.

Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,

By you be shun'd, nor once remit your guard;

Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.

Ye blooming plants of human race divine,

An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe;

Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,

And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

Wheatley is an interesting example because her work speaks to the concerns of scholars interested in the African American literary tradition and scholars interested in issues of conquest and colonialism. Wheatley wrote, after all, when Massachusetts was a British colony, and she came to Massachusetts after being

forcibly seized from her home in either Senegal or Gambia, in West Africa. Next we'll look at another text that can help us understand the concerns of postcolonial critics. Nearly 150 years after Wheatley was captured, Joseph Conrad published one of the most famous works ever written about the African continent, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902; University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, 1993), etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/ConDark.html).

YOUR PROCESS

1. As we've suggested throughout this text, these process papers will make more sense if you are familiar with the literary work under discussion. For this section, you should read Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*.
2. As you read, pay particular attention to the way that Conrad portrays relationships between European and African characters in the text.

Though *Heart of Darkness* was written, in part, as a critique of Belgian colonialism and commerce in the Congo, many postcolonialist critics have pointed out that the novella perpetuates attitudes of racism and Eurocentrism through its portrayal of Africans.

Most famously, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe wrote in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" that the novella "projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor, 2012)). Achebe notes that few Africans are allowed to speak in Conrad's text. Through most of the novella, he notes, the African characters simply make noises — grunts and babble and sounds. Only two African characters speak: one to express cannibal propensities and another to announce the death of the white enigma, Mr. Kurtz. Achebe insists, despite the stylistic merits of Conrad's work (which he admits are considerable), that "the real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot" (Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor, 2012)). In other words, Achebe insists that the text's aesthetic qualities cannot and should not redeem its cultural and racial attitudes. Such a commitment to the political and social implications of literature characterizes much ethnic criticism.

If that attitude seems extreme, consider the following excerpt from a 2003 article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*. It's

written by Caryl Phillips, who initially met with Achebe to defend Joseph Conrad's writing against Achebe's critiques, but their conversation took another turn:

"I am an African. What interests me is what I learn in Conrad about myself. To use me as a symbol may be bright or clever, but if it reduces my humanity by the smallest fraction I don't like it."

"Conrad does present Africans as having 'rudimentary' souls."

Achebe draws himself upright.

"Yes, you will notice that the European traders have 'tainted' souls, Marlow has a 'pure' soul, but I am to accept that mine is 'rudimentary'?" He shakes his head. "Towards the end of the 19th century, there was a very short-lived period of ambivalence about the certainty of this colonising mission, and Heart of Darkness falls into this period. But you cannot compromise my humanity in order that you explore your own ambiguity. I cannot accept that. My humanity is not to be debated, nor is it to be used simply to illustrate European problems."

The realisation hits me with force. I am not an African. Were I an African I suspect I would feel the same way as my host. But I was raised in Europe, and although I have learned to reject the stereotypically reductive images of Africa and Africans, I am undeniably interested in the break-up of a European mind and the health of European civilisation. I feel momentarily ashamed that I might have become caught up with this theme and subsequently overlooked how offensive this novel might be to a man such as Chinua Achebe and to millions of other Africans. Achebe is right; to the African reader the price of Conrad's eloquent denunciation of colonisation is the recycling of racist notions of the "dark" continent and her people. Those of us who are not from Africa may be prepared to pay this price, but this price is far too high for Achebe. However lofty Conrad's mission, he has, in keeping with times past and present, compromised African humanity in order to examine the European psyche.

—Caryl Phillips, "Out of Africa," *The Guardian*, February 21, 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003...s.chinuaachebe>.

Phillips begins to understand that he shares, to some degree, Conrad's Eurocentric perspective and thus has not to this point understood Achebe's African perspective. When Phillips begins to see how Conrad's focus on the novella's European characters leads him to disregard its African characters, Phillips also begins to accept Achebe's postcolonial critique of the novel.

YOUR PROCESS

1. Listen to Chinua Achebe's 2009 interview with NPR about *Heart of Darkness* (Robert Siegel, "Chinua Achebe: 'Heart of Darkness' Is Inappropriate," *All Things Considered*, NPR, audio, October 15, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/s...ryId=113835207>). Can you understand why Achebe, as an African, takes such

umbrage at the portrayal of Africans in this canonical novel? Should such concerns shape what we read in literature classrooms?

2. You can read Caryl Phillips's full article about his discussion with Achebe [here](#). How does Phillips's epiphany square with your own thoughts about Achebe and Conrad?
3. To learn more about postcolonial writers and critics, visit the [Postcolonial Web](#) or read Deepika Bahri's "Introduction to Postcolonial Studies" (<http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Intro.html>) (George P. Landlow, "Home Page," The Postcolonial Web, <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/>; Deepika Bahri, "Introduction to Postcolonial Studies," Dept. of Postcolonial Studies, Emory University, <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Intro.html>).

To sum up, when you want to read with an eye toward racial, ethnic, or postcolonial issues, you should consider the following questions:

1. How does this work represent different groups of people? Does it valorize one particular culture at the expense of another? Are characters from particular groups portrayed positively or negatively? Does the work employ stereotypes or broad generalizations?
2. How does this work present political power and/or domination? Are there clear lines drawn between conquerors and conquered people in the work? Does the work seem to argue that these lines are appropriate, or does it challenge the divisions between colonizer and colonized?
3. What is the historical or cultural context of the work? Is the story set during a time of conflict or peace? Is the story set in a location where one culture colonized another? Does the story unfold before the colonial period, during the colonial period, or after the colonial period?
4. Can you discern any particular political agendas at work in the text? That is, does the novel, story, poem, play, or essay seem to make an argument about racial relations, ethnic identity, or political oppression?

The theories we outline in this chapter share many concerns but can be applied in many different ways. To that end, we provided three sample papers in this chapter. Each uses a slightly different lens to investigate a given literary text. Please review all the papers since they will prepare you for the chapter's conclusion, which will synthesize the insights of all three papers.

Contributors and Attributions

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2.5.7: New Historicism

The Relationship Between History and Literature

Early scholars of literature thought of history as a progression: events and ideas built on each other in a linear and causal way. History, consequently, could be understood objectively, as a series of dates, people, facts, and events. Once known, history became a static entity. We can see this in the previous example from *Wonderland. The Mouse* notes that the "driest thing" he knows is that "William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon submitted to by the English, who wanted leaders, and had been of late much accustomed to usurpation and conquest. Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria—" I think we would all agree to moan "Ugh!" In other words, the Mouse sees history as a list of great dead people that must be remembered and recited, a list that refers only to the so-called great events of history: battles, rebellions, and the rise and fall of leaders. Corresponding to this view, literature was thought to directly or indirectly mirror historical reality. Scholars believed that history shaped literature, but literature didn't shape history.

While this view of history as a static amalgamation of facts is still considered important, other scholars in the movement called **New Historicism** see the relationship between history and literature quite differently. Today, most literary scholars think of history as a dynamic interplay of cultural, economic, artistic, religious, political, and social forces. They don't necessarily concentrate solely on kings and nobles, or battles and coronations. In addition, they also focus on the smaller details of history, including the plight of the common person, popular songs and art, periodicals and advertisements — and, of course, literature. New Historical scholarship, it follows, is **interdisciplinary**, drawing on materials from a number of academic fields that were once thought to be separate or distinct from one another: history, religious studies, political science, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and even the natural sciences. In fact, New Historicism is also called **cultural materialism** since a text—whether it's a piece of literature, a religious tract, a political polemic, or a scientific discovery—is seen as an artifact of history, a material entity that reflects larger cultural issues.

Exercise 10.7.1

How have you learned to connect literature and history? Jot down two or three examples from previous classes.

History Influences Literature

Sometimes it's obvious the way history can help us understand a piece of literature. When reading William Butler Yeats's poem "Easter, 1916," for instance, readers immediately wonder how

the date named in the poem's title shapes the poem's meaning. Curious readers might quickly look up that Easter date and discover that leaders of the Irish independence movement staged a short-lived revolt against British rule during Easter week in 1916. The rebellion was quickly ended by British forces, and the rebel leaders were tried and executed. Those curious readers might then understand the allusions that Yeats makes to each of the executed Irish leaders in his poem and gain a better sense of what Yeats hopes to convey about Ireland's past and future through his poem's symbols and language. Many writers, like Yeats, use their art to directly address social, political, military, or economic debates in their cultures. These writers enter into the social **discourse** of their time, this discourse being formed by the cultural conditions that define the age. Furthermore, this discourse reflects the **ideology** of the society at the time, which is the collective ideas—including political, economic, and religious ideas—that guide the way a culture views and talks about itself. This cultural ideology, in turn, reflects the **power structures** that control—or attempt to control—the discourse of a society and often control the way literature is published, read, and interpreted. Literature, then, as a societal discourse comments on and is influenced by the other cultural discourses, which reflect or resist the ideology that is based on the power structures of society.

Literature Influences History

Let's turn to another example to illuminate these issues. One of the most influential books in American history was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which Stowe wrote to protest slavery in the South before the Civil War. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an instant bestseller that did much to popularize the abolitionist movement in the northern United States. Legend has it that when Abraham Lincoln met Stowe during the Civil War, he greeted her by saying, "So you're the little woman that wrote the book that started this great war." In the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, then, it's clear that understanding the histories of slavery, abolitionism, and antebellum regional tensions can help us make sense of Stowe's novel.

But history informs literature in less direct ways, as well. In fact, many literary scholars—in particular, New Historical scholars—would insist that every work of literature, whether it explicitly mentions a historical event or not, is shaped by the moment of its composition (and that works of literature shape their moment of composition in turn). The American history of the Vietnam war is a great example, for we continue to interpret and revise that history, and literature (including memoirs) is a key material product that influences that revision: think of Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977); Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977); Bobbie Anne Mason's *In Country* (1985); Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990); Robert Olen Butler's

A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain (1992); and, most recently, Karl Marlantes's *Matterhorn* (2010) (Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Vintage, 1977); Philip Carputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine, 1977); Bobbie Anne Mason, *In Country* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Mariner, 2009); Robert Olen Butler, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain: Stories* (New York: Holt, 1992); Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2010)).

Exercise 10.7.2

Pick something you've read or watched recently. It doesn't matter what you choose: *Dear White People*, the Harry Potter series, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, even *Jersey Shore* or *American Idol*. Now reflect on what that book, movie, or television show tells you about your culture. What discourses or ideologies (values, priorities, concerns) does your cultural artifact reveal? Jot down your thoughts.

New Historicism Practice

As you can see, authors influence their cultures and they, in turn, are influenced by the social, political, military, and economic concerns of their cultures. To review the connection between literature and history, let's look at one final example, "London", written by the poet William Blake in 1794.

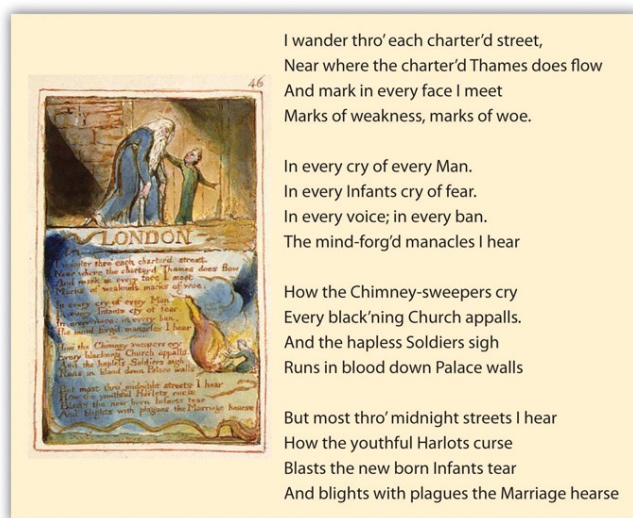


Illustration by William Blake for "London" from his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794).

Unlike Yeats or Stowe, Blake does not refer directly to specific events or people from the late eighteenth century. Yet this poem directly confronts many of the most pressing social issues of Blake's day. The first stanza, for example, refers to the "charter'd streets" and "charter'd Thames." If we look up the meaning of the word "charter," we find that the word has several meanings. "Charter" can refer to a deed or a contract. When

Blake refers to "charter'd" streets, he might be alluding to the growing importance of London as a center of industry and commerce. A "charter" also defines boundaries and control. When Blake refers to "charter'd Thames," then, he implies that nature—the Thames is the river that runs through London—has been constricted by modern society. If you look through the rest of the poem, you can see many other historical issues that a scholar might be interested in exploring: the plight of child laborers ("the Chimney-sweepers cry"); the role of the Church ("Every black'ning Church"), the monarchy ("down Palace walls"), or the military ("the hapless Soldiers sigh") in English society; or even the problem of sexually transmitted disease ("blights with plagues the Marriage hearse"). You will also notice that Blake provided an etching for this poem and the poems that compose *The Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *The Songs of Experience* (in which "London" was published), so Blake is also engaging in the artistic movement of his day and the very production of bookmaking itself. And we would be remiss if we did not mention that Blake wrote these poems during the French Revolution (1789–99), where he initially hoped that the revolution would bring freedom to all individuals but soon recognized the brutality of the movement. That's a lot to ask of a sixteen-line poem! But each of these topics is ripe for further investigation that might lead to an engaging critical paper.

When scholars dig into one historical aspect of a literary work, we call that process **parallel reading**. Parallel reading involves examining the literary text in light of other contemporary texts: newspaper articles, religious pamphlets, economic reports, political documents, and so on. These different types of texts, considered equally, help scholars construct a richer understanding of history. Scholars learn not only what happened but also how people understood what happened. By reading historical and literary texts in parallel, scholars create, to use a phrase from anthropology, a **thick description** that centers the literary text as both a product and a contributor to its historical moment. A story might respond to a particular historical reality, for example, and then the story might help shape society's attitude toward that reality, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sparked a national movement to abolish slavery in the United States.

Apply New Historicism To Your Reading

When reading a work through a New Historicism reading, apply the following steps:

1. Determine the time and place, or historical context of the literature.
2. Choose a specific aspect of the text you feel would be illuminated by learning more about the history of the text.
3. Research the history.
4. Analyze the ways in which the text may be influenced by its history or the text may have influenced the culture of the

time.

Apply New Historicism To Your Writing

To review, New Historicism provides us with a particular lens to use when we read and interpret works of literature. Such reading and interpreting, however, never happens after just a first reading; in fact, all critics reread works multiple times before venturing an interpretation. You can see, then, the connection between reading and writing: as Chapter 1 indicates, writers create multiple drafts before settling for a finished product. The writing process, in turn, is dependent on the multiple rereadings you have performed to gather evidence for your essay. It's important that you integrate the reading and writing process together. As a model, use the following ten-step plan as you write using a new historical approach:

1. Carefully *read the work* you will analyze.
2. *Formulate a general question* after your initial reading that identifies a problem—a tension—related to a historical or cultural issue.
3. *Reread the work*, paying particular attention to the question you posed. Take notes, which should be focused on your central question. *Write an exploratory journal entry or blog post* that allows you to play with ideas.
4. *Construct a working thesis* that makes a claim about the work and accounts for the following:
 1. What does the work mean?
 2. How does the work demonstrate the theme you've identified using a new historical approach?
 3. "So what" is significant about the work? That is, why is it important for you to write about this work? What will readers learn from reading your interpretation? How does the theory you apply illuminate the work's meaning?
5. *Reread the text to gather textual evidence* for support.
6. *Construct an informal outline* that demonstrates how you will support your interpretation.
7. *Write a first draft*.
8. *Receive feedback* from peers and your instructor via *peer review* and *conferencing* with your instructor (if possible).
9. *Revise the paper*, which will include revising your original thesis statement and restructuring your paper to best support the thesis. Note: You probably will revise many times, so it is important to receive feedback at every draft stage if possible.
10. *Edit and proofread* for correctness, clarity, and style.

We recommend that you follow this process for every paper that you write from this textbook. Of course, these steps can be modified to fit your writing process, but the plan does ensure that you will engage in a thorough reading of the text as you work through the writing process, which demands that you allow plenty of time for reading, reflecting, writing, reviewing, and revising.

For more strategies, read on [here](#).

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2.5.8: Ecocriticism

Literature and the Natural World

Literary critics have long been interested in the way the natural world influences literary expression. For instance, in his important 1964 book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, Leo Marx demonstrated that a "pastoral ideal" guided the formation of American culture, identity, and literature. This "urge to idealize a simple, rural environment," Marx argues, continued even as America became "an intricately organized, urban, industrial, nuclear-armed society." Marx sees much of American literature as a response to this tension between urban realities ("the machine") and pastoral ideals ("the garden"). Many other literary critics who wrote before the advent of a formal ecocritical school investigated similar topics, particularly when they studied authors who write frequently about nature, such as the Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Romanticism

The term **Romanticism** doesn't have anything to do with steamy love scenes. Instead, Romanticism was an intellectual movement that idealized emotional experiences and the natural world, eschewing many of the scientific, industrial, and capitalistic ideals that had come to define society between, roughly, 1800–50. The following oil painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), by the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich, demonstrates the Romantic position. The painting can be interpreted in a variety of ways. An ecocritical reading might examine humanity's relationship to nature—a human's desire to appreciate the sheer power of the natural world—yet there seems to be a suggestion that the man, with his walking stick, is also contemplating the way to harness this power of nature, to civilize the natural world.



"The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog" by Caspar David Friedrich (1818) is in the public domain

To get a better sense of these concerns, let's look at "The World Is Too Much with Us" (1807), a poem written by one of the most well-known Romantics, William Wordsworth.

"The World Is Too Much with Us" by William Wordsworth

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Activity: analyze the poem

1. What do you think Wordsworth means by "the world" in this poem? How is "the world" distinct from "Nature"? Why do you think Wordsworth splits these two ideas apart? Record your thoughts.
2. A related question: Why do you think Wordsworth capitalizes "Nature" and "Sea" in the poem? What other words are capitalized, and how might they relate to these two words? Jot down your ideas.

For a critic interested in literature and nature, Wordsworth's poems are rich territory. In "The World Is Too Much with Us," the speaker worries that people "lay waste" their "powers" because they are too wrapped up with "getting and spending." In other words, the concerns of industry and commerce have crowded out those things that the speaker believes give human beings their power. We can read "the world" in the poem as the constructed world of human cities and concerns; that world "is too much with us" while the natural world has become estranged from humanity. "Little we see in Nature that is ours," the speaker worries, and "we are out of tune" with "this Sea," "the moon," and "the winds." By claiming that human beings have fallen out of tune with nature, the speaker implies that humanity was once in tune with it. The poem mourns a profound loss for men and women, who can no longer feel the emotions that bucolic natural scenes should evoke in them: "It moves us not."

In the final lines of "The World Is Too Much with Us," Wordsworth's speaker wishes he could trade his modern

existence for a more primitive life that is closer to nature. "Great God!" he exclaims, "I'd rather be / a pagan suckled in a creed outworn." In other words, while the speaker does not believe in, say, the Greek myths—he insists that such religions are "outworn"—he would nonetheless trade his more modern ideas for a faith that allowed him to see the divine in the natural world. Keep in mind the Greek myths, in which each aspect of the natural world is overseen by a god or goddess, and in which many plants, animals, and natural features are said to embody mythical heroes or monsters. Wordsworth's speaker wishes he could, when looking at the ocean, see more than water. He wishes he could see also "Proteus rising from the sea" and "hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn." Were he able to recognize the divinity of nature, the speaker insists, he would be "less forlorn" about his life in the modern world.

Whether they wrote during the Romantic period or not, writers who focus explicitly on nature in their works (e.g., John Keats, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and Annie Dillard) lend themselves well to this kind of analysis. However, modern ecocritics have expanded their focus to include much writing that's not explicitly about nature. Ecocritics are interested in the attitudes that literary works express about nature, whether those attitudes are expressed consciously through the themes or plot of a work or unconsciously through the work's symbols or language. Even a work set in a city—the most urban of spaces—can nonetheless convey ideas about the loss of nature. Ecocritics can discuss the absence of nature in a work as well as its presence.

One could argue that a key turning point was the Industrial Revolution, which transformed the way people lived in worked in the nineteenth century. Moving from an agrarian or agricultural model to one centered on industry, the Industrial Revolution further reinforced the divide between the city and the country. Here are a few opening paragraphs from Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–53):

London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle,

with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his

shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds.

Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time—as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation, Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds this day in the sight of heaven and earth.

Dickens's famous first sentence—"London."—sets the action in London, where the mud and fog overpower the city. Dickens uses the "filth" of London as a symbol for the corruption of Chancery, the court system of London, but he's also depicting a London that is diseased by industrialization — the fog, in

particular, reflects the poor air quality of London during this time as coal-powered factories spewed their smoke over the city.

Life in the Iron Mills by Rebecca Harding Davis

In America, writers also focused on the environment and the dangers of industrialization. Two famous examples are Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature" (1836). Thoreau and Emerson, in fact, are two of the earliest ecocritical voices in America, and their influence was significant. Emerson and Thoreau argued that experiences in nature were the most authentic in human existence, and they urged their countrymen and women to go into the natural world for inspiration. Those ideas continue to inform literature to this day as well as more tangible aspects of our lives, such as the dedication of so many communities to creating green spaces—parks, greenways, or river walks—for their citizens. Let's look at a classic example, Rebecca Harding Davis's 1861 short story, *Life in the Iron Mills*.

Activity: ecocriticism reading log

As you read the story, keep a running list of all the references you find to the natural world. You can list natural features described, discussions of the characters' attitudes toward nature, or anything else that seems to comment on humanity's relationship to its environment. Be sure to include quotation marks around sentences or phrases you pull from the story so you can ethically attribute any material you end up using in an essay!



"Wilmington and Its Industries," originally printed in *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* (April, 1873), is in the public domain

Life in the Iron Mills recounts a story of Welsh immigrants working in an iron-mill town along the Ohio River in an area that would become West Virginia. Readings of this story often focus on its critique of industrialization and capitalism. For instance, a critic might look at the ways that Hugh Wolfe's artistic talents cannot flower in the story because of his class or ethnic background. Let's look closely at the story's opening paragraphs, however, with an eye to the text's attitudes toward the environment and natural world.

A cloudy day: do you know what that is in a town of iron-works? The sky sank down before dawn,

muddy, flat, immovable. The air is thick, clammy with the breath of crowded human beings. It stifles me. I open the window, and, looking out, can scarcely see through the rain the grocer's shop opposite, where a crowd of drunken Irishmen are puffing Lynchburg tobacco in their pipes. I can detect the scent through all the foul smells ranging loose in the air.

The idiosyncrasy of this town is smoke. It rolls sullenly in slow folds from the great chimneys of the iron-foundries, and settles down in black, slimy pools on the muddy streets. Smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river,—clinging in a coating of greasy soot to the house-front, the two faded poplars, the faces of the passers-by. The long train of mules, dragging masses of pig-iron through the narrow street, have a foul vapor hanging to their reeking sides. Here, inside, is a little broken figure of an angel pointing upward from the mantel-shelf; but even its wings are covered with smoke, clotted and black. Smoke everywhere! A dirty canary chirps desolately in a cage beside me. Its dream of green fields and sunshine is a very old dream,—almost worn out, I think.

From the back-window I can see a narrow brick-yard sloping down to the river-side, strewed with rain-butts and tubs. The river, dull and tawny-colored, (la belle

riviere!) drags itself sluggishly along, tired of the heavy weight of boats and coal-barges. What wonder? When I was a child, I used to fancy a look of weary, dumb appeal upon the face of the negro-like river slavishly bearing its burden day after day. Something of the same idle notion comes to me to-day, when from the street-window I look on the slow stream of human life creeping past, night and morning, to the great mills. Masses of men, with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and there by pain or cunning; skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes; stooping all night over boiling caldrons of metal, laired by day in dens of drunkenness and infamy; breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body. What do you make of a case like that, amateur psychologist? You call it an altogether serious thing to be alive: to these men it is a drunken jest, a joke,—horrible to angels perhaps, to them commonplace enough. My fancy about the river was an idle one: it is no type of such a life. What if it be stagnant and slimy here? It knows that beyond there waits for it odorous sunlight, quaint old gardens, dusky with soft, green foliage of apple-trees, and flushing crimson with roses,—air, and fields, and mountains. The future of the

Welsh puddler passing just now is not so pleasant. To be stowed away, after his grimy work is done, in a hole in the muddy graveyard, and after that, not air, nor green fields, nor curious roses.

Can you see how foggy the day is? As I stand here, idly tapping the windowpane, and looking out through the rain at the dirty backyard and the coalboats below, fragments of an old story float up before me,—a story of this house into which I happened to come to-day. You may think it a tiresome story enough, as foggy as the day, sharpened by no sudden flashes of pain or pleasure.—I know: only the outline of a dull life, that long since, with thousands of dull lives like its own, was vainly lived and lost: thousands of them, massed, vile, slimy lives, like those of the torpid lizards in yonder stagnant water-butt.—Lost? There is a curious point for you to settle, my friend, who study psychology in a lazy, dilettante way. Stop a moment. I am going to be honest. This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me,—here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story. There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you. You, Egoist, or Pantheist, or Arminian, busy in

making straight paths for your feet on the hills, do not see it clearly,—this terrible question which men here have gone mad and died trying to answer. I dare not put this secret into words. I told you it was dumb. These men, going by with drunken faces and brains full of unawakened power, do not ask it of Society or of God. Their lives ask it; their deaths ask it. There is no reply. I will tell you plainly that I have a great hope; and I bring it to you to be tested. It is this: that this terrible dumb question is its own reply; that it is not the sentence of death we think it, but, from the very extremity of its darkness, the most solemn prophecy which the world has known of the Hope to come. I dare make my meaning no clearer, but will only tell my story. It will, perhaps, seem to you as foul and dark as this thick vapor about us, and as pregnant with death; but if your eyes are free as mine are to look deeper, no perfume-tinted dawn will be so fair with promise of the day that shall surely come.

These first paragraphs detail the scenery of the narrator's world (and notice the similarity to Dickens). In this case, however, the scenery described is obscured by the products of human industry. The natural world is obscured both figuratively ("The air is thick, clammy with the breath of crowded human beings.") and literally, by smoke: "The idiosyncrasy of this town is smoke. It rolls sullenly in slow folds from the great chimneys of the iron-foundries, and settles down in black, slimy pools on the muddy streets. Smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river,—clinging in a coating of greasy soot to the house-front, the two faded poplars, the faces of the passers-by." The river, too, is polluted; it's "dull and tawny-colored" and "tired" of the many "boats and coal-barges" bringing goods to and from the town. The town is so polluted that its human inhabitants suffer acutely, "breathing from

infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body."

The ecocritic might interpret this story as a sustained critique of a modern society that disregards the needs of the planet in order to advance the narrow priorities of industrial and consumer culture. In order to produce iron, the material that shaped so much of the Industrial Revolution, the owners of the factories in this story have destroyed the air, the water, and even the health of the human beings who make their business run. In fact, they have made all of nature (including human beings) slaves to industry. The river is imagined as "slavishly bearing its burden day after day." The men who work in the factories are so broken in spirit that they consider their lives "a drunken jest, a joke." The narrator points out that far beyond this town one can find "odorous sunlight, quaint old gardens, dusky with soft, green foliage of apple-trees, and flushing crimson with roses,—air, and fields, and mountains." These healthful natural features, however, are beyond the reach and understanding of those living in this "town of iron-works," who are "stowed away, after [their] grimy work is done, in a hole in the muddy graveyard, and after that, not air, nor green fields, nor curious roses." Harding Davis's novella, then, draws an explicit parallel between human flourishing and human treatment of the natural world. When human beings disregard nature, *Life in the Iron Mills* implies, they suffer with nature.

What's more, the narrator of Harding Davis's story challenges the story's readers to come to terms with the realities described in the novella. The original readers of this story would have been subscribers to the *Atlantic* magazine, which means they would likely have been educated, financially secure members of middle- or upper-class society. In other words, they would have been nothing like the iron workers Harding Davis writes of in the story and would not have experienced the absolute deprivation from nature the tale relates. Her narrator addresses this discrepancy directly:

There is a curious point for you to settle, my friend, who study psychology in a lazy, dilettante way. Stop a moment. I am going to be honest. This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me,—here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story. There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that

has lain dumb for centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you. You, Egoist, or Pantheist, or Arminian, busy in making straight paths for your feet on the hills, do not see it clearly,—this terrible question which men here have gone mad and died trying to answer. I dare not put this secret into words.

There's a lot going on in these few sentences, but the ecocritic would likely concentrate on the way Harding Davis's narrator insists that her readers must experience the horrible environmental conditions of her subjects in order to understand their story. Her readers must "take not heed to [their] clean clothes" and "come right down...into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia." Readers "busy in making straight paths for [their] feet on the hills" cannot "see clearly" the plight of those who cannot spend time in the hills, experiencing the natural world without smoke and mud and effluvia.

These natural themes continue throughout *Life in the Iron Mills*. At the end of the novella, in fact, Deborah—one of the characters deformed, body and soul, by her time in the mill town—is taken in by Quakers who live in the hills near the town. The narrator reports that life in closer communion with nature purifies Deborah:

There is no need to tire you with the long years of sunshine, and fresh air, and slow, patient Christ-love, needed to make healthy and hopeful this impure body and soul. There is a homely pine house, on one of these hills, whose windows overlook broad, wooded slopes and clover-crimsoned meadows,—nched into the very place where the light is warmest, the air freest. It is the Friends' meeting-house. Once a week they sit there, in their grave, earnest way, waiting for the Spirit of Love to speak, opening their simple hearts to receive His words. There is a woman, old,

deformed, who takes a humble place among them: waiting like them: in her gray dress, her worn face, pure and meek, turned now and then to the sky.

Living in greater harmony with nature "make[s] healthy and hopeful" Deborah's "impure body and soul." The warm light, free air, "wooded slopes," and "clover-crimsoned meadows" all contribute to her restoration. In the last view readers have of Deborah, she turns her face "now and then to the sky."

Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* can be read, then, as a searching critique of modern society *without* nature — a warning about what mass industrialization will do to the environment and the people who rely on it. You can probably see that these ideas relate closely to ideas one would find in modern **environmentalist and environmental justice** thought. We can read Harding Davis's story as an exposé of human practices that permanently scar the natural world — an argument against pollution and waste. In cases like this, we want to be careful of **anachronism**. Harding Davis wrote this work long before scientists and other thinkers articulated the ideas and principles of the modern environmentalist and environmental justice movements. We wouldn't, for instance, want to discuss *Life in the Iron Mills* as advocating for recycling, a word and practice of which Harding Davis would never have heard. Nevertheless, we can point out sympathetic ideas between Harding Davis's story and modern environmental concerns, drawing out nuances of the story that may not have been apparent to earlier readers.

Activity: approach a literary text as an ecocritic

When you're reading literature as an ecocritic, start by asking the following questions:

1. How does this novel, story, poem, play, or essay represent the natural world (e.g., plants, animals, ecosystems)? Is nature portrayed positively, negatively,

or otherwise?

2. How does the work represent the relationship between human beings and nature? For instance, is the relationship symbiotic or adversarial?
3. Do the characters in the work express ideas or opinions about their environment (whether a "natural" environment as in Wordsworth's poem or a man-made environment as in Harding Davis's story)? What cultural, social, or political values do characters seem to embody? When asking this question, don't forget to consider the narrator!
4. Does the text engage consciously with ideas related to modern environmentalism and environmental justice? For instance, does the text seem to make an argument for or against conservationism, preservation, or restoration?

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