# LIVING LITERATURE: A JOURNEY THROUGH STORIES, DRAMA, AND POETRY



*Kelsey Ford*
Cosumnes River College

LibreTexts™

# Living Literature: A Journey Through Stories, Drama, and Poetry

Remixed by Kelsey Ford at Cosumnes River College for ENGWR 301

This text is disseminated via the Open Education Resource (OER) LibreTexts Project (https://LibreTexts.org) and like the thousands of other texts available within this powerful platform, it is freely available for reading, printing, and "consuming."

The LibreTexts mission is to bring together students, faculty, and scholars in a collaborative effort to provide an accessible, and comprehensive platform that empowers our community to develop, curate, adapt, and adopt openly licensed resources and technologies; through these efforts we can reduce the financial burden born from traditional educational resource costs, ensuring education is more accessible for students and communities worldwide.

Most, but not all, pages in the library have licenses that may allow individuals to make changes, save, and print this book. Carefully consult the applicable license(s) before pursuing such effects. Instructors can adopt existing LibreTexts texts or Remix them to quickly build course-specific resources to meet the needs of their students. Unlike traditional textbooks, LibreTexts' web based origins allow powerful integration of advanced features and new technologies to support learning.




LibreTexts is the adaptable, user-friendly non-profit open education resource platform that educators trust for creating, customizing, and sharing accessible, interactive textbooks, adaptive homework, and ancillary materials. We collaborate with individuals and organizations to champion open education initiatives, support institutional publishing programs, drive curriculum development projects, and more.

The LibreTexts libraries are Powered by NICE CXone Expert and was supported by the Department of Education Open Textbook Pilot Project, the California Education Learning Lab, the UC Davis Office of the Provost, the UC Davis Library, the California State University Affordable Learning Solutions Program, and Merlot. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1246120, 1525057, and 1413739.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation nor the US Department of Education.

Have questions or comments? For information about adoptions or adaptions contact info@LibreTexts.org or visit our main website at https://LibreTexts.org.

This text was compiled on 04/28/2026

# TABLE OF CONTENTS


Licensing

## 1: What Is Literature, and How Do We Interact with It?

- 1.1: What is Literature?
- 1.2: Why Read and Write About Literature?
- 1.3: Tips for Reading Online
- 1.4: The Literary Landscape- Four Major Genres

## 2: Creative Nonfiction

- 2.1: What is Creative Nonfiction?
- 2.2: Elements of Creative Nonfiction
- 2.3: "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009)
- 2.4: Discussion Questions on "The Danger of a Single Story"
- 2.5: "The Blue" by Anne-Marie Oomen (2018)
- 2.6: Discussion Questions on "The Blue"

## 3: Fiction

- 3.1: What is Fiction?
- 3.2: Short Stories versus the Novel
- 3.3: How to Read Fiction
- 3.4: Elements of Fiction
- 3.5: "The Rocking Horse Winner" by D.H. Lawrence
- 3.6: Discussion Questions on "The Rocking Horse Winner"
- 3.7: Characterization
- 3.8: Plot
- 3.9: Setting
- 3.10: Narration (Point of View)
- 3.11: Discussion Questions on "The Shawl" by Louise Erdrich
- 3.12: Theme
- 3.13: Rhetorical and Literary Devices
- 3.14: Word Choice, Tone, Voice, and Style
- 3.15: Taking Notes on a Novel

## 4: Literary Theory and Criticism

- 4.1: What is Literary Criticism?
- 4.2: Formalism
- 4.3: Psychoanalytic Criticism
- 4.4: Gender Criticism
- 4.5: New Historicism
- 4.6: Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies
- 4.7: Ecocriticism
- 4.8: "On the Gull's Road" by Willa Cather (1908)
- 4.9: Literary Concept Map Group Assignment

## 5: Drama


- 5.1: What is Drama?
- 5.2: Elements of Drama
- 5.3: Reading and Responding to Drama
- 5.4: Trifles by Susan Glaspell (1916)


## 6: Poetry


- 6.1: What is Poetry?
- 6.2: Music and Poetry
- 6.3: Reading Poetry
- 6.4: Close Reading of a Poem
- 6.5: Why Analyze Poetry?
- 6.6: Imagery
- 6.7: The Line in Poetry
- 6.8: Word Choice, Word Order, and Tone
- 6.9: Voice
- 6.10: Figurative Language
- 6.11: Form in Poetry
- 6.12: Meter
- 6.13: Alliteration, Consonance, Assonance
- 6.14: Rhyme
- 6.15: Video- Why Shakespeare Loved Iambic Pentameter
- 6.16: Poetry Canvas Page and Video Group Assignment


## 7: Writing about Literature


- 7.1: What Does My Professor Want?
- 7.2: Literary Response Paper
- 7.3: The Writing Process for Literary Essays
- 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays
- 7.5: Brainstorming
- 7.6: Writing About Fiction and Creative Nonfiction
- 7.7: Literary Thesis Statements
- 7.8: Essay as Argument
- 7.9: Summarizing vs. Analyzing Literary Works
- 7.10: Writing a Literary Analysis Essay
- 7.11: Sample Student Literary Analysis Essays
- 7.12: Essays on Comparing and Contrasting Literature
- 7.13: Writing About Drama
- 7.14: Literary Research Essays
- 7.15: How to Perform Literary Research


## 8: MLA Format and Citations


- 8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution
- 8.2: What is MLA?
- 8.3: Formatting a Literature Essay
- 8.4: MLA Works Cited Page
- 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations
- 8.6: Quotation, Paraphrase, and Summary

Index

Glossary

Detailed Licensing

# Licensing

*A detailed breakdown of this resource's licensing can be found in **Back Matter/Detailed Licensing**.*

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

## 1: What Is Literature, and How Do We Interact with It?


1.1: What is Literature?

1.2: Why Read and Write About Literature?

1.3: Tips for Reading Online

1.4: The Literary Landscape- Four Major Genres


---


1: What Is Literature, and How Do We Interact with It? is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 1.1: What is Literature?

## Defining Literature

In order for us to study literature with any kind of depth, first we must decide what constitutes literature. While works like William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are almost universally accepted as literature, other works are hotly debated, or included or excluded based on the context. For example, some debate whether more recent publications such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* or Rupi Kaur's Instagram poetry constitute literature. And what about the stories told through tweets, like Jennifer Egan's "Black Box"? What about video games, like *Spiritfarer*, or memes, like Grumpy Cat?

Students often throw their hands up in the air over such distinctions, arguing literature is subjective. Isn't it up to individual opinion? Anything can be literature, such students argue. At first glance, it could seem such distinctions are, at best, arbitrary. At worst, such definitions function as a means of enforcing cultural erasure.

However, consider a story speculating about Kim Kardashian's plastic surgery in *People Magazine*. Can this be considered on the same level of literary achievement as *Hamlet*? Most would concede there is a difference in quality between these two texts. A blurb about Kim Kardashian's latest plastic surgery, most would agree, does not constitute literature. So how can we differentiate between such works?

### Literature vs. literature

As illustrated in the somewhat silly example above, one way we can define what constitutes literature is by identifying what is definitely *not* literature. In terms of defining most terms in this textbook, we will use the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definitions. Some professors who teach Literature use the concept of Big L Literature vs. little l literature (Rollison).

| Literature | literature |
|---|---|
| "written work valued for superior or lasting artistic merit" ("Literature" - OED) | "Printed matter of any kind; esp. leaflets, brochures, etc., used to advertise products or provide information and advice" ("literature" -OED) |

While the definition of little l literature is fairly easy to understand and apply, the definition of Big L Literature remains amorphous. What makes a work "artistic"? How do we classify what constitutes "superior" or "lasting"?

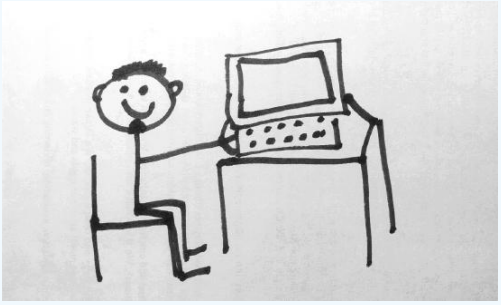
Let's break down some of the defining qualities of literature in a bit more detail, starting with the word "artistic."

### Exercise 1.1.1

Consider the following works of art. Which of these images do you feel is higher quality or more "artistic"? Which is lower-quality or less artistic? Why? Justify your position by analyzing the elements of each artwork.



"Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog" by Caspar David Friedrich (1818) is in the public domain



"stick figure self portrait" by marco on flickr (2019) is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

**Answer**

While there may be some debate, most students usually respond that Friedrich's painting is more artistic. This is due to several composition differences between the two works:

- **Artist's skill:** it certainly appears as if the first image was produced by an artist with superior skill
- **Fame:** for anyone who knows art history, the first image is famous while the other is not
- **Lasting quality:** the first image has survived the test of time, remaining popular over two hundred years!
- **Meaning:** the first image likely conjures deeper feelings, themes, or ideas, such as isolation and the primacy of nature. This is why this image has become the face of Romanticism.

But what *about* the images demonstrate the artists' superior skills? While the second image appears to be

produced with a simple doodle, and quickly composed, the first indicates more complexity, attention-to-detail, and craft. Freidrich leverages different colors, textures, shapes, and symbols to evoke a feeling in the viewer. Skilled artists will use different techniques, like the way they move the paintbrush, how they mix the paints, the pressure they exert or the direction of the brush. They will use textured paintbrushes for a specific effect, such as the difference between the light fluffy clouds and dark mountain rocks. They will use different color pallets to project, as accurately as possible, the feelings they are trying to evoke. In short, while anyone can paint, true artists leverage many different skills, techniques, and materials to render what is in their imagination into a real-life product.

So how does this relate to our attempts to define literature?

**Literature is art, but with words.**

While the artist uses different colors, paintbrushes, mediums, canvases, and techniques, the writer uses different genres and literary techniques called **literary devices**. Just like different types of paint, paintbrushes, and artistic tools, there are literally hundreds of literary devices, but some of the most common are metaphor, simile, personification, and imagery. **Genre** is the type or style of literature. Each genre has its own conventions. Literary genres include **creative nonfiction, fiction, drama,** and **poetry**. Works that are literary tend to expertly use genre conventions and literary devices to create a world in the mind of the reader. Works that are less literary tend to be for practical and/or entertainment purposes, and the writer dedicates less focused energy towards artfully employing literary devices.

However, just because a work is not as literary as another does not mean it cannot be enjoyed or analyzed. Just like a stick figure or cartoon character might be perfectly fine if intended for a particular audience or purpose, readers can still enjoy *People Magazine* even though it is not of the same literary quality as *Hamlet*.

So, to use an example from earlier:

| *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare | *People Magazine* |
|---|---|
| • Has lasted hundreds of years<br>• Is written by an expert of craft<br>• Covers deep, meaningful concepts like love, loss, war & political corruption<br>• Uses many literary devices such as metaphors | • Is often forgotten by the next issue<br>• Is written by a pop culture writer<br>• Covers shallow issues like what plastic surgeries a starlet has had<br>• Usually does not use literary devices in a meaningful way, but merely to capture the attention of an audience |

While some literature falls into clear designations of literature or not literature, most works are open to debate. Given the sometimes difficult task of determining whether a work falls into one camp or the other, it may be more helpful to think of Literature less as a dichotomy than a spectrum, with popular magazines on one end and works like *Beloved* on the other, and most written works falling somewhere between the two extremes.

## The Literary Spectrum

This spectrum can be a helpful way to think about literature because it provides a more open-ended way to discuss writing as art than simply labeling works as literary or not. After viewing the chart, why do you think popular magazines and a Calculus textbook are considered "less literary"? In terms of popular magazines, they do not fit the definition of literature as "lasting" in the sense that they usually fade from relevancy quickly after publication. Additionally, the authors of such magazines are striving for quick entertainment rather than leaving a meaningful impression on the reader. They tend not to use literary devices, such as metaphor, in an impactful way. These works tend to fade from memory. As for textbooks, their purpose is to impart accurate information, not to necessarily shift a reader's perspective or make them feel a certain way. Textbooks are often reprinted, former editions fading into the past as more accurate current editions take their place. On the other end, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* definitely fits the definition of "lasting," in that it has survived hundreds of years. It is full of literary devices used for rhetorical effect and, one would argue, it touches upon deep themes such as death, the afterlife, murder, vengeance, and love, rather than trifling issues such as a starlet's most recent plastic surgery.




What makes certain literary works survive the test of time? What makes a story, poem, or drama "good"? While literary scholars are less interested in proving a certain work is "good" or not -- and more focused on analyzing the ways to illuminate a given work -- it can be helpful for you to consider what kinds of literature you like and why you like them. What *about the way it was written* causes you to feel the way you do about it? What makes for meaningful literature?

## Who Decides What is Literature?

Now that we have at least somewhat clarified the definition of literature, who decides what works are or are not literature? Historically speaking, kings, queens, publishers, literary critics, professors, colleges, and readers (like you!) have decided which works survive and which works do not.

Aristotle was one of the first writers to attempt to decide what works fall into the category of literature, and what works do not. While Aristotle was most famous for his contributions to science and philosophy, he is also considered one of the first literary critics. A **literary critic** is a person who studies and analyzes literature. A literary critic produces scholarship called **literary criticism**. An example of this would be Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which he identifies the defining qualities of a "good" Tragedy. Aristotle's analysis of the tragic genre was so influential that it is still used today, over two thousand years later!

When a work is officially determined to constitute literature, it enters something called **the Canon.** Not to be confused with the large metal tube that shoots explosives (cannon), the Literary Canon is a collection of works that are considered by the powers that be to constitute literature worth reading, or as representative of a given time, place, or genre. A work that falls into this designation is called **canonical.** So, to use an example from Aristotle's *Poetics*, Aristotle defined Sophocles' Oedipus Trilogy as the pinnacle of its genre. From there, in part due to Aristotle's influence, Greek society valued *Oedipus* so much that they kept discussing, reading, referencing, and teaching it. Thus, it became a kind of shining example of the Tragic Canon, one which has lasted thousands of years and continues to be read and lauded to this day. Other tragedies, fairly or not, are often judged on their quality in comparison to Sophocles' works.

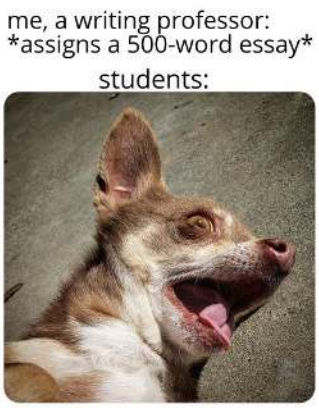
Interesting to think that someone who died thousands of years ago still influences what we consider literature today.

One of the most exciting aspects of reading and analyzing literature is that you can take part in canon formation. What you read, write about, and share with your friends can help propel works into the canon that would otherwise fade from history into the canon.

## Memes, Social Media, and Video Games: Today's Literature?

All this talk of thousands-of-years-old texts might seem out of touch. A lot of people think "old and boring" and literature are synonymous. Students are often surprised to hear that comic books and video games can arguably be considered literature, too. There are plenty of arguments to be made that comic books, such as *Destroyer* by Victor LaValle (2017), *Maus* by Art Spiegalman (1991) or *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (2006) are literature. Cutting edge literary scholars argue video games like *Kentucky Route Zero* by Cardboard Computer (2015) can be considered literary. There is also literature that is published in tweets, like Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" (2012). Some might even consider memes literature!

**Generative question: do you think memes can be literary?**




A **meme** is an image or video containing cultural values or ideas, often represented through **allusion** (implied reference to another work, without naming that work or its author). Memes can spread rapidly spreads through social media. Why? Because the best ones are #relatable; that is, they speak to a common human experience.

Usually memes take the form of text superimposed on an image. For example, the meme above conveys the dramatic reaction students sometimes give when I assign an essay. This is done primarily through a literary device called **hyperbole**, or exaggeration for rhetorical effect. It conveys its message comically through certain conventions that come along with the meme genre, such as the syntactic structure "me, a [insert

noun]" and asterisks, which convey action. Just like in the Shakespearean drama, the colon indicates what each character (me and the students, in this case) is saying or doing. My chihuahua's face looks silly and very dramatic. Through this use of image, text, format, and convention, the meaning I intended to convey was that I was making fun of my students for being over-dramatic about what to me seems like a fairly simple assignment. While some might dismiss memes as shallow, when you start to unravel the layers of meaning, they can actually be very complex and even, dare I say, literary!

Think about a recent meme you have seen, or your favorite meme of all time. Imagine explaining this meme to someone who has no idea what it means. What is the message or idea behind the meme? What cultural reference points does it use to convey its message? In what ways might this meme be considered literature? How might this compare to a short poem, like a haiku?

## Not Literature

Let's say you come to the conclusion that a meme, a gossip magazine, or the *Twilight* Series is not literary. Does that mean you have to feel guilty and give up reading it forever? Or that it is not "good"?

No!

Just because a work is not literary does not mean it is "bad," that it does not have value, that one cannot enjoy it, or that it is unsuitable for study as a form of literature. Indeed, there are plenty of examples of written works that are on the less literary side of the spectrum but are still fun and enriching to read, and reveal something interesting about the culture which produced them. *Joe Dirt i*s not on the same artistic level of cinema as *Schindler's List*, but my husband still quotes it regularly. Nothing JoJo Siwa has produced is as deep as Tupac Shakur's "Changes" (1992) or Mitski's "Last Words of a Shooting Star" (2014), but her work might be interesting to analyze from a literary studies angle. This is all to say that whether a text is literary or not is not as important as *the methods of analyzing texts*. In fact, texts which were excluded from literature are often argued into the literary canon through such analysis. Part of what makes analyzing literature so fun is that it means the definition of literature is always up for debate! This is especially important given the history of the canon.

## The Problem with the Canon

In an ideal world, literature would be celebrated purely based on its artistic merit. Well-written works would last, poorly-written works would wither from public memory. However, that is not always the case. Works often achieve public prominence or survive based on qualities unrelated to skill or aesthetics, such as an author's fame, wealth, connections, or values of the dominant culture. William Wordsworth, for example, was named Poet Laureate of England and has been taught as one of the "Big Six" major Romantic-era authors ever since. Indeed, he is accepted as part of the Romanticism literary canon. One would be hard-pressed to find a Literature anthology that does not feature William Wordsworth. However, how many people have read Dorothy Wordsworth, William Wordsworth's sister, who arguably depicted Romantic themes with equal skill and beauty, albeit in prose form? Or James Hogg, a Scottish contemporary of Wordsworth who was a lower-class shepherd? Similarly, while most readers have encountered F. Scott Fitzgerald or Edgar Allen Poe in their high school literature classes, how many have read Frederick Douglass in these same classes? In short, all artistic skill (arguably) considered equal, why do some authors predominantly feature in the canon while others do not?

Like much of society, systemic inequities plague the publishing industry and the study of literature in English. As time progresses, it seems there is increasing but not proportionate representation on average. For example, while women make up about half of the population, over 80% of the most popular novels were written by men ("Battle"). The publishing industry is overwhelmingly white and non-disabled (Lee & Low). While there are many possible reasons for this discrepancy in representation (which could be the focus of an entire textbook), what does this mean for scholars of literature? For students? For instructors? For society?

As a cultural relic, similar to art, many scholars suggest literature is a reflection of the society which produces it. This includes positive aspects of society (championing values such as love, justice, and good triumphing over evil), but it can also reflect negative aspects of society (such as discrimination, racism, sexism, homophobia, historical lack of opportunity for marginalized authors).

For example, prior to abolition in the United States, enslavers prevented enslaved Africans from learning to read and write as a form of control. When Phillis Wheatley published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), many doubted she wrote it, due to popularly held racist views that Black people were incapable of writing poetry. Later, abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote about how those supporting slavery banned him from reading and writing, as they realized "education and slavery were incompatible with each other" (Douglass). He later championed literacy as the means which conveyed him to freedom. However, even when trying to publish *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), anti-abolitionists actively fought to keep Douglass' book from circulation as it threatened the institution

of slavery. Indeed, to this day, Douglass' book continues to be banned in some prisons for its potential to incite revolution (Darby, Gilroy).

How could Black writers enter the canon en masse if they were not allowed to read or write? Or if they were forced to spend all of their waking hours working? And if those who had the means to read and write had to jump through absurd hoops just to have their works published? And if even those texts which were published were banned?

Similarly, throughout much of Western history, women have been discouraged from pursuing reading and writing, as it distracted from society's expectations for women to focus on motherly and household duties. Until the 1700s, women were not allowed to attend college. Even then, very few went: only the extremely wealthy. It was not until the 19th century that women attended college in representative numbers. Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own* that if there are fewer works of literature written by women, it is only because society, historically, has not given women the time, education, funding, or space to do so. In this extended essay, she describes an imaginary sister of William Shakespeare who could have been just as great of a writer had she the same opportunities as her brother.

> *I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister; but do not look for her in Sir Sidney Lee's life of the poet. She died young—alas, she never wrote a word. She lies buried where the omnibuses now stop, opposite the Elephant and Castle. Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within your power to give her.*

Woolf argues that in our time those who have been excluded from literature can now join the canon by adding their voices. The inequity of representation in literature -- which has arguably improved, but in many ways persists -- can be remedied if more people from a wide array of backgrounds and walks of life are empowered to study and create Literature. That is one reason why the current study of literature is so exciting. As a student and literary scholar in training, you have the power to influence culture through your reading and analysis of literature!

For one author's perspective on this topic, please watch this the following TED Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie about why it is important to veer away from the historically parochial canon into what Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of stories" (qtd. Bacon).




- Original video available on TED Talk website
- Transcript of video

What "single stories" do you know? What are the "single stories" people have told about you? What story would you tell if you could? What kinds of stories do you want to read? Throughout this class, you will get the opportunity to encounter many different stories. While we faced hurdles of copyright permissions, the authors of this textbook attempted to embody the values espoused in this TED Talk & Chinua Achebe's conception of the "balance of stories." As you read the textbook, consider the stories which were omitted, why they were omitted, and what literature you would include if you could.

## Works Cited

Bacon, Katie. "An African Voice." *The Atlantic*, 2000.

"Battle of the Authors: Are The Most Popular Rated Fiction Books Written by Men or Women?" *Wordery*, 1 Mar. 2019.

Darby, Luke. "Illinois Prison Bans Frederick Douglass's Memoir and Other "Racial" Books." *GQ*, 20 August 2019.

Douglass, Frederick. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. 1845.

Friedrich, Caspar David. "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog." *Hamburger Kunsthalle Museum*, 1818.

Gilroy, Paul. "Banned Books of Guantánamo: 'An American Slave' by Frederick Douglass." *Vice*, 14 Nov. 2014.

"literature, n.; 3b & 5" *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/109080. Accessed 6 September 2019.

Rollison, David. "Big L vs Little L Literature." *Survey of World Literature I.* College of Marin, 2008. Lecture.

Lee & Low. "The 2023 Lee & Low Diversity Baseline Survey Results" Lee and Low Books, 2023.

Wheatley, Phillis. *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. 1773.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own.* 1929.

---

This page titled 1.1: What is Literature? is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **1.1: What is Literature?** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 1.2: Why Read and Write About Literature?

## Why Read Literature?

In the age of TikTok, Twitter, Youtube, and streaming television services, literature might seem like a relic of the past. Indeed, fewer people are reading literature than ever. According to an article published in the Washington Post, "in 2015, 43 percent of adults read at least one work of literature in the previous year. That's the lowest percentage in any year since NEA surveys began tracking reading and arts participation in 1982 when the literature reading rate was 57 percent" (Ingraham). If the decline of literature-reading in adults isn't the death knoll of literature, the decline in teenagers might be. According to NPR, in a recently conducted poll, "nearly half of 17-year-olds say they read for pleasure no more than one or two times a year — if that" (Ludden). How many books have you read this year? How many poems? In this fast-paced dopamine-fueled media landscape, it's difficult for stinky old books to compete.

But this is hardly a new problem if it is even a problem at all.

Consider the words of master-of-clapbacks Sir Philip Sydney, #throwback to the late 1500s and early 1600s. After the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg, many people saw the proliferation of novels and plays as morally poisonous. Talking heads of the time argued that poetry and literature were a waste of time, or "fake news" as some might call it today. They questioned the purpose of fictional works. Poet and diplomat Sir Philip Sydney responded with a scathing literary smack-down to the haters. He argued the poet has a special talent to create new, beautiful worlds that no other professional can claim, and that those who question the purpose of poetry have "earth-creeping" minds and are "momes" (AKA fools, blockheads). He further stated that he hopes these momes never get "favor" (love) because they don't know how to write sonnets to woo their love interests and that they don't get an epitaph on their graves, because that is the poet's job. Ouch, harsh.

In today's world, it seems that Sidney would probably consider most people momes. After all, very few of us read or appreciate poetry regularly. Most of our reading and writing is done on the internet: in the forms of Facebook posts, memes, tweets, snapchats, Tik Tok videos, and viral news. In response to this trend, some claim that literature is dead (Breuklander). Indeed, if we define literature as only printed novels and poetry, perhaps it is, for all intents and purposes, dead. But... what if we were to define literature as Sidney did--a creation made from the "zodiac of [the poet's] own wit," improving upon nature itself through invention? Might some of today's internet media fall into that definition?

What if literature isn't dead after all...but thriving more than ever? What if we radically reconsider the parameters of literature? What if literature has just evolved from sonnets and novels to tweets and memes? In this textbook, we will explore how technology has blurred the lines between Literature and literature. We will question and explore the "usefulness" of literature in a world that encourages split-second attention spans. We will see how literature has solved problems in the past, and explore how it can be used to solve problems in the future. Medicine, a threat to the status quo, entertainment, activism, or boring stinky old piles of pages: what is literature to you?

No matter the reader, no matter the writer, no matter the genre, literature is a cultural relic, a manifestation of the human experience. Thus, it can teach us things about our society and about ourselves we might not be able to learn from other types of media. It enables us to experience and discuss ideas from the safety of our armchairs, to project ourselves onto characters and environments, to explore worlds and lived experiences we otherwise would never have the opportunity to experience.

Additionally, data suggests reading literature benefits us in profound ways.

### Benefits of Literature

Studies show reading literature may help

- promote empathy and social skills (Castano and Kidd)
- alleviate symptoms of depression (Billington et al.)
- business leaders succeed (Coleman)
- prevent dementia by stimulating the mind (Thorpe)

These are just a few of the studied benefits of literature. As we continue to gain increasing complexity in terms of measuring brain activity and developing other tools to measure brain function, scientists may find more benefits.

## Why Write About Literature?

You might be asking yourself why you should bother writing about something you've read. After all, isn't creative writing more fun, journalistic writing more interesting, and technical writing more useful? Maybe, but consider this: writing about literature will let you exercise your critical thinking skills like no other style of writing will. Even if you don't want to pursue a career involving literature, you can use critical thinking and analysis in any field from philosophy to business to physics. More than being able to think critically, you need to be able to

express those thoughts in a coherent fashion. Writing about literature will allow you to practice this invaluable communication skill.

“Okay,” you say, “that's all good and well. But hasn't anything I have to say about a story already been said? So what's the point, then?” When you write your paper, you might end up saying something that has been discussed, argued over, or proposed by literary critics and students alike. However, when you write something, you present a point of view through your unique voice. Even if something has been said about a book many times, you can add something new to that discussion. Perhaps you can state an idea in simpler terms, or you want to disagree with a popular viewpoint. Even if you're writing to an instructor's prompt, your voice will make the paper unique.

### How Do I Start?

To many of us, writing a response to something we've had to read sounds more than a little daunting. There are so many things to examine and analyze in a book, play, or poem. But before you decide that writing about writing just isn't for you, think about this--you already have many of the skills you need to write a good response to literature.

How many times have you heard about someone who watched a horror movie and yelled, “Don't go into the basement!” at the potential victim. Or maybe you've listened to a song and thought about how the lyrics described your life almost perfectly. Perhaps you like to jump up and cheer for your favorite team even if you're watching the game from home. Each time you do one of these things, you are responding to something you've seen or heard. And when you read a book, you likely do the same thing. Have you ever read anything and sympathized with or hated a character? If so, you've already taken your first step in responding to literature.

However, the next steps are a little harder. You need to be able to put your response into writing so other people can understand why you believe one thing or another about a book, play, or poem. In addition, writing an essay based on how a story makes you think or feel is only one of many ways to respond to what you read. In order to write a strong paper, you will need to examine a text both **subjectively** and **objectively**. If you only write about your personal reaction to a book, there won't be much to support your argument except your word alone. Thus, you will need to use some facts from the text to support your argument. Rather than trying to evaluate every nuance of a text all at once, you should start with the basics: character and plot. From there, you can examine the theme of the work and then move on to the finer points such as the writing itself. For instance, when determining how you want to analyze a piece of literature, you might want to ask yourself the following series of questions:

- Who are the characters?
- What are they doing?
- Why and how are they doing it?
- Do their actions relate to any broader topics or issues?
- How does the author convey this through their writing?

### Questions to consider when writing about literature

Of course, answering these questions will only start your analysis. However, if you can answer them, you will have a strong grasp of the basic elements of the story. From there, you can go on to more specific questions, such as, “How does symbolism help illustrate the theme?” or “What does the author say about the relationships between characters through the dialogue he gives them?” However, before you can start answering detailed questions like these, you should look at the basic elements of what you're reading. Some of the most common elements in a piece of literature include:

- Setting
- Characters
- Plot (story or play) or structure (poem)
- Tone/Mood
- Themes
- Symbolism and Figurative Language

As you work through each genre in this book, try to examine each of these elements in each piece of literature you read.

## Optional, Supplemental Reading: Excerpt from Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*

"There is no art delivered unto mankind that has not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend as they become actors and players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth. So doth the astronomer look upon the stars, and, by that he sees, set down what order nature has taken therein. So do the geometrician and arithmetician in their divers sorts of quantities. So doth the musician in times tell you which by nature agree, which not. The natural philosopher thereon has his name, and the moral philosopher stands upon the natural virtues, vices, and passions of man; and “follow nature,” says he, “therein, and thou shalt not err.” The lawyer says what men have determined, the historian what men have done. The grammarian speaks only of the rules of speech, and the rhetorician and logician, considering what in nature will soonest prove and persuade, thereon give artificial rules, which still are compassed within the circle of a question, according to the proposed matter. The physician weighs the nature of man’s body, and the nature of things helpful or hurtful unto it. And the metaphysic, though it

be in the second and abstract notions, and therefore be counted supernatural, yet doth he, indeed, build upon the depth of nature.

Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature brings forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demi-gods, cyclops, chimeras, furies, and such like; so as he goes hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden...

[...]

But if—fie of such a but!—you be born so near the dull-making cataract of Nilus, that you cannot hear the planet-like music of poetry; if you have so earth-creeping a mind that it cannot lift itself up to look to the sky of poetry, or rather, by a certain rustical disdain, will become such a mome [blockhead—ed.], as to be a Momus of poetry; then, though I will not wish unto you the ass' ears of Midas, nor to be driven by a poet's verses, as Bubonax was, to hang himself; nor to be rimed to death, as is said to be done in Ireland; yet thus much curse. I must send you in the behalf of all poets:—that while you live in love, and never get favor for lacking skill of a sonnet; and when you die, your memory die from the earth for want of an epitaph." -- Sir Philip Sydney

## Works Cited


Billington, Josie, Dowrick, Christopher, Hamer, Andrew, Robinson, Jude and Clare Williams. *An investigation into the therapeutic benefits of reading in relation to depression and well-being.* Liverpool Health Inequalities Research Institute. University of Liverpool, Nov. 2010. https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/iphs/web_version_therapeutic_benefits_of_reading_final_report_Mar.pdf

Breuklander, Joel. "Literature is Dead (According to Straight, White Guys at Least)." The Atlantic, 18 July 2013. Web. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07/literature-is-dead-according-to-straight-white-guys-at-least/277906/ Accessed 12 August 2018

Castano, Emanuele and David Kidd. "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind." *Science.* 18 Oct. 2013;342(6156):377-80.

Coleman, John. "The Benefits of Poetry for Professionals." *Harvard Business Review*, 2012. https://hbr.org/2012/11/the-benefits-of-poetry-for-pro

Ingraham, Christopher. "The long, steady decline of literary reading." The Washington Post, 7 Sep 2016. Web. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/09/07/the-long-steady-decline-of-literary-reading/?utm_term=.ad2fa9146ec0 Accessed 2 August 2018.

Ludden, Jennifer. "Why Aren't Teens Reading Like They Used To?" NPR. 12 May 2014. https://www.npr.org/2014/05/12/311111701/why-arent-teens-reading-like-they-used-to Accessed 02 August 2018.

Thorpe, J.R. "Why Reading Poetry Is Good For Your Brain." *Bustle*, 20 Apr. 2017. https://www.bustle.com/p/why-reading-poetry-is-good-for-your-brain-51884

Sidney, Sir Philip. *The Defense of Poesy.* The Poetry Foundation. 13 Oct. 2009. Web. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69375/the-defence-of-poesy Accessed 2 August 2018.


## Contributors and Attributions

- **Why Write About Literature** sections adapted from "Writing About Literature Basics" from *Commonsense Composition* by Crystle Bruno of San Jose State University licensed CC BY-NC 4.0


This page titled 1.2: Why Read and Write About Literature? is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **1.2: Why Read and Write About Literature?** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 1.3: Tips for Reading Online

## Reading on a Screen



***Figure* 1.3.1**

Even if you take primarily face-to-face classes in college, you'll likely find that a significant amount of the reading you'll have to do in college comes from online sources: articles on the Web, online library databases, e-books. The academic reading process of previewing, active reading, summarizing, and reviewing can be used to read these online materials, just like any other text.

However, effective online reading takes time and practice, and you need to carefully consider your approach. Read on for a list of tips that can help you successfully complete your online reading.

### Eliminate distractions to maintain focus

In addition to the usual distractions found in a space (like people, cell phones, and televisions), online readers can be easily distracted by computer features (like games, instant messaging, and Facebook). Shut these programs off, and make sure your environment stays focused. You can even download tools to block programs that might cause distractions for a set period of time, to help you maintain your willpower.

### Set a time limit

Reading from a computer screen can cause eye strain, so plan to read for shorter periods of time. For example, read for about 30 minutes and then take a 10 minute break away from your monitor. Use this time to think about what you just read and identify the key points or themes.

### Identify *why* you are reading

Perhaps you are looking for sources of information for an assignment or paper. Maybe you need some background information on a topic. Or, possibly you need to learn specific subject matter for your course. Knowing why you are reading will help you decide exactly what strategies you should use. Choose a strategy based on your learning purpose.

If you are clear on your purpose but do not have a study guide or assignment to guide your reading, you may find it helpful to generate some personal study questions to focus your efforts. For instance, if you were studying interpersonal communication in the criminal justice field, you could ask: "What are the three important interpersonal communication skills? Why are they important? How can these skills be developed?" Record these questions in your notes and refer to them as you read.

### Consider saving the document you are reading in a form you can manipulate

After evaluating the document you plan to read, save it to your personal files. This allows you to highlight key ideas or make summary notes in the margins of the document itself. These markings can then be transferred later into your own notes.

### Preview before you read

Previewing the title, headings, and subheadings of a document will give you a better sense of its content and organization as well as make you aware of what you already know about the topic. You can then make an informed choice about:

- whether or not the material suits your purpose
- which sections of the material you should read
- how thoroughly you should read to accomplish your purpose

### Get prepared to take notes

Whether you choose to use paper or a computer program, it is important to record important ideas for future reference. Have paper and pen readily available or open a blank Word document, so you are prepared to take notes once you start reading.

### Take notes

Record important information on your note paper or in your Word document. Note taking helps you understand ideas and ensure you have the material for later reference. Be sure to record ideas in point form and in your own words and experiment with different note taking strategies to find one that suits your needs.

If you feel you might need the information for an assignment, record the document's reference information next to the notes you created. This step is important since you must cite all the references you draw on in assignment and papers. It is easier to do this step now rather than later when you may have forgotten the website address.

### Read difficult material out loud

Sometimes it is helpful to *hear* what you are reading, especially if the material is complex or difficult to understand. Study in a space where you can read aloud to yourself. Alternatively, you can ask a friend or family member to review complex material with you. When two people look at information together, they can usually make sense of difficult materials.

## Conclusion

An immense amounts of online resources are available to you. By using effective strategies and following the above suggestions, you will increase your chances of successfully accomplishing your reading task.

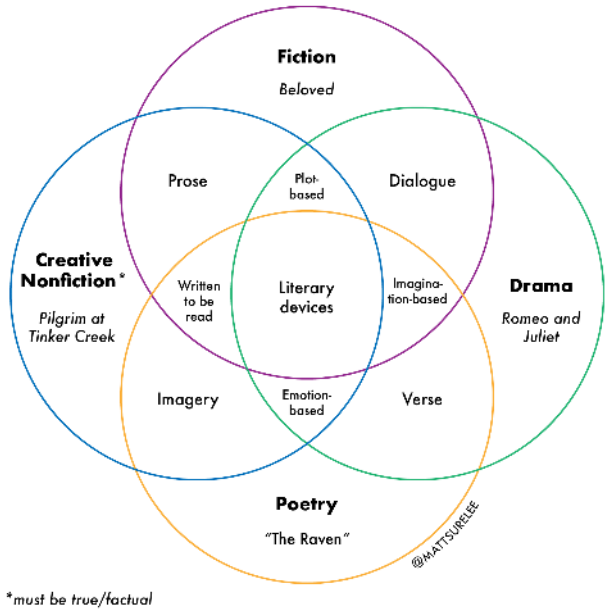
---

1.3: Tips for Reading Online is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 1.4: The Literary Landscape- Four Major Genres

## The Literary Landscape: Four Major Genres

In the landscape of literature, there are four major genres: poetry, drama, fiction, and creative nonfiction. While there are certain key recognizable features of each genre, these are not so much rules as they are tools, or conventions, the author uses. If we think of literature as its own world, it may help to think of genres more as regions with open borders, where there are no walls and that authors can freely move through if they desire. But, like any traveler, it helps you understand your place in the world if you know where you are located (or at least the "lay of the land"). It can also be interesting to analyze how certain texts break genre conventions. These major genres are briefly outlined below.




"Literary Genres Venn Diagram" by Matt Shirley (2021) licensed CC-BY-SA. This image shows some of the differences and overlap between different genres.

## Poetry

- Emphasis on image or feeling
- More emphasis on rhythm and meter than other genres (older drama, like Shakespeare, often uses rhythm and meter)
- Sometimes rhymes, but not always
- Organized through stanzas and lines
- Does not require a plot or characters, although it may include them (such as in narrative poetry). Often focuses on single moment or feeling or image
- Meant to be heard as well as read, so there is an emphasis on sound

### Example

"I wandered lonely as a cloud" by William Wordsworth (1807)

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, 5
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay: 10
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company: 15
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude; 20
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

**In-Text Citation:** Wordsworth personified the daffodils as "dancing" (line 6). The 6 corresponds to the line number.

**Works Cited Entry:** Wordsworth, William. "I wandered lonely as a cloud." *Poems in Two Volumes.* London: Longman, 1807.

## Drama

- Meant to be performed to an audience
- Character List (often); Character names indicate who is speaking (almost always)
- Heavy inclusion of dialogue. Usually not much scene description (compared to other genres)
- Organized by Acts, Scenes, and Line Numbers
- May include stage directions, but may not
- Plot based (it tells a story, usually involving a conflict of some kind)
- May be written in verse
- Types: Comedy, Tragedy, History, and Romance, among others

### Example

*The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde (excerpt)

THE PERSONS IN THE PLAY

John Worthing, J.P.
Algernon Moncrieff
Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.
Merriman, Butler
Lane, Manservant
Lady Bracknell
Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax
Cecily Cardew
Miss Prism, Governess

ACT 1 SCENE 1

1 Morning-room in **Algernon's** flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room.

2 [**Lane** is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, **Algernon** enters.]

3 **Algernon.** Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

4 **Lane.** I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

5 **Algernon.** I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—any one can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

6 **Lane.** Yes, sir.

7 **Algernon.** And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

8 **Lane.** Yes, sir. [Hands them on a salver.]

9 **Algernon.** [Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.] Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord 10 Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

**In-Text Citation:** The dynamics of power are indicated by Lane's repeated use of "sir" (Wilde 1.1.4, 6, 8). Here the numbers represent the Act (1), the Scene (1), and the line numbers (4, 6, 8).

**Works Cited Entry:** Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest.* London: St. James' Theatre, 1895.

## Fiction

- Prose
- Created from the imagination. May be inspired by real events or people, but not chained by the constraints of reality.
- Plot-based
- Character-based
- Usually includes dialogue and scene descriptions
- Organized through paragraphs and sentences
- Types: Short Story, Novella, Novel

### Example

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour. The light fell either upon the smooth, grey back of a pebble, or, the shell of a snail with its brown, circular veins, or falling into a raindrop, it expanded with such intensity of red, blue and yellow the thin walls of water that one expected them to burst and disappear. Instead, the drop was left in a second silver grey once more, and the light now settled upon the flesh of a leaf, revealing the branching thread of fibre beneath the surface, and again it moved on and spread its illumination in the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the heart-shaped and tongue-shaped leaves. Then the breeze stirred rather more briskly overhead and the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women who walk in Kew Gardens in July.

**In-Text Citation:** The natural world is described in anatomical language, like dismembered body parts, such as the "heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves," the "throat" of the flowers, and the "veins" of the snail shells (Woolf 1). If there are page numbers, the number that goes in the parenthesis is the page number. If there are no page numbers, you can use the paragraph number (Woolf par. 1). If there are not page numbers, and there are too many paragraphs to count, you can just put the author last name (Woolf).

**Works Cited Entry:** Woolf, Virginia. "Kew Gardens." *Monday or Tuesday.* New York: Harcourt, 1921.

## Creative Nonfiction

- Prose
- **True** (not fabricated, not from the imagination). This is a *very important* distinction from the other genres.
- Plot-based
- Character-based

- Usually includes dialogue and scene descriptions
- Organized through paragraphs and sentences
- Types: Narrative, Memoir, and Literary Journalism, among others

### Example

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.

**In-Text Citation:** Even from the first paragraph of his narrative, Douglass repeatedly notes the power of "knowledge" and "information", and of enslavers' dehumanizing cruelty in withholding knowledge and information, such as birthdays (1). The number here represents the page. Just like in Fiction, if there is no page available, cite the paragraph number (Douglass par. 1). If there no page number, and there are too many paragraphs to count, just cite the last name (Douglass).

**Works Cited Entry:** Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston Anti-Slavery Office, Boston, 1845.

## Copyright

All literary works cited on this page are in the public domain.

This page titled 1.4: The Literary Landscape- Four Major Genres is shared under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **1.8: The Literary Landscape- Four Major Genres** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-SA 4.0.

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

## 2: Creative Nonfiction


2.1: What is Creative Nonfiction?

2.2: Elements of Creative Nonfiction

2.3: "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009)

2.4: Discussion Questions on "The Danger of a Single Story"

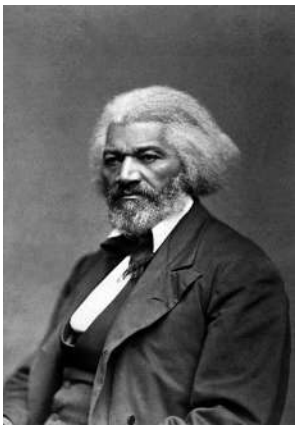
2.5: "The Blue" by Anne-Marie Oomen (2018)

2.6: Discussion Questions on "The Blue"


---


2: Creative Nonfiction is shared under a CC BY-NC license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 2.1: What is Creative Nonfiction?



*"Frederick Douglass" by Frank W. Legg (c. 1879) is in the public domain*

*Frederick Douglass' creative nonfiction account of the horrors of slavery and his escape from it was so powerfully written that it is largely credited, along with Douglass' speeches, as helping end slavery and empower African-American citizens (Ceasar).*

"I shut my ears, averted my eyes, turning instead to what I thought at the time was pain's antidote: silence. I was wrong... Silence feeds pain, allows it to fester and thrive. What starves pain, what forces it to release its grip, is speech, the voice upon which rides the story, this is what happened; this is what I have refused to let claim me."

— Tracy K. Smith, *Ordinary Light*

This textbook begins with creative nonfiction because most students find it the most accessible. Why? Because students encounter nonfiction every day. News stories, some social media posts, and documentaries are all examples of nonfiction. Creative nonfiction is the literary arm of nonfiction.

What is creative nonfiction? Currently, it is currently the most popular literary genre, with such titles as *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls having more than 5 million copies in circulation (Cadden). Indeed, "Creative nonfiction has become the most popular genre in the literary and publishing communities. These days the biggest publishers—HarperCollins, Random House, Norton, and others—are seeking creative nonfiction titles more vigorously than literary fiction and poetry" (Gutkind). While generations past defined literature as poetry, drama, and fiction, Creative Nonfiction has increasingly gained popularity and recognition in the literary world.

According to the literary magazine *Creative Nonfiction*, this fast-growing and increasingly popular genre is defined as: "true stories, well told" (Gutkind). That is, creative nonfiction stories depict real-life events, places, people, and experiences, but do so in a way that is immersive, so readers feel emotionally invested in the writing in a way they probably are not as invested in, say, a textbook or a more formal autobiography. While "nonfiction" (without the creative designation) tells true stories as well, there is less emphasis upon and space for creativity. If regular nonfiction were a person, it might say "just the facts, ma'am." Creative nonfiction, on the other hand, might ask "and what color were her eyes as the moonlight reflected off the ocean into them, and what childhood memories did that moment dredge up?"

The best creative nonfiction tells a true story in an artistic -- or literary -- way. This means that the story has certain elements, such as descriptive imagery, setting, plot, conflict, characters, metaphors, and other literary devices. Usually, a work of creative nonfiction is narrated in first-person, though sometimes it can be written in third-person. It can be more lyric and personal, like Annie Dillard's nature essays, or representing important moments in history, like abolitionist Frederick Douglass' *The Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) or Jo Ann Beard's "The Fourth State of Matter." Creative Nonfiction can also include less artistic forms of storytelling, such as investigative journalism.

To summarize the defining characteristics of this genre:

- True stories
- Prose (usually, though sometimes poetry)
- Uses literary devices/is more creative and artistically-oriented than "regular" nonfiction
- Often told in first person
- The narrator is often the author or a persona of the author, but not always

When reading a work of creative nonfiction, it is important to remember the story is true. This means the author does not have as much artistic freedom as a fiction writer or poet might, because they cannot invent events which did not happen. It is worthwhile, then, to pay attention to the literary devices and other artistic choices the narrator makes. Readers should consider: what choices were made here about what to include and what to omit? Are there repeating images or themes? How might the historical context influence this work?

Works Cited

Cadden, Mary. "Book Buzz: Memoir 'The Glass Castle' cracks No. 1 ceiling." *USA Today*, 16 August 2017.

https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2017/08/16/book-buzz-memoir-the-glass-castle-cracks-no-1-ceiling/569422001/ Accessed 5 Oct. 2019.

Caesar, Rebecca. "Letters." *University of Rochester Frederick Douglass Project*, 2005. Web.

https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/4071 Accessed 14 Aug. 2019

Gutkind, Lee. "What is Creative Nonfiction?" *Creative Nonfiction*, 2012. Web.

https://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/what-creative-nonfiction. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.

Legg, Frank W. "Frederick Douglass." The National Archives, 1879. Web.

https://catalog.archives.gov/id/558770. Accessed 14 Aug. 2019.

Smith, Tracy K. *Ordinary Light*. New York: Knopf, 2015. Print.

---

This page titled 2.1: What is Creative Nonfiction? is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **2.1: What is Creative Nonfiction?** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 2.2: Elements of Creative Nonfiction

The main elements of creative nonfiction are **setting, descriptive imagery, figurative language**, **plot**, and **character**. The overarching element or requirement that distinguishes creative nonfiction from any other genre of writing is that while other literary genres can spring from the imagination, **creative nonfiction is, by definition, true.** As you complete the assigned readings in this chapter, keep track of the following elements as they arise in your readings: see if you can identify each of them. Learning these elements now will form a solid foundation for the rest of the class.

## Setting

Each story has a setting. The setting is the place where the story takes place. Usually, an effective story establishes its setting early in the story: otherwise readers will have a difficult time visualizing the action of the story. Below is an example of how a writer might establish setting in a way which immerses the reader: by showing rather than telling.

| Telling | Showing |
|---|---|
| I went to the lake. It was cool. | My breath escaped in **ragged bursts**, my quadriceps **burning** as I crested the summit. The lake stretched before me, **aquamarine, glistening** in the **hot August afternoon sun**. Ponderosa pines lined its shores, dropping their **spicy-scented** needles into the clear water. Despite the heat, the Montana mountain air **tasted crisp**. |

Which of the above lakes would you want to visit? Which one paints a more immersive picture, making you feel like you are there? When writing a story, our initial instinct is usually to make a list of chronological moments: first I did this, then I did this, then I did that, it was neat-o. That might be factual, but it does not engage the reader or invite them into your world. It bores the reader. Ever been stuck listening to someone tell a story that seems like it will never end? It probably was someone **telling** you a story rather than **using the five senses to immerse you**. In the example above, the writer uses **visual** (sight), **auditory** (sound), **olfactory** (smell), **tactile** (touch), or **gustatory** (taste) imagery to help the reader picture the setting in their mind. By the final draft, the entire story should be compelling and richly detailed. While it's fine to have an outline or first draft that recounts the events of the story, the final draft should include dialogue, immersive description, plot twists, and metaphors to capture your reader's attention as you write.



"Eibsee Lake" by barnyz, 2 August 2011, published on Flickr **CC BY-NC-ND 2.0**

## Descriptive Imagery

You have probably encountered **descriptive imagery** before. Basically, it is the way the writer paints the scene, or image, in the mind of the reader. It usually involves descriptions of one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste. For example, how would you describe a lemon to a person who has never seen one before?

activity: describe a lemon



"Lemon" by André Karwath (2005) is licensed CC BY-SA 2.5

Imagine you are describing a lemon to someone who has never seen one before. How would you describe it using all five senses?

- Sight
- Sound
- Smell
- Touch
- Taste

One might describe a lemon as yellow, sour-smelling and tasting, and with a smooth, bumpy skin. They might describe the sound of the lemon as a thump on the table if it is dropped, or squelching if it is squished underfoot. By painting a picture in the reader's mind, it immerses them in the story so that they feel they are actually there.

### Figurative Language

As a counterpart to descriptive imagery, figurative language is using language in a surprising way to describe a literary moment. Figurative language can take the form of metaphor, such as saying "the lemon tree was heavy with innumerable miniature suns." Since the lemons are not actually suns, this is figurative. Figurative language can also take the form of simile: "aunt Becky's attitude was as sour as a lemon." By comparing an abstract concept (attitude) to an object (lemon), it imparts a feeling/meaning in a more interesting way.

## Plot

Plot is one of the basic elements of every story: put simply, plot refers to the actual events that take place within the bounds of your narrative. Using our rhetorical situation vocabulary, we can identify “plot” as the primary subject of a descriptive personal narrative. Three related elements to consider are scope, sequence, and pacing.

### Scope

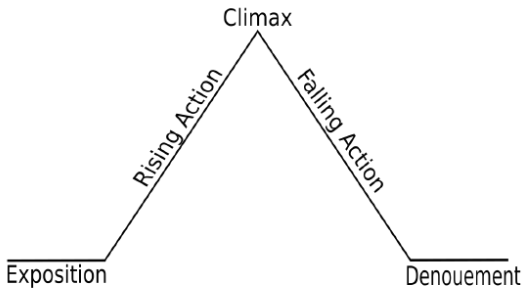
The term scope refers to the boundaries of plot. Where and when does the story begin and end? What is its focus? What background information and details does the story require? I often think about narrative scope as the edges of a photograph: a photo, whether of a vast landscape or a microscopic organism, has boundaries. Those boundaries inform the viewer’s perception.

The way we determine scope varies based on rhetorical situation, but I can say generally that many developing writers struggle with a scope that is too broad: writers often find it challenging to zero in on the events that drive a story and prune out extraneous information.

Consider, as an example, how you might respond if your friend asked what you did last weekend. If you began with, “I woke up on Saturday morning, rolled over, checked my phone, fell back asleep, woke up, pulled my feet out from under the covers, put my feet on the floor, stood up, stretched…” then your friend might have stopped listening by the time you get to the really good stuff. Your scope is too broad, so you’re including details that distract or bore your reader. Instead, focus on the most exciting or meaningful moment(s) of your day: "I woke up face-down to the crunch of shattered glass underneath me. When I wobbled to my feet I realized I was in a large, marble room with large windows overlooking the flashing neon lights of the Las Vegas strip. I had no idea how I got there!" Readers can expect this story will focus on how the storyteller arrived in Las Vegas, and it is much more interesting than including every single detail of the day.

## Sequence

The sequence of your plot—the order of the events—will determine your reader's experience. There are an infinite number of ways you might structure your story, and the shape of your story is worth deep consideration. Although the traditional forms for a narrative sequence are not your only options, let's take a look at a few tried-and-true shapes your plot might take.




Freytag's Pyramid is in the public domain

## Freytag's Pyramid: Chronological

A. **Exposition**: Here, you're setting the scene, introducing characters, and preparing the reader for the journey.

B. **Rising action**: In this part, things start to happen. You (or your characters) encounter conflict, set out on a journey, meet people, etc.

C. **Climax**: This is the peak of the action, the main showdown, the central event toward which your story has been building.

D. **Falling action**: Now things start to wind down. You (or your characters) come away from the climactic experience changed—at the very least, you are wiser for having had that experience.

E. **Resolution**: Also known as dénouement, this is where all the loose ends get tied up. The central conflict has been resolved, and everything is back to normal, but perhaps a bit different.

## In Medias Res

While Freytag's Pyramid tends to follow a linear or chronological structure, a story that begins in medias res begins in the middle of the action. In fact, the Latin translation for this term most literally means "in the middle of things." This is a more exciting way to start a story in that it grabs the readers' attention quickly.

*There I was floating in the middle of the ocean, the sharks with laser beams attached to their heads circling hungrily, the red lights bouncing off of the floating disco ball upon which I clung to for dear life, when I thought back to the events which led to this horrifying situation...*

The best In Medias Res beginnings make the reader go "WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON HERE?" and want to continue reading. They will usually follow the following inversion of Freytag's Pyramid:

C. **Climax**: This is the peak of the action, the main showdown, the central event of the story where the conflict comes to a head.

A. **Exposition**: Here, you're setting the scene, introducing characters, and preparing the reader for the journey.

B. **Rising action**: In this part, things start to happen. You (or your characters) encounter conflict, set out on a journey, meet people, etc.

C. **Climax**: the story briefly returns to the moment where it started, though usually not in a way which is redundant (not the exact same writing or details)

D. **Falling action**: Now things start to wind down. You (or your characters) come away from the climactic experience changed—at the very least, you are wiser for having had that experience.

E. **Resolution**: Also known as dénouement, this is where all the loose ends get tied up. The central conflict has been resolved, and everything is back to normal, but perhaps a bit different.

### Nonlinear Narrative

A nonlinear narrative may be told in a series of flashbacks or vignettes. It might jump back and forth in time. Stories about trauma are often told in this fashion. If using this plot form, be sure to make clear to readers how/why the jumps in time are occurring. A writer might clarify jumps in time by adding time-stamps or dates or by using symbolic images to connect different vignettes.

### Pacing

While scope determines the boundaries of plot, and sequencing determines where the plot goes, pacing determines how quickly readers move through the story. In short, it is the amount of time you dedicate to describing each event in the story.

I include *pacing* with *sequence* because a change to one often influences the other. Put simply, pacing refers to the speed and fluidity with which a reader moves through your story. You can play with pacing by moving more quickly through events, or even by experimenting with sentence and paragraph length. Consider how the "flow" of the following examples differ:

| | |
|---|---|
| The train screeched to a halt. A flock of pigeons took flight as the conductor announced, "We'll be stuck here for a few minutes." | Lost in my thoughts, I shuddered as the train ground to a full stop in the middle of an intersection. I was surprised, jarred by the unannounced and abrupt jerking of the car. I sought clues for our stop outside the window. All I saw were pigeons as startled and clueless as I. |

## Characters

A major requirement of any story is the use of characters. Characters bring life to the story. Keep in mind that while human characters are most frequently featured in stories, sometimes there are non-human characters in a story such as animals or even the environment itself. Consider, for example, the ways in which the desert itself might be considered a character in "Bajadas" by Francisco Cantú.

### Characterization

Whether a story is fiction or nonfiction, writers should spend some time thinking about characterization: the development of characters through actions, descriptions, and dialogue. Your audience will be more engaged with and sympathetic toward your narrative if they can vividly imagine the characters as real people.

Like setting description, characterization relies on specificity. Consider the following contrast in character descriptions:

| | |
|---|---|
| My mom is great. She is an average-sized brunette with brown eyes. She is very loving and supportive, and I know I can rely on her. She taught me everything I know. | In addition to some of my father's idiosyncrasies, however, he is also one of the most kind-hearted and loving people in my life. One of his signature actions is the 'cry-smile,' in which he simultaneously cries and smiles any time he experiences a strong positive emotion (which is almost daily). |

How does the "cry-smile" detail enhance the characterization of the speaker's parent?

To break it down to process, characterization can be accomplished in two ways:

a. **Directly**, through specific description of the character—What kind of clothes do they wear? What do they look, smell, sound like?—or,
b. **Indirectly**, through the behaviors, speech, and thoughts of the character—What kind of language, dialect, or register do they use? What is the tone, inflection, and timbre of their voice? How does their manner of speaking reflect their attitude toward the listener? How do their actions reflect their traits? What's on their mind that they won't share with the world?

Thinking through these questions will help you get a better understanding of each character (often including yourself!). You do not need to include all the details, but they should inform your description, dialogue, and narration.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Round characters | are very detailed, requiring attentive description of their traits and behaviors. | Your most important characters should be round: the added detail will help your reader better visualize, understand, and care about them. |
| Flat characters | are minimally detailed, only briefly sketched or named. | Less important characters should take up less space and will therefore have less detailed characterization. |
| Static characters | remain the same throughout the narrative. | Even though all of us are always changing, some people will behave and appear the same throughout the course of your story. Static characters can serve as a reference point for dynamic characters to show the latter's growth. |
| Dynamic characters | noticeably change within the narrative, typically as a result of the events. | Most likely, you will be a dynamic character in your personal narrative because such stories are centered around an impactful experience, relationship, or place. Dynamic characters learn and grow over time, either gradually or with an epiphany. |

## Point of View

The position from which your story is told will help shape your reader's experience, the language your narrator and characters use, and even the plot itself. You might recognize this from *Dear White People* Volume 1 or *Arrested Development* Season 4, both Netflix TV series. Typically, each episode in these seasons explores similar plot events, but from a different character's perspective. Because of their unique vantage points, characters can tell different stories about the same realities.

This is, of course, true for our lives more generally. In addition to our differences in knowledge and experiences, we also interpret and understand events differently. In our writing, narrative position is informed by point-of-view and the emotional valences I refer to here as tone and mood.

**point-of-view (POV):** the perspective from which a story is told.

- This is a grammatical phenomenon—i.e., it decides pronoun use—but, more importantly, it impacts tone, mood, scope, voice, and plot.

Although point-of-view will influence tone and mood, we can also consider what feelings we want to convey and inspire independently as part of our narrative position.

**tone:** the emotional register of the story's language.

- What emotional state does the narrator of the story (not the author, but the speaker) seem to be in? What emotions are you trying to imbue in your writing?

**mood:** the emotional register a reader experiences.

- What emotions do you want your reader to experience? Are they the same feelings you experienced at the time?

A Non-Comprehensive Breakdown of POV

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1st person** | Narrator uses 1st person pronouns (I/me/mine or us/we/ours) | Can include internal monologue (motives, thoughts, feelings) of the narrator. Limited certainty of motives, thoughts, or feelings of other characters. | I tripped on the last stair, preoccupied by what my sister had said, and felt my stomach drop. |
| **2nd person** | Narrator uses 2nd person pronouns (you/you/your) | Speaks *to* the reader, as if the reader is the protagonist OR uses apostrophe to speak to an absent or unidentified person | Your breath catches as you feel the phantom step.<br>O, staircase, how you keep me awake at night. |
| **3rd person limited** | Narrator uses 3rd person pronouns (he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/they/theirs) | Sometimes called "close" third person. Observes and narrates but sticks near one or two characters, in contrast with 3rd person omniscient. | He was visibly frustrated by his sister's nonchalance and wasn't watching his step. |
| **3rd person omniscient** | Narrator uses 3rd person pronouns (he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/they/theirs) | Observes and narrates from an all-knowing perspective. Can include internal monologue (motives, thoughts, feelings) of all characters. | Beneath the surface, his sister felt regretful. *Why did I tell him that?* she wondered. |
| **stream-of-consciousness** | Narrator uses inconsistent pronouns, or no pronouns at all | Approximates the digressive, wandering, and ungrammatical thought processes of the narrator. | But now, a thousand empty—*where?*—and she, with head shake, will be fine—AHH! |

Typically, you will tell your story from the first-person point-of-view, but personal narratives can also be told from a different perspective; I recommend "Comatose Dreams" to illustrate this at work. As you're developing and revising your writing, try to inhabit different authorial positions: What would change if you used the third person POV instead of first person? What different meanings would your reader find if you told this story with a different tone—bitter instead of nostalgic, proud rather than embarrassed, sarcastic rather than genuine?

Furthermore, there are many rhetorical situations that call for different POVs. (For instance, you may have noticed that this book uses the second-person very frequently.) So, as you evaluate which POV will be most effective for your current rhetorical situation, bear in mind that the same choice might inform your future writing.

## Dialogue

**dialogue:** communication between two or more characters. For example...

"Hate to break it to you, but your story is boring."

"What? Why do you say that?" he stuttered, face reddening.

"Because you did not include any dialogue," she laughed.

Think of the different conversations you've had today, with family, friends, or even classmates. Within each of those conversations, there were likely pre-established relationships that determined how you talked to each other: each is its own rhetorical situation. A dialogue with your friends, for example, may be far different from one with your family. These relationships can influence tone of voice, word choice (such as using slang, jargon, or lingo), what details we share, and even what language we speak.

Effective dialogue often demonstrates the traits of a character or the relationship of characters. From reading or listening to how people talk to one another, we often infer the relationships they have. We can tell if they're having an argument or conflict, if one is experiencing some internal conflict or trauma, if they're friendly acquaintances or cold strangers, even how their emotional or professional attributes align or create opposition.

Often, dialogue does more than just one thing, which makes it a challenging tool to master. When dialogue isn't doing more than one thing, it can feel flat or expositional, like a bad movie or TV show where everyone is saying their feelings or explaining what

just happened. For example, there is a difference between “No thanks, I’m not hungry” and “I’ve told you, I’m not hungry.” The latter shows frustration, and hints at a previous conversation. Exposition can have a place in dialogue, but we should use it deliberately, with an awareness of how natural or unnatural it may sound. We should be aware how dialogue impacts the pacing of the narrative. Dialogue can be musical and create tempo, with either quick back and forth, or long drawn out pauses between two characters. Rhythm of a dialogue can also tell us about the characters’ relationship and emotions.

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from "Chapter 2: Telling a Story" from *EmpoWord* by Shane Abrams, Chapter 2, licensed CC BY NC 4.0 by Portland State University

---

This page titled 2.2: Elements of Creative Nonfiction is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **2.2: Elements of Creative Nonfiction** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 2.3: "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009)

## The Danger of a Single Story

By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



"Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie" by Howard County Library System is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call "the danger of the single story." I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria. My mother says that I started reading at the age of two, although I think four is probably close to the truth. So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books.

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out.

Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.

My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer, because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was.

And for many years afterwards, I would have a desperate desire to taste ginger beer. But that is another story.

What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the foreign books.

But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.

Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned eight, we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey.

She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this

single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.

I must say that before I went to the U.S., I didn't consciously identify as African. But in the U.S., whenever Africa came up, people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity, and in many ways I think of myself now as African. Although I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country, the most recent example being my otherwise wonderful flight from Lagos two days ago, in which there was an announcement on the Virgin flight about the charity work in "India, Africa and other countries."

So, after I had spent some years in the U.S. as an African, I began to understand my roommate's response to me. If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner. I would see Africans in the same way that I, as a child, had seen Fide's family.

This single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature. Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Lok, who sailed to west Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as "beasts who have no houses," he writes, "They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts."

Now, I've laughed every time I've read this. And one must admire the imagination of John Lok. But what is important about his writing is that it represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West: A tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are "half devil, half child."

And so, I began to realize that my American roommate must have throughout her life seen and heard different versions of this single story, as had a professor, who once told me that my novel was not "authentically African." Now, I was quite willing to contend that there were a number of things wrong with the novel, that it had failed in a number of places, but I had not quite imagined that it had failed at achieving something called African authenticity. In fact, I did not know what African authenticity was. The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man. My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African.

But I must quickly add that I too am just as guilty in the question of the single story. A few years ago, I visited Mexico from the U.S. The political climate in the U.S. at the time was tense, and there were debates going on about immigration. And, as often happens in America, immigration became synonymous with Mexicans. There were endless stories of Mexicans as people who were fleecing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border, that sort of thing.

I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then, I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself.

So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

I recently spoke at a university where a student told me that it was such a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in my novel. I told him that I had just read a novel called "American Psycho" --

-- and that it was such a shame that young Americans were serial murderers.

Now, obviously I said this in a fit of mild irritation.

But it would never have occurred to me to think that just because I had read a novel in which a character was a serial killer that he was somehow representative of all Americans. This is not because I am a better person than that student, but

because of America's cultural and economic power, I had many stories of America. I had read Tyler and Updike and Steinbeck and Gaitskill. I did not have a single story of America.

When I learned, some years ago, that writers were expected to have had really unhappy childhoods to be successful, I began to think about how I could invent horrible things my parents had done to me.

But the truth is that I had a very happy childhood, full of laughter and love, in a very close-knit family.

But I also had grandfathers who died in refugee camps. My cousin Polle died because he could not get adequate healthcare. One of my closest friends, Okoloma, died in a plane crash because our fire trucks did not have water. I grew up under repressive military governments that devalued education, so that sometimes, my parents were not paid their salaries. And so, as a child, I saw jam disappear from the breakfast table, then margarine disappeared, then bread became too expensive, then milk became rationed. And most of all, a kind of normalized political fear invaded our lives.

All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: There are immense ones, such as the horrific rapes in Congo and depressing ones, such as the fact that 5,000 people apply for one job vacancy in Nigeria. But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them.

I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.

So what if before my Mexican trip, I had followed the immigration debate from both sides, the U.S. and the Mexican? What if my mother had told us that Fide's family was poor and hardworking? What if we had an African television network that broadcast diverse African stories all over the world? What the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of stories."

What if my roommate knew about my Nigerian publisher, Muhtar Bakare, a remarkable man who left his job in a bank to follow his dream and start a publishing house? Now, the conventional wisdom was that Nigerians don't read literature. He disagreed. He felt that people who could read, would read, if you made literature affordable and available to them.

Shortly after he published my first novel, I went to a TV station in Lagos to do an interview, and a woman who worked there as a messenger came up to me and said, "I really liked your novel. I didn't like the ending. Now, you must write a sequel, and this is what will happen ..."

And she went on to tell me what to write in the sequel. I was not only charmed, I was very moved. Here was a woman, part of the ordinary masses of Nigerians, who were not supposed to be readers. She had not only read the book, but she had taken ownership of it and felt justified in telling me what to write in the sequel.

Now, what if my roommate knew about my friend Funmi Iyanda, a fearless woman who hosts a TV show in Lagos, and is determined to tell the stories that we prefer to forget? What if my roommate knew about the heart procedure that was performed in the Lagos hospital last week? What if my roommate knew about contemporary Nigerian music, talented people singing in English and Pidgin, and Igbo and Yoruba and Ijo, mixing influences from Jay-Z to Fela to Bob Marley to their grandfathers.

What if my roommate knew about the female lawyer who recently went to court in Nigeria to challenge a ridiculous law that required women to get their husband's consent before renewing their passports? What if my roommate knew about Nollywood, full of innovative people making films despite great technical odds, films so popular that they really are the best example of Nigerians consuming what they produce? What if my roommate knew about my wonderfully ambitious hair braider, who has just started her own business selling hair extensions? Or about the millions of other Nigerians who start businesses and sometimes fail, but continue to nurse ambition?

Every time I am home I am confronted with the usual sources of irritation for most Nigerians: our failed infrastructure, our failed government, but also by the incredible resilience of people who thrive despite the government, rather than because of it. I teach writing workshops in Lagos every summer, and it is amazing to me how many people apply, how many people are eager to write, to tell stories.

My Nigerian publisher and I have just started a non-profit called Farafina Trust, and we have big dreams of building libraries and refurbishing libraries that already exist and providing books for state schools that don't have anything in their libraries, and also of organizing lots and lots of workshops, in reading and writing, for all the people who are eager to tell our many stories.

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

The American writer Alice Walker wrote this about her Southern relatives who had moved to the North. She introduced them to a book about the Southern life that they had left behind. "They sat around, reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained."

I would like to end with this thought: That when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.

Thank you.

---

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie grew up in Nigeria. She is the author of the novels *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*,and *Americanah*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was named one of The New York Times Top Ten Best Books of 2013. Her 2009 TED Talk, The Danger of A Single Story, is now one of the most-viewed TED Talks of all time.



The Danger of a Single Story by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

This page titled 2.3: "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **3.1: Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009)** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 2.4: Discussion Questions on "The Danger of a Single Story"

## Discussion Questions on “The Danger of a Single Story”

1. How does the author use the following elements to make a point about the "danger of a single story”? Find at least one example of each element within the text.

- **Setting**
- **Descriptive imagery**
- **Figurative language**
- **Plot**
- **Character**

2. Consider how the creative elements of this text help to bring it alive and reinforce the overall message. What is that message?

3. What is the relationship between power and the single story? Find a quotation that illustrates this idea.

4. Adichie ends her essay by saying, “when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.” What do you think she means by this?

---

This page titled 2.4: Discussion Questions on "The Danger of a Single Story" is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Kelsey Ford.

# 2.5: "The Blue" by Anne-Marie Oomen (2018)



*"Yarn Tree!" by knittinandnoodlin is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

In the end, the creatures found it. They were the ones who knew what to do.

A couple decades ago my dear friend Mimi gave me a blue sweater. Not just any blue sweater but one that had been knitted by her mother in Denmark. When her mother died, Mimi—who had gone to be with her—brought it back, and gave it to me. Open stitches, soft wool, equally soft shape—that loose pullover style meant for cuddling. And blue, a stunning, singing, deep song. Winter blue, dark sapphire blue, ah yes, Scandinavian blue.

I cherished the sweater. Each winter, I anticipated pulling it out of storage on the coldest mornings of our Michigan darkness. The warmth and color never faded; I could rely on it when things were unreliable. When I wore it, I always looked to the sky for a match, and found it finally in those clear-hued December evenings. That blue, strongest just before real dark fell.

The winter after I lost my father, I pulled the sweater off the shelf, shook it out, and was shocked and saddened to find moths had invaded. A handful of holes blinked in the weave. I mended it and wore it two more winters, but the yarn had weakened. More holes laced the knit. The sweater was done. Was that the spring I lost two more friends: one, heart attack; another, cerebral hemorrhage?

Finally, I took the blue into my arms, apologized to Mimi's mother, and threw it over the back clothesline hoping maybe the Waxwings would raid it; they like string and single strands of stuff. That sacre bleu hung all summer and early fall; no waxwings. The blue never faded, and with the first snows, it shone against the white of a thin new snow. I looked at it every morning I came to the porch, coffee in hand. Its shabby obstinacy drew my eyes.
I missed my father, my friends more than I could say.

One day, the sweater disappeared. Gone. I can't articulate the contradictions I felt. Relief—some thing had taken it at last, and loss—all over again. That swath of ultramarine had hung like a spirit friendship with a woman I never knew, but I did know because of her skill and her daughter's gift. It also stood for my lost friends. Their spirits, that blue. I studied the ground under the clothesline, scuffed through the garden, searching for the remnants. Nothing.

Later, while packing up the garden one rough-winded day, I caught sight of a blue strand. It led under the woodshed. When I dislodged an old clay pot, there, a blue tangle woven with dry leaves in a nest where a mouse or vole had kept warm. All through late fall, I found traces, a strand hooked in the wood pile, a filament caught in the window box, and once, what might have been a clump in a tree. A squirrels' nest woven blue into the cross-hatch of high-tree debris?

They were using it, but I had not seen. Like grief I suppose, eventually we weave it in, but invisibly.

Around Thanksgiving, I found what remained of the sweater in the ravine below our house. Just tatters, but identifiable. It had finally faded to the tired blue after storm. What remained fell apart in my hands; those warm mornings frayed in my fingertips. I stood on the hillside, amazed. Here was a piece of sky, now of earth, scattered by chance winds and the choices of wild creatures. What was lost? Warmth, color, connection? What was gained? A nest, a coil of new meaning, some organic fiber woven into a home. I leave it there in the wild. I'm a fool for loss, but there's also beauty: sky on a partly sunny morning, light warming the winter garden, the ecology of being human with mouse, squirrel, sweater and winter.
That deep blue dusk as dark comes on.

It's not done yet. Nearing Solstice, as we move wood out of the woodshed, I discover a phoebe nest in the eaves. Left from summer. When I pull it down to check if the nest had been a success, there, a thin filament of blue looping in the grassy bowl of emptiness. All through our woods, that blue has been knitted a second time. This is how creatures do it, making useful those faded but enduring fibers. Here, just before the year turns, I tug a single-strand from spiraled grasses. I let it catch the wind. Here's what matters, the way this cast-off never fully decays, the way friendship lives on in memory, and then becomes sacred in its adaptive use—blue thread still linking an endless sky to a battered but vital earth.

---

Anne-Marie Oomen is author of *Lake Michigan Mermaid* with Linda Nemec Foster (Michigan Notable Book for 2018), *Love, Sex and 4-H* (Next Generation Indie Award for Memoir), *Pulling Down the Barn* (Michigan Notable Book); and *Uncoded Woman* (poetry), among others. She edited *ELEMENTAL: A Collection of Michigan Nonfiction*. She teaches at Solstice MFA at Pine Manor College (MA), Interlochen's College of Creative Arts (MI), and at conferences throughout the country.




- Contributors: "The Blue" by Anne-Marie Ooman is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. This work was previously published on mynorth.com.

This page titled 2.5: "The Blue" by Anne-Marie Oomen (2018) is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **3.7: Oomen, Anne-Marie "The Blue" (2018)** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 2.6: Discussion Questions on "The Blue"

## Discussion Questions on “The Blue” by Anne-Marie Oomen

1. How does the author describe the color of blue in order to get the audience to really “see” it? Which descriptive phrases are most vivid for you?

2. What is her message in this essay? Find a line that really helps the reader to see that message?

3. Why does the author tell the audience where the sweater came from? Is that significant to her message?

4. How does the symbol of this blue sweater help to convey that message?

---

This page titled 2.6: Discussion Questions on "The Blue" is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Kelsey Ford.

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

## 3: Fiction


3.1: What is Fiction?
3.2: Short Stories versus the Novel
3.3: How to Read Fiction
3.4: Elements of Fiction
3.5: "The Rocking Horse Winner" by D.H. Lawrence
3.6: Discussion Questions on "The Rocking Horse Winner"
3.7: Characterization
3.8: Plot
3.9: Setting
3.10: Narration (Point of View)
3.11: Discussion Questions on "The Shawl" by Louise Erdrich
3.12: Theme
3.13: Rhetorical and Literary Devices
3.14: Word Choice, Tone, Voice, and Style
3.15: Taking Notes on a Novel


---


3: Fiction is shared under a CC BY-NC license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 3.1: What is Fiction?

## Overview



Image from Pixabay

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

Gutkind, Lee. "A Million Little Choices: The ABCs of CNF." *Creative Nonfiction* Issue 29, 2006.

Wyatt, Edward. "Author Is Kicked Out of Oprah Winfrey's Book Club." *The New York Times*, 27 January 2006.

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from the course Approaching Prose Fiction by Dr. Steve Padley, provided on the OpenLearn Website, licensed under CC-BY-NC-SA

---

This page titled 3.1: What is Fiction? is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **4.1: What is Fiction?** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY 4.0.

# 3.2: 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

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from Literary Genres, **Authored by**: Jan-Louis Nagel **Provided by**: NDLA. **License**: *CC BY-NC-SA*
- Adapted from What is a Novel, **Authored by**: Eli M. Huseby **Provided by**: NDLA. **License**: *CC BY-NC-SA*

---

3.2: Short Stories versus the Novel is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- **4.2: Short Stories versus the Novel** has no license indicated.

## 3.3: How to Read Fiction

# How to Read and Analyze Fiction



CC-BY-NC-SA-4.0 Supplier: Corbis NTB scanpix

> *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.



*CC-BY-NC-SA-4.0 Photographer: George Charles Beresford*

## 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 out 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.

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from the course Approaching Prose Fiction by Dr. Steve Padley, provided on the OpenLearn Website, licensed under CC-BY-NC-SA
- Adapted from Writing About Literature: The Basics by CK-12, license CC-BY-NC

This page titled 3.3: How to Read Fiction is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **4.4: How to Read Fiction** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

https://human.libretexts.org/@go/page/353474

# 3.4: 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 themself 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?

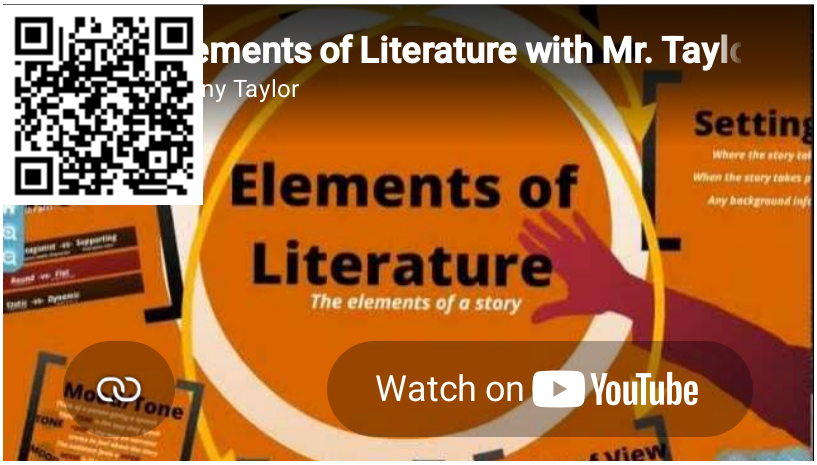
### Style

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.

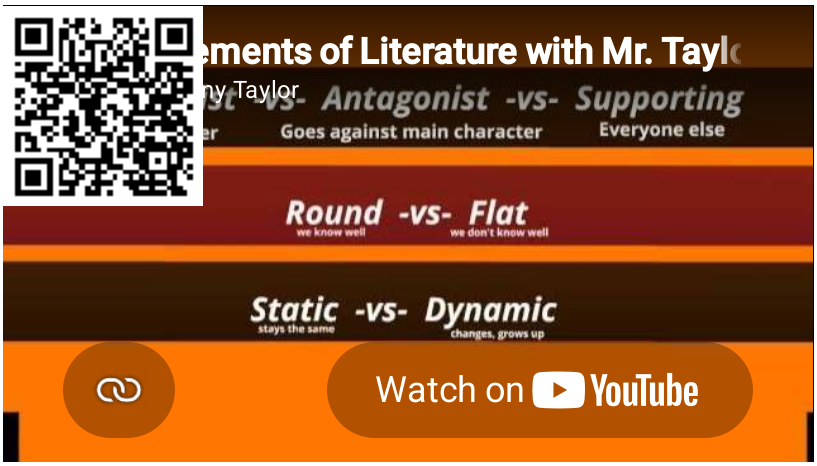
- Is the text full of figurative language?
- Does the author use a lot of symbolism? Metaphors, similes?
  An example of a metaphor is when someone says, "My love, you *are* a rose." An example of a simile is "My darling, you are *like* a rose."
- What images are used?

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

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from Writing About Literature: The Basics by CK-12, license CC-BY-NC
- Adapted from How to Analyze a Novel by Carol Dwankowski, provided by NDLA, license CC-BY-SA

---

This page titled 3.4: Elements of Fiction is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **4.5: Elements of Fiction** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

# 3.5: "The Rocking Horse Winner" by D.H. Lawrence

## Biography

David Herbert Lawrence, born on September 11, 1885, was an English novelist, poet, playwright, essayist, literary critic, and painter who published as D. H. Lawrence. His collected works, among other things, represent an extended reflection upon the de-humanising effects of modernity and industrialization. In them, some of the issues Lawrence explores are emotional health, vitality, spontaneity, and instinct.

Lawrence's opinions earned him many enemies and he endured official persecution, censorship, and misrepresentation of his creative work throughout the second half of his life, much of which he spent in a voluntary exile, which he called his "savage pilgrimage."

At the time of his death, on March 2, 1930, his public reputation was that of a pornographer who had wasted his considerable talents. E. M. Forster, in an obituary notice, challenged this widely held view, describing him as, "The greatest imaginative novelist of our generation." Later, the influential Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis championed both his artistic integrity and his moral seriousness, placing much of Lawrence's fiction within the canonical "great tradition" of the English novel.

## Short Story: "The Rocking Horse Winner"

(Published in 1926)

There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love, and the love turned to dust. She had bonny children, yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them. They looked at her coldly, as if they were finding fault with her. And hurriedly she felt she must cover up some fault in herself. Yet what it was that she must cover up she never knew. Nevertheless, when her children were present, she always felt the centre of her heart go hard. This troubled her, and in her manner she was all the more gentle and anxious for her children, as if she loved them very much. Only she herself knew that at the centre of her heart was a hard little place that could not feel love, no, not for anybody. Everybody else said of her: "She is such a good mother. She adores her children." Only she herself, and her children themselves, knew it was not so. They read it in each other's eyes.There were a boy and two little girls. They lived in a pleasant house, with a garden, and they had discreet servants, and felt themselves superior to anyone in the neighbourhood.Although they lived in style, they felt always an anxiety in the house. There was never enough money. The mother had a small income, and the father had a small income, but not nearly enough for the social position which they had to keep up. The father went in to town to some office. But though he had good prospects, these prospects never materialised. There was always the grinding sense of the shortage of money, though the style was always kept up.At last the mother said, "*I* will see if *I* can't make something." But she did not know where to begin. She racked her brains, and tried this thing and the other, but could not find anything successful. The failure made deep lines come into her face. Her children were growing up, they would have to go to school. There must be more money, there must be more money. The father, who was always very handsome and expensive in his tastes, seemed as if he never *would* be able to do anything worth doing. And the mother, who had a great belief in herself, did not succeed any better, and her tastes were just as expensive. And so the house came to be haunted by the unspoken phrase: *There must be more money! There must be more money!* The children could hear it all the time, though nobody said it aloud. They heard it at Christmas, when the expensive and splendid toys filled the nursery. Behind the shining modern rocking-horse, behind the smart doll's-house, a voice would start whispering: "There *must* be more money! There *must* be more money!" And the children would stop playing, to listen for a moment. They would look into each other's eyes, to see if they had all heard. And each one saw in the eyes of the other two that they too had heard. "There *must* be more money! There *must* be more money!" It came whispering from the springs of the still-swaying rocking-horse, and even the horse, bending his wooden, champing head, heard it. The big doll, sitting so pink and smirking in her new pram, could hear it quite plainly, and seemed to be smirking all the more self-consciously because of it. The foolish puppy, too, that took the place of the teddy-bear, he was looking so extraordinarily foolish for no other reason but that he heard the secret whisper all over the house: "There *must* be more money."

Yet nobody ever said it aloud. The whisper was everywhere, and therefore no one spoke it. Just as no one ever says: "We are breathing!" in spite of the fact that breath is coming and going all the time.

"Mother!" said the boy Paul one day. "Why don't we keep a car of our own? Why do we always use uncle's, or else a taxi?"

“Because we’re the poor members of the family,” said the mother.

“But why are we, mother?”

“Well—I suppose,” she said slowly and bitterly, “it’s because your father has no luck.”

The boy was silent for some time.

“Is luck money, mother?” he asked, rather timidly.

“No, Paul! Not quite. It’s what causes you to have money.”

“Oh!” said Paul vaguely. “I thought when Uncle Oscar said *filthy lucker*, it meant money.”

“*Filthy lucre* does mean money,” said the mother. “But it’s lucre, not luck.”

“Oh!” said the boy. “Then what *is* luck, mother?”

“It’s what causes you to have money. If you’re lucky you have money. That’s why it’s better to be born lucky than rich. If you’re rich, you may lose your money. But if you’re lucky, you will always get more money.”

“Oh! Will you! And is father not lucky?”

“Very unlucky, I should say,” she said bitterly.

The boy watched her with unsure eyes.

“Why?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Nobody ever knows why one person is lucky and another unlucky.”

“Don’t they? Nobody at all? Does *nobody* know?”

“Perhaps God! But He never tells.”

“He ought to, then. And aren’t you lucky either, mother?”

“I can’t be, if I married an unlucky husband.”

“But by yourself, aren’t you?”

“I used to think I was, before I married. Now I think I am very unlucky indeed.”

“Why?”

“Well—never mind! Perhaps I’m not really,” she said.

The child looked at her, to see if she meant it. But he saw, by the lines of her mouth, that she was only trying to hide something from him.

“Well, anyhow,” he said stoutly, “I’m a lucky person.”

“Why?” said his mother, with a sudden laugh.

He stared at her. He didn’t even know why he had said it.

“God told me,” he asserted, brazening it out.

“I hope He did, dear!” she said, again with a laugh, but rather bitter.

“He did, mother!”

“Excellent!” said the mother, using one of her husband’s exclamations.

The boy saw she did not believe him; or rather, that she paid no attention to his assertion. This angered him somewhere, and made him want to compel her attention.

He went off by himself, vaguely, in a childish way, seeking for the clue to “luck”. Absorbed, taking no heed of other people, he went about with a sort of stealth, seeking inwardly for luck. He wanted luck, he wanted it, he wanted it. When the two girls were playing dolls, in the nursery, he would sit on his big rocking-horse, charging madly into space, with a frenzy that made the little

girls peer at him uneasily. Wildly the horse careered, the waving dark hair of the boy tossed, his eyes had a strange glare in them. The little girls dared not speak to him.

When he had ridden to the end of his mad little journey, he climbed down and stood in front of his rocking-horse, staring fixedly into its lowered face. Its red mouth was slightly open, its big eye was wide and glassy bright.

“Now!” he would silently command the snorting steed. “Now take me to where there is luck! Now take me!”

And he would slash the horse on the neck with the little whip he had asked Uncle Oscar for. He *knew* the horse could take him to where there was luck, if only he forced it. So he would mount again, and start on his furious ride, hoping at last to get there. He knew he could get there.

“You’ll break your horse, Paul!” said the nurse.

“He’s always riding like that! I wish he’d leave off!” said his elder sister Joan.

But he only glared down on them in silence. Nurse gave him up. She could make nothing of him. Anyhow he was growing beyond her.

One day his mother and his Uncle Oscar came in when he was on one of his furious rides. He did not speak to them.

“Hallo! you young jockey! Riding a winner?” said his uncle.

“Aren’t you growing too big for a rocking-horse? You’re not a very little boy any longer, you know,” said his mother.

But Paul only gave a blue glare from his big, rather close-set eyes. He would speak to nobody when he was in full tilt. His mother watched him with an anxious expression on her face.

At last he suddenly stopped forcing his horse into the mechanical gallop, and slid down.

“Well, I got there!” he announced fiercely, his blue eyes still flaring, and his sturdy long legs straddling apart.

“Where did you get to?” asked his mother.

“Where I wanted to go to,” he flared back at her.

“That’s right, son!” said Uncle Oscar. “Don’t you stop till you get there. What’s the horse’s name?”

“He doesn’t have a name,” said the boy.

“Gets on without all right?” asked the uncle.

“Well, he has different names. He was called Sansovino last week.”

“Sansovino, eh? Won the Ascot[3]. How did you know his name?”

“He always talks about horse-races with Bassett,” said Joan.

The uncle was delighted to find that his small nephew was posted with all the racing news. Bassett, the young gardener who had been wounded in the left foot in the war, and had got his present job through Oscar Cresswell, whose batman[4] he had been, was a perfect blade of the “turf”. He lived in the racing events, and the small boy lived with him.

Oscar Cresswell got it all from Bassett.

“Master Paul comes and asks me, so I can’t do more than tell him, sir,” said Bassett, his face terribly serious, as if he were speaking of religious matters.

“And does he ever put anything on a horse he fancies?”

“Well—I don’t want to give him away—he’s a young sport, a fine sport, sir. Would you mind asking him himself? He sort of takes a pleasure in it, and perhaps he’d feel I was giving him away, sir, if you don’t mind.”

Bassett was serious as a church.

The uncle went back to his nephew, and took him off for a ride in the car.

“Say, Paul, old man, do you ever put anything on a horse?” the uncle asked.

The boy watched the handsome man closely.

“Why, do you think I oughtn’t to?” he parried.

“Not a bit of it! I thought perhaps you might give me a tip for the Lincoln[5].”

The car sped on into the country, going down to Uncle Oscar’s place in Hampshire.

“Honour bright?” said the nephew.

“Honour bright, son!” said the uncle.

“Well, then, Daffodil.”[6]

“Daffodil! I doubt it, sonny. What about Mirza?”

“I only know the winner,” said the boy. “That’s Daffodil!”

“Daffodil, eh?” There was a pause. Daffodil was an obscure horse comparatively.

“Uncle!”

“Yes, son?”

“You won’t let it go any further, will you? I promised Bassett.”

“Bassett be damned, old man! What’s he got to do with it?”

“We’re partners! We’ve been partners from the first! Uncle, he lent me my first five shillings, which I lost. I promised him, honour bright, it was only between me and him: only you gave me that ten-shilling note I started winning with, so I thought you were lucky. You won’t let it go any further, will you?”

The boy gazed at his uncle from those big, hot, blue eyes, set rather close together. The uncle stirred and laughed uneasily.

“Right you are, son! I’ll keep your tip private. Daffodil, eh! How much are you putting on him?”

“All except twenty pounds,” said the boy. “I keep that in reserve.”

The uncle thought it a good joke.

“You keep twenty pounds in reserve, do you, you young romancer? What are you betting, then?”

“I’m betting three hundred,” said the boy gravely. “But it’s between you and me, Uncle Oscar! Honour bright?”

The uncle burst into a roar of laughter.

“It’s between you and me all right, you young Nat Gould,”[7] he said, laughing. “But where’s your three hundred?”

“Bassett keeps it for me. We’re partners.”

“You are, are you! And what is Bassett putting on Daffodil?”

“He won’t go quite as high as I do, I expect. Perhaps he’ll go a hundred and fifty.”

“What, pennies?” laughed the uncle.

“Pounds,” said the child, with a surprised look at his uncle. “Bassett keeps a bigger reserve than I do.”

Between wonder and amusement, Uncle Oscar was silent. He pursued the matter no further, but he determined to take his nephew with him to the Lincoln races.

“Now, son,” he said, “I’m putting twenty on Mirza, and I’ll put five for you on any horse you fancy. What’s your pick?”

“Daffodil, uncle!”

“No, not the fiver on Daffodil!”

“I should if it was my own fiver,” said the child.

“Good! Good! Right you are! A fiver for me and a fiver for you on Daffodil.”

The child had never been to a race-meeting before, and his eyes were blue fire. He pursed his mouth tight, and watched. A Frenchman just in front had put his money on Lancelot. Wild with excitement, he flayed his arms up and down, yelling *'Lancelot! Lancelot/'* in his French accent.

Daffodil came in first, Lancelot second, Mirza third. The child, flushed and with eyes blazing, was curiously serene. His uncle brought him five five-pound notes: four to one.

"What am I to do with these?" he cried, waving them before the boy's eyes.

"I suppose we'll talk to Bassett," said the boy. "I expect I have fifteen hundred now: and twenty in reserve: and this twenty."

His uncle studied him for some moments.

"Look here, son!" he said. "You're not serious about Bassett and that fifteen hundred, are you?"

"Yes, I am. But it's between you and me, uncle! Honour bright!"

"Honour bright all right, son! But I must talk to Bassett."

"If you'd like to be a partner, uncle, with Bassett and me, we could all be partners. Only you'd have to promise, honour bright, uncle, not to let it go beyond us three. Bassett and I are lucky, and you must be lucky, because it was your ten shillings I started winning with . . ."

Uncle Oscar took both Bassett and Paul into Richmond Park[8] for an afternoon, and there they talked.

"It's like this, you see, sir," Bassett said. "Master Paul would get me talking about racing events, spinning yarns, you know, sir. And he was always keen on knowing if I'd made or if I'd lost. It's about a year since, now, that I put five shillings on Blush of Dawn for him: and we lost. Then the luck turned, with that ten shillings he had from you: that we put on Singhalese. And since that time, it's been pretty steady, all things considering. What do you say, Master Paul?"

"We're all right when we're *sure*," said Paul. "It's when we're not quite sure that we go down."

"Oh, but we're careful then," said Bassett.

"But when are you *sure*?" smiled Uncle Oscar.

"It's Master Paul, sir," said Bassett, in a secret, religious voice. "It's as if he had it from heaven. Like Daffodil now, for the Lincoln. That was as sure as eggs."

"Did you put anything on Daffodil?" asked Oscar Cresswell.

"Yes, sir. I made my bit."

"And my nephew?"

Bassett was obstinately silent, looking at Paul.

"I made twelve hundred, didn't I, Bassett? I told uncle I was putting three hundred on Daffodil."

"That's right," said Bassett, nodding.

"But where's the money?" asked the uncle.

"I keep it safe locked up, sir. Master Paul, he can have it any minute he likes to ask for it."

"What, fifteen hundred pounds?"

"And twenty! And *forty*, that is, with the twenty he made on the course."

"It's amazing!" said the uncle.

"If Master Paul offers you to be partners, sir, I would, if I were you: if you'll excuse me," said Bassett.

Oscar Cresswell thought about it.

"I'll see the money," he said.

They drove home again, and sure enough, Bassett came round to the garden-house with fifteen hundred pounds in notes. The twenty pounds reserve was left with Joe Glee, in the Turf Commission deposit.

“You see, it’s all right, uncle, when I’m *sure*! Then we go strong, for all we’re worth. Don’t we, Bassett?”

“We do that, Master Paul.”

“And when are you sure?” said the uncle, laughing.

“Oh, well, sometimes I’m *absolutely* sure, like about Daffodil,” said the boy; “and sometimes I have an idea; and sometimes I haven’t even an idea, have I, Bassett? Then we’re careful, because we mostly go down.”

“You do, do you! And when you’re sure, like about Daffodil, what makes you sure, sonny?”

“Oh, well, I don’t know,” said the boy uneasily. “I’m sure, you know, uncle; that’s all.”

“It’s as if he had it from heaven, sir,” Bassett reiterated.

“I should say so!” said the uncle.

But he became a partner. And when the Leger[9] was coming on, Paul was “sure” about Lively Spark, which was a quite inconsiderable horse. The boy insisted on putting a thousand on the horse, Bassett went for five hundred, and Oscar Cresswell two hundred. Lively Spark came in first, and the betting had been ten to one against him. Paul had made ten thousand.

“You see,” he said, “I was absolutely sure of him.”

Even Oscar Cresswell had cleared two thousand.

“Look here, son,” he said, “this sort of thing makes me nervous.”

“It needn’t, uncle! Perhaps I shan’t be sure again for a long time.”

“But what are you going to do with your money?” asked the uncle.

“Of course,” said the boy, “I started it for mother. She said she had no luck, because father is unlucky, so I thought if *I* was lucky, it might stop whispering.”

“What might stop whispering?”

“Our house! I *hate* our house for whispering.”

“What does it whisper?”

“Why—why”—the boy fidgeted—”why, I don’t know! But it’s always short of money, you know, uncle.”

“I know it, son, I know it.”

“You know people send mother writs, don’t you, uncle?”

“I’m afraid I do,” said the uncle.

“And then the house whispers like people laughing at you behind your back. It’s awful, that is! I thought if I was lucky—”

“You might stop it,” added the uncle.

The boy watched him with big blue eyes, that had an uncanny cold fire in them, and he said never a word.

“Well then!” said the uncle. “What are we doing?”

“I shouldn’t like mother to know I was lucky,” said the boy.

“Why not, son?”

“She’d stop me.”

“I don’t think she would.”

“Oh!”—and the boy writhed in an odd way—”I *don’t* want her to know, uncle.”

“All right, son! We’ll manage it without her knowing.”

They managed it very easily. Paul, at the other's suggestion, handed over five thousand pounds to his uncle, who deposited it with the family lawyer, who was then to inform Paul's mother that a relative had put five thousand pounds into his hands, which sum was to be paid out a thousand pounds at a time, on the mother's birthday, for the next five years.

"So she'll have a birthday present of a thousand pounds for five successive years," said Uncle Oscar. "I hope it won't make it all the harder for her later."

Paul's mother had her birthday in November. The house had been "whispering" worse than ever lately, and even in spite of his luck, Paul could not bear up against it. He was very anxious to see the effect of the birthday letter, telling his mother about the thousand pounds.

When there were no visitors, Paul now took his meals with his parents, as he was beyond the nursery control. His mother went into town nearly every day. She had discovered that she had an odd knack of sketching furs and dress materials, so she worked secretly in the studio of a friend who was the chief "artist" for the leading drapers. She drew the figures of ladies in furs and ladies in silk and sequins for the newspaper advertisements. This young woman artist earned several thousand pounds a year, but Paul's mother only made several hundreds, and she was again dissatisfied. She so wanted to be first in something, and she did not succeed, even in making sketches for drapery advertisements.

She was down to breakfast on the morning of her birthday. Paul watched her face as she read her letters. He knew the lawyer's letter. As his mother read it, her face hardened and became more expressionless. Then a cold, determined look came on her mouth. She hid the letter under the pile of others, and said not a word about it.

"Didn't you have anything nice in the post for your birthday, mother?" said Paul.

"Quite moderately nice," she said, her voice cold and absent.

She went away to town without saying more.

But in the afternoon Uncle Oscar appeared. He said Paul's mother had had a long interview with the lawyer, asking if the whole five thousand could not be advanced at once, as she was in debt.

"What do you think, uncle?" said the boy.

"I leave it to you, son."

"Oh, let her have it, then! We can get some more with the other," said the boy.

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, laddie!" said Uncle Oscar.

"But I'm sure to *know* for the Grand National;[10] or the Lincolnshire; or else the Derby. I'm sure to know for one of them," said Paul.

So Uncle Oscar signed the agreement, and Paul's mother touched the whole five thousand. Then something very curious happened. The voices in the house suddenly went mad, like a chorus of frogs on a spring evening. There were certain new furnishings, and Paul had a tutor. He was *really* going to Eton, his father's school, in the following autumn. There were flowers in the winter, and a blossoming of the luxury Paul's mother had been used to. And yet the voices in the house, behind the sprays of mimosa and almond-blossom, and from under the piles of iridescent cushions, simply trilled and screamed in a sort of ecstasy: "There *must* be more money! Oh-h-h! There *must* be more money! Oh, now, now-w! now-w-w—there *must* be more money!—more than ever! More than ever!"

It frightened Paul terribly. He studied away at his Latin and Greek with his tutors. But his intense hours were spent with Bassett. The Grand National had gone by: he had not "known", and had lost a hundred pounds. Summer was at hand. He was in agony for the Lincoln. But even for the Lincoln he didn't "know", and he lost fifty pounds. He became wild-eyed and strange, as if something were going to explode in him.

"Let it alone, son! Don't you bother about it!" urged Uncle Oscar. But it was as if the boy couldn't really hear what his uncle was saying.

"I've got to know for the Derby! I've *got* to know for the Derby!" the child reiterated, his big blue eyes blazing with a sort of madness.

His mother noticed how overwrought he was.

“You’d better go to the seaside. Wouldn’t you like to go now to the seaside, instead of waiting? I think you’d better,” she said, looking down at him anxiously, her heart curiously heavy because of him.

But the child lifted his uncanny blue eyes.

“I couldn’t possibly go before the Derby, mother!” he said. “I couldn’t possibly!”

“Why not?” she said, her voice becoming heavy when she was opposed. “Why not? You can still go from the seaside to see the Derby with your Uncle Oscar, if that’s what you wish. No need for you to wait here. Besides, I think you care too much about these races. It’s a bad sign. My family has been a gambling family, and you won’t know till you grow up how much damage it has done. But it has done damage. I shall have to send Bassett away, and ask Uncle Oscar not to talk racing to you, unless you promise to be reasonable about it: go away to the seaside and forget it. You’re all nerves!”

“I’ll do what you like, mother, so long as you don’t send me away till after the Derby,” the boy said.

“Send you away from where? Just from this house?”

“Yes,” he said, gazing at her.

“Why, you curious child, what makes you care about this house so much, suddenly? I never knew you loved it!”

He gazed at her without speaking. He had a secret within a secret, something he had not divulged, even to Bassett or to his Uncle Oscar.

But his mother, after standing undecided and a little bit sullen for some moments, said:

“Very well, then! Don’t go to the seaside till after the Derby,[11] if you don’t wish it. But promise me you won’t let your nerves go to pieces! Promise you won’t think so much about horse-racing and *events*, as you call them!”

“Oh no!” said the boy, casually. “I won’t think much about them, mother. You needn’t worry. I wouldn’t worry, mother, if I were you.”

“If you were me and I were you,” said his mother, “I wonder what we *should* do!”

“But you know you needn’t worry, mother, don’t you?” the boy repeated.

“I should be awfully glad to know it,” she said wearily.

“Oh, well, you *can*, you know. I mean you *ought* to know you needn’t worry!” he insisted.

“Ought I? Then I’ll see about it,” she said.

Paul’s secret of secrets was his wooden horse, that which had no name. Since he was emancipated from a nurse and a nursery governess, he had had his rocking-horse removed to his own bedroom at the top of the house.

“Surely you’re too big for a rocking-horse!” his mother had remonstrated.

“Well, you see, mother, till I can have a *real* horse, I like to have *some* sort of animal about,” had been his quaint answer.

“Do you feel he keeps you company?” she laughed.

“Oh yes! He’s very good, he always keeps me company, when I’m there,” said Paul.

So the horse, rather shabby, stood in an arrested prance in the boy’s bedroom.

The Derby was drawing near, and the boy grew more and more tense. He hardly heard what was spoken to him, he was very frail, and his eyes were really uncanny. His mother had sudden strange seizures of uneasiness about him. Sometimes, for half an hour, she would feel a sudden anxiety about him that was almost anguish. She wanted to rush to him at once, and know he was safe.

Two nights before the Derby, she was at a big party in town, when one of her rushes of anxiety about her boy, her first-born, gripped her heart till she could hardly speak. She fought with the feeling, might and main, for she believed in common-sense. But it was too strong. She had to leave the dance and go downstairs to telephone to the country. The children’s nursery governess was terribly surprised and startled at being rung up in the night.

“Are the children all right, Miss Wilmot?”

“Oh yes, they are quite all right.”

“Master Paul? Is he all right?”

“He went to bed as right as a trivet. Shall I run up and look at him?”

“No!” said Paul’s mother reluctantly. “No! Don’t trouble. It’s all right. Don’t sit up. We shall be home fairly soon.” She did not want her son’s privacy intruded upon.

“Very good,” said the governess.

It was about one o’clock when Paul’s mother and father drove up to their house. All was still. Paul’s mother went to her room and slipped off her white fur cloak. She had told her maid not to wait up for her. She heard her husband downstairs, mixing a whisky-and-soda.

And then, because of the strange anxiety at her heart, she stole upstairs to her son’s room. Noiselessly she went along the upper corridor. Was there a faint noise? What was it?

She stood, with arrested muscles, outside his door, listening. There was a strange, heavy, and yet not loud noise. Her heart stood still. It was a soundless noise, yet rushing and powerful. Something huge, in violent, hushed motion. What was it? What in God’s Name was it? She ought to know. She felt that she *knew* the noise. She knew what it was.

Yet she could not place it. She couldn’t say what it was. And on and on it went, like a madness.

Softly, frozen with anxiety and fear, she turned the door-handle.

The room was dark. Yet in the space near the window, she heard and saw something plunging to and fro. She gazed in fear and amazement.

Then suddenly she switched on the light, and saw her son, in his green pyjamas, madly surging on his rocking-horse. The blaze of light suddenly lit him up, as he urged the wooden horse, and lit her up, as she stood, blonde, in her dress of pale green and crystal, in the doorway.

“Paul!” she cried. “Whatever are you doing?”

“It’s Malabar!” he screamed, in a powerful, strange voice. “It’s Malabar!”

His eyes blazed at her for one strange and senseless second, as he ceased urging his wooden horse. Then he fell with a crash to the ground, and she, all her tormented motherhood flooding upon her, rushed to gather him up.

But he was unconscious, and unconscious he remained, with some brain-fever. He talked and tossed, and his mother sat stonily by his side.

“Malabar! It’s Malabar! Bassett, Bassett, I *know*: it’s Malabar!”

So the child cried, trying to get up and urge the rocking-horse that gave him his inspiration.

“What does he mean by Malabar?” asked the heart-frozen mother.

“I don’t know,” said the father, stonily.

“What does he mean by Malabar?” she asked her brother Oscar.

“It’s one of the horses running for the Derby,” was the answer.

And, in spite of himself, Oscar Cresswell spoke to Bassett, and himself put a thousand on Malabar: at fourteen to one.

The third day of the illness was critical: they were watching for a change. The boy, with his rather long, curly hair, was tossing ceaselessly on the pillow. He neither slept nor regained consciousness, and his eyes were like blue stones. His mother sat, feeling her heart had gone, turned actually into a stone.

In the evening, Oscar Cresswell did not come, but Bassett sent a message, saying could he come up for one moment, just one moment? Paul’s mother was very angry at the intrusion, but on second thoughts she agreed. The boy was the same. Perhaps Bassett might bring him to consciousness.

The gardener, a shortish fellow with a little brown moustache and sharp little brown eyes, tiptoed into the room, touched his imaginary cap to Paul's mother, and stole to the bedside, staring with glittering, smallish eyes at the tossing, dying child.

"Master Paul!" he whispered. "Master Paul! Malabar came in first all right, a clean win. I did as you told me. You've made over seventy thousand pounds, you have; you've got over eighty thousand. Malabar came in all right, Master Paul."

"Malabar! Malabar! Did I say Malabar, mother? Did I say Malabar? Do you think I'm lucky, mother? I knew Malabar, didn't I? Over eighty thousand pounds! I call that lucky, don't you, mother? Over eighty thousand pounds! I knew, didn't I know I knew? Malabar came in all right. If I ride my horse till I'm sure, then I tell you, Basset, you can go as high as you like. Did you go for all you were worth, Bassett?"

"I went a thousand on it, Master Paul."

"I never told you, mother, that if I can ride my horse, and *get there*, then I'm absolutely sure—oh, absolutely! Mother, did I ever tell you? I *am* lucky!"

"No, you never did," said the mother.

But the boy died in the night.

And even as he lay dead, his mother heard her brother's voice saying to her: "My God, Hester, you're eighty-odd thousand to the good, and a poor devil of a son to the bad. But, poor devil, poor devil, he's best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner."

---

3.5: "The Rocking Horse Winner" by D.H. Lawrence is shared under a CC BY license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 3.6: Discussion Questions on "The Rocking Horse Winner"

## Discussion Questions on “The Rocking Horse Winner”

1. What is the relationship like between the mother and Paul? How do you know? Find passages that support your interpretation.

2. What is the major conflict in this story? How does it fuel the plot?

3. What is Uncle Oscar’s reaction when he first talks to Paul about betting on the race horses? What do you make of his character?

4. How is Paul determining on which horse to bet? At what point in the story does the reader first discover his method? Is there foreshadowing of the method earlier in the story?

5. Why do you think the father is pretty much absent in the story? Does it have any significance on what happens?

6. How is the house personified? Would you consider it to be a character in the story or do you think it symbolizes something, or both? Find passages in the story to support your assertion.

7. What might the rocking horse symbolize?

8. What does the story seem to suggest about the nature of materialism and greed?

---

This page titled 3.6: Discussion Questions on "The Rocking Horse Winner" is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Kelsey Ford.

# 3.7: Characterization

## 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.

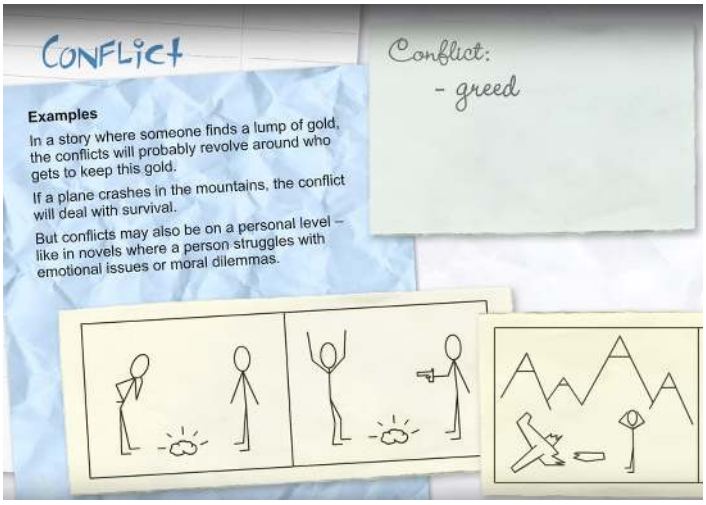
We use the term characterisation to describe the strategies that an author uses to present and develop the characters in a narrative. This use of descriptive techniques will vary from character to character. Some characters are central to a story; often there will be one main character around whom the 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

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from Writing About Literature: The Basics by CK-12, license CC-BY-NC
- Characters and Characterization by Ely M. Huseby, provided by NDLA., license: *CC BY-NC-SA*
- Adapted from the course, Approaching Prose Fiction from OpenLearn licensed under CC-BY-NC-SA

---

This page titled 3.7: Characterization is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **4.6: Character** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 3.8: Plot

## Plot



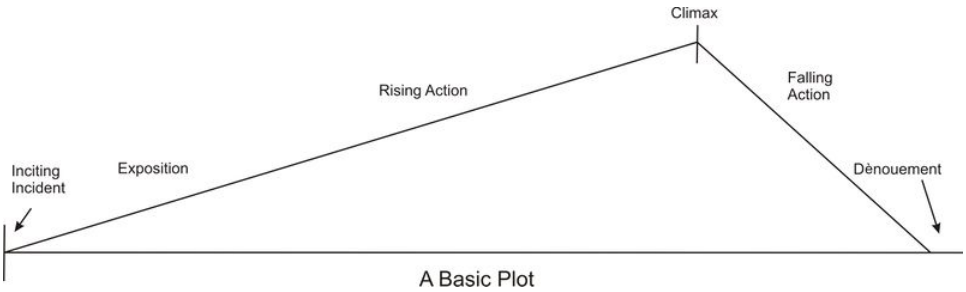
Image from Pixabay

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.

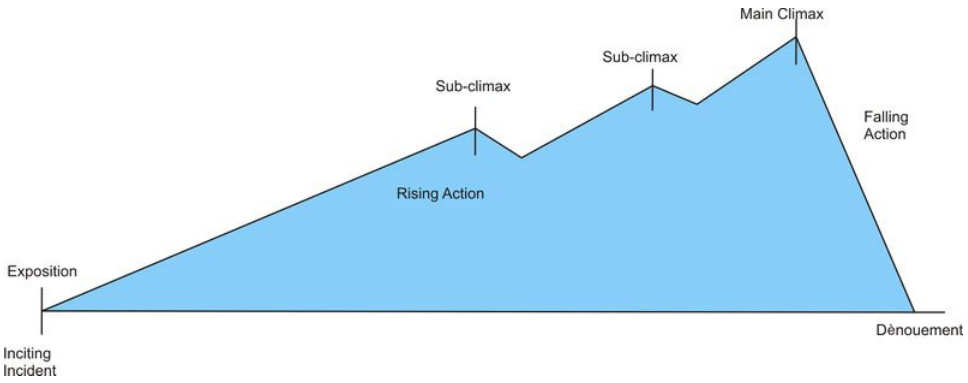
**Exposition:** This is the part of the story that tells us the setting. We find out who the main characters are and where the story takes place. The exposition also hints at the themes and conflicts that will develop later in the story. Exposition can take place throughout a story as characters reveal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

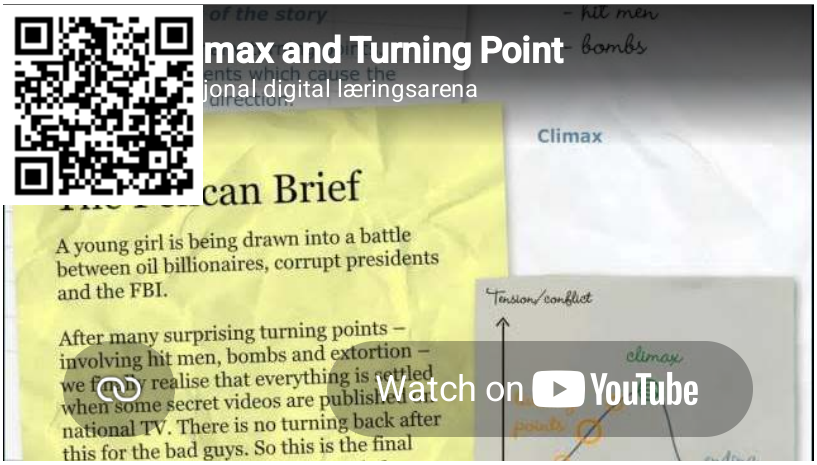
A **flashback** (not shown in the diagram) is a device used to give the reader background information that happened in the past.

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

## Contributors and Attributions

Adapted from Writing About Literature: The Basics by CK-12, license CC-BY-NC

---

This page titled 3.8: Plot is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **4.7: Plot** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 3.9: Setting

## Setting in Fiction



Image from Pixabay

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, politicos 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 Statis 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

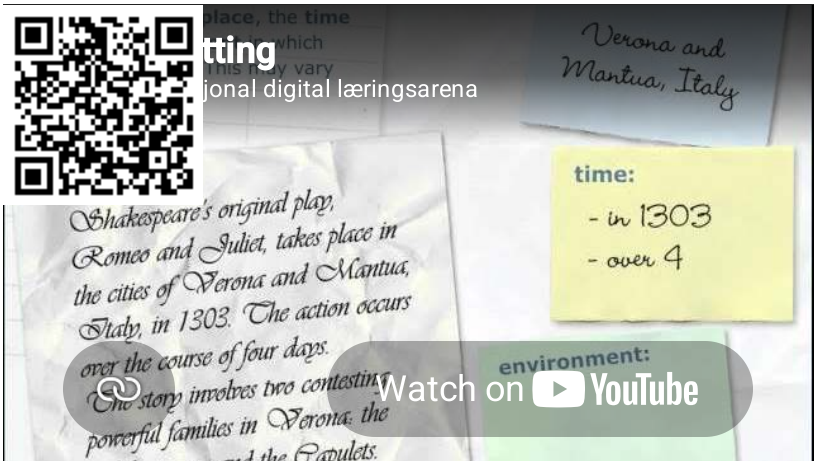
Read the following description of Pavel's room and try to decide what the setting tells us about him.

> *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

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from Writing About Literature: The Basics by CK-12, license CC-BY-NC
- Adapted from the course Approaching Prose Fiction from OpenLearn licensed under CC-BY-NC-SA

---

This page titled 3.9: Setting is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **4.8: Setting** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 3.10: Narration (Point of View)

## Narration



Image from Pixabay

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.



Image from Pixabay

### 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 wothe 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.

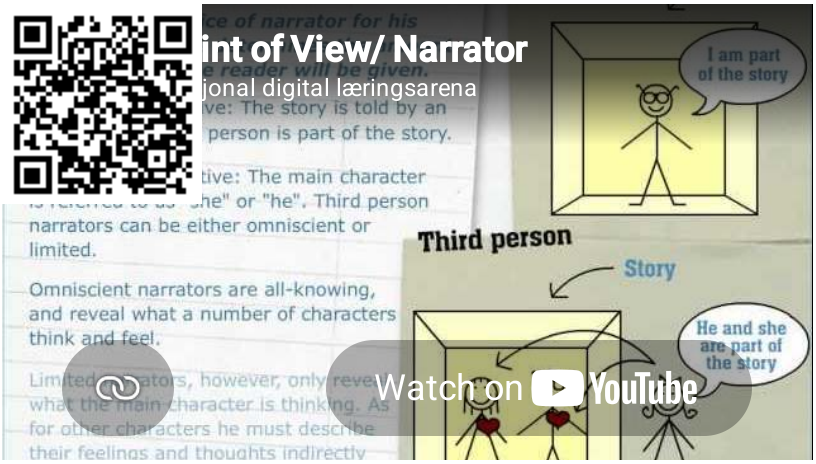
Finally, you will sometimes encounter a story that is told in first-person narration by multiple narrators. When reading a multi-narrator text, you must always be aware of who is speaking. Multi-narrator prose provides the reader with as much insight about the characters as third-person omniscient narration 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 *Ioqui* (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.

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from Writing About Literature: The Basics by CK-12, license CC-BY-NC
- Adapted from the course Approaching Prose Fiction from OpenLearn licensed under CC-BY-NC-SA
- Adapted from What is Sound? in Exploring Movie Construction and Production, license CC-NC-SA 4.0
- Adapted from Elements of Drama in Literature for the Humanities, source Florida State College at Jacksonville, license CC-BY: Attribution

---

This page titled 3.10: Narration (Point of View) is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **4.9: Narration, Point of View, Dialogue** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 3.11: Discussion Questions on "The Shawl" by Louise Erdrich

## Discussion Questions on “The Shawl” by Louise Erdrich

1. Who is telling this story? How do you know? Find passages that show who is telling the story.

2. What kind of narrator is this? Can we trust his impressions? Why or why not?

3. What is the effect of the narrator starting out the story by saying, “Among the Anishinaabeg on the road where I live, *it is* told how…”?

4. What do we know about the narrator’s father? Why is he like this? Find passages that help support your interpretations.

5. Do your feelings about the narrator’s father change as you discover his connection to the story being told in the first half of the story? Why or why not?

6. When the narrator describes his twin brother and sister, he comments, “Our story isn’t uncommon. But for us it helps to compare our points of view.” What do you think he means by this?

7. At the end of the story, how does the narrator reframe what happened to the sister with the plaid shawl? How might reframing the story help his father?

---

This page titled 3.11: Discussion Questions on "The Shawl" by Louise Erdrich is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Kelsey Ford.

# 3.12: Theme



Image from Pixabay

## 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

## Contributors and Attributions

Adapted from Writing About Literature: The Basics by CK-12, license CC-BY-NC

This page titled 3.12: Theme is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **4.12: Theme** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 3.13: Rhetorical and Literary Devices



Image from Pixabay

## 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, litheness, 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.



Image from Flickr user nelesch14 (CC BY-SA 2.0)

### 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.

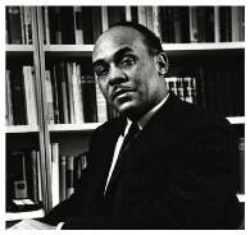


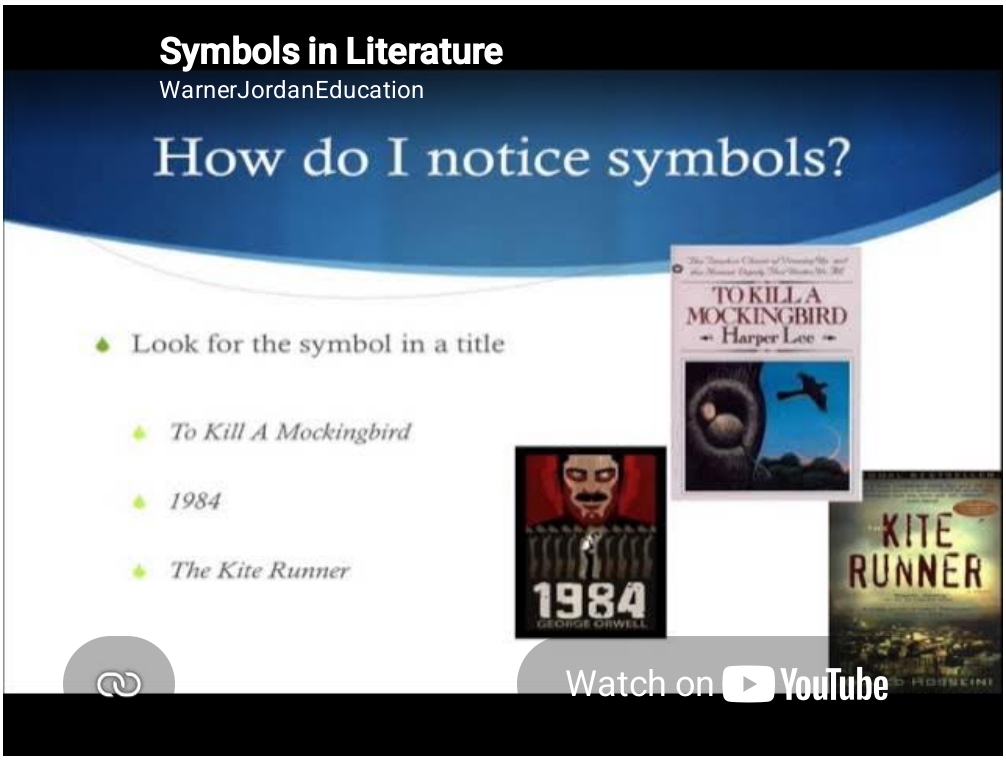
**Image 6.5 | Ralph Ellison, 1961**
**Photographer** | Houghton Mifflin
**Source** | Wikimedia Commons
**License** | Public Domain

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

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from Writing About Literature: The Basics by CK-12, license CC-BY-NC
- Adapted from Ralph Ellison, authored by Berke, Bleil, & Cofer, originally sourced from the University of North Georgia Press.

---

This page titled 3.13: Rhetorical and Literary Devices is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **4.11: Rhetorical and Literary Devices** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 3.14: Word Choice, Tone, Voice, and Style

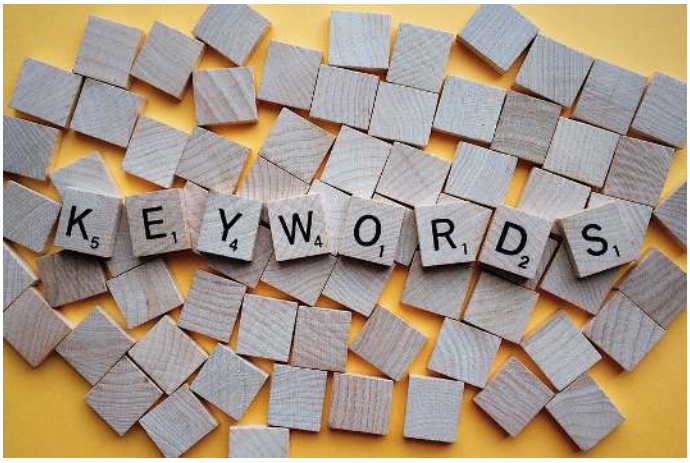



Image from Pixabay

## 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 connotate 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 *revelry rang* throughout the town. The sun *gleamed brightly* on the parade, and colorful streamers *floated* through the air like *dazzling rainbows*. | The noise of the *cacophony shrilled* throughout the town. The sun *glared harshly* on the parade, and colorful streamers *rained* through the air like *falling debris*. |

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.

## Contributors and Attributions


- Adapted from Writing About Literature: The Basics by CK-12, license CC-BY-NC
- Adapted from the course Approaching Prose Fiction from OpenLearn licensed under CC-BY-NC-SA

This page titled 3.14: Word Choice, Tone, Voice, and Style is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

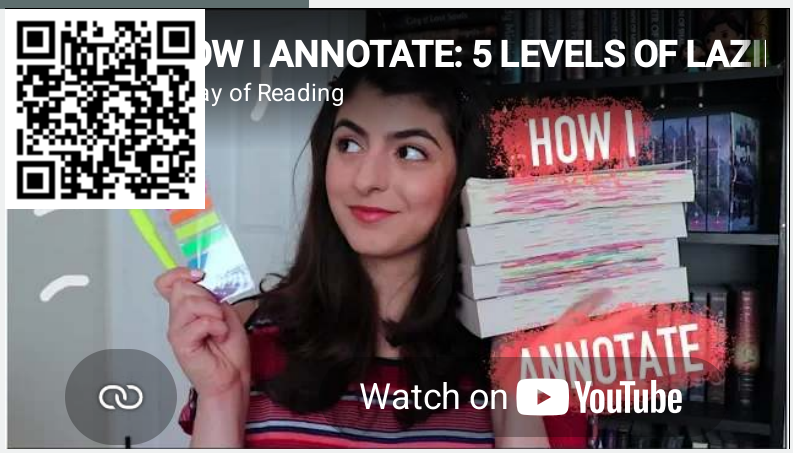
- **4.10: Word Choice, Tone, Voice, and Style** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 3.15: Taking Notes on a Novel

## Reading and Taking Notes on a Novel

As you start reading the novel, I want you to take a few minutes to think about how you want to take notes as you read. Reading for academic purposes often involves close reading through annotations which we have been talking about throughout the semester. Sometimes, the thought of annotating a full-length novel can be overwhelming, and I want you to really think about what your time looks like and how you can best interact with this novel. The following video describes five levels of novel annotation which the speaker labels as "5 Levels of Laziness." Really she is just talking about levels of engagement with the text. I think it's helpful to consider various aspects of these levels as you begin reading the novel so that you can develop a system that works for you.

HOW I ANNOTATE: 5 LEVELS OF LAZINESS




Video produced by A Ray of Reading, all rights reserved. It is not openly licensed but freely available to all.

### eBooks

This class is zero textbook costs because the college has purchased an eBook license for the novel we will be reading. The library has also purchased a few physical copies of the book if you would prefer to check out a print copy.

The link to that eBook is available through the CRC Library databases. You will be asked to enter your wID and password (same one used for Canvas) to access the book. Please note, I'm unable to link to specific pages of the ebook so it will be important for you to check your assigned readings carefully so you know what you are supposed to read any given week.

Link to Book: Tomorrow, Tomorrow, and Tomorrow by Gabrielle Zevin

Navigating and Using Tools in EBSCO eBooks, 2025 update.

Please watch the video below which explains how to use the tools within the eBook:



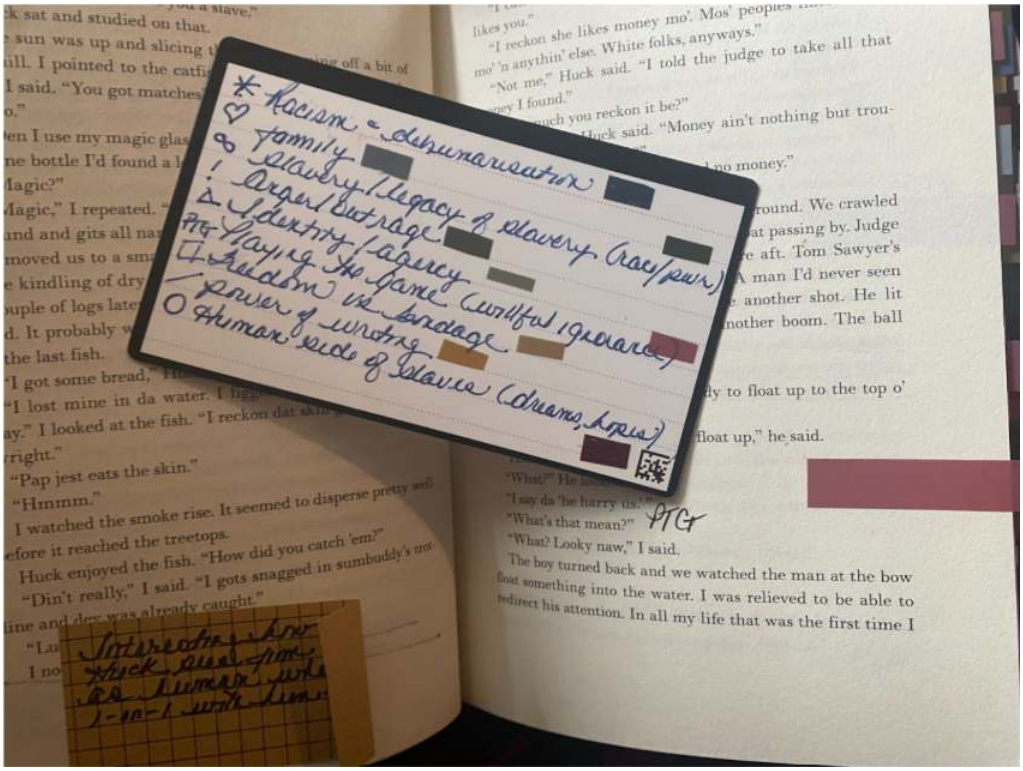

The description of this YouTube video contains links to specific sections so you don't have to watch the entire video if you're looking for instructions on a specific topic.

Video produced by Andi Adkins Pogue, all rights reserved. It is not openly licensed but freely available to all.

## Physical Books

I am a huge proponent of writing directly in my books, especially if I am going to have to write about it or discuss it with others. If you decide to purchase a book or check one out from the CRC or public library, you may consider some additional options for annotation.

Although you can't really take notes in a book that you have checked out from the library, you can use post-it notes or flags to mark specific pages of the book. Here is an example of someone who used post-it notes and little flags on the pages of a book and color-coordinated them to topics that she was noticing in the book.





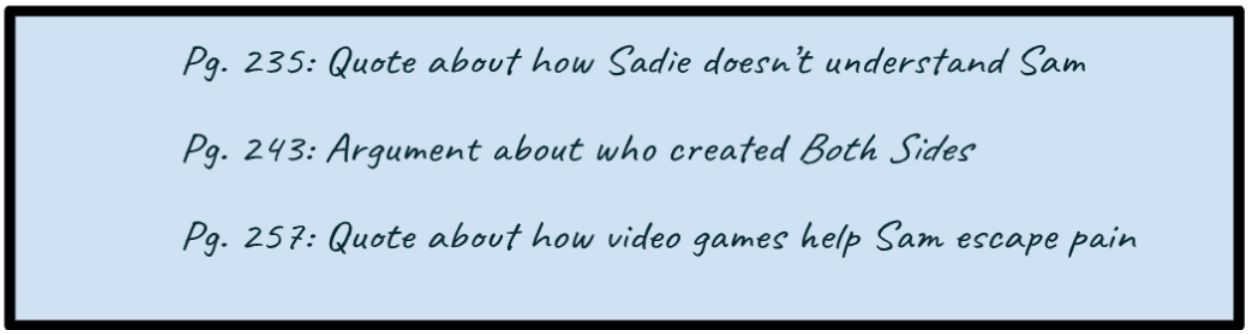

## Reading Logs

In addition to directly annotating or using post it notes/flags in your physical or ebook, I would encourage you to keep a separate reading log.

I often fold up a few pages of binder paper to keep in my book as a bookmark. I use that binder paper to jot down notes about each chapter or key passages or quotes with their page numbers.

You might also create a Google doc or Google sheet to record your thoughts about and/or quotations on specific pages.

There are many ways to keep a reading log, but the purpose is to have a document that provides page numbers for important ideas and passages that you may want to come back to. You don't have to write down complete ideas or complete quotations. It might look something like this:




---

This page titled 3.15: Taking Notes on a Novel is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Kelsey Ford.

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

## 4: Literary Theory and Criticism


4.1: What is Literary Criticism?
4.2: Formalism
4.3: Psychoanalytic Criticism
4.4: Gender Criticism
4.5: New Historicism
4.6: Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies
4.7: Ecocriticism
4.8: "On the Gull's Road" by Willa Cather (1908)
4.9: Literary Concept Map Group Assignment



4: Literary Theory and Criticism is shared under a CC BY-NC license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 4.1: 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.

## Works Cited

Gerald Graff, “Disliking Books at an Early Age,” *Lingua Franca: The Review of Academic Life* 2, no. 6 (September–October 1992): 45–51, *JSTOR*.

Wolfgang Iser, *How to Do Theory* (Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

## Contributors and Attributions

- Page adapted from "What is Literary Theory?" and "Why Study Literary Theory?" from *Creating Literary Analysis* by Ryan Cordell and John Pennington CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

This page titled 4.1: What is Literary Criticism? is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **10.2: What is Literary Criticism?** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 4.2: 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 Courtyard," *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.

### Works Cited

Arnold, Matthew. *Function of Criticism in the Present Time* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010) .

Brooks, Cleanth.*The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1956).

Keats, John. "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919)

## Contributors:

Adapted from "Writing About Form" in *Creating Literary Analysis* by Ryan Cordell and John Pennington CC BY-NC-SA

This page titled 4.2: Formalism is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **10.3: Formalism** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 4.3: 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.

Works Cited

Bonaparte, Marie. *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe.* London: Image Publishing, 1949.

Crews, Frederick. *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams* in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay. New York: Norton, 1989.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Birthmark," in *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Modern Library ed., ed. Norman Holmes Pearson. New York: Random House, 1937; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1996.

Lacan, Jacques. "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" *Lacan.* http://www.lacan.com/purloined.htm.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Purloined Letter," in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination.* London: J. M. Dent, 1912; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1994.

## Contributors and Attributions

Adapted from "Writing About Character and Motivation - Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism" from *Creating Literary Analysis* by Ryan Cordell and John Pennington CC BY-NC-SA

This page titled 4.3: Psychoanalytic Criticism is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **10.4: Psychoanalytic Criticism** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 4.4: Gender Criticism

## 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 (10–3/4 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 incompleted 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 catched 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 whalemen 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

This page titled 4.4: Gender Criticism is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **10.5: Criticism and Gender** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 4.5: 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.

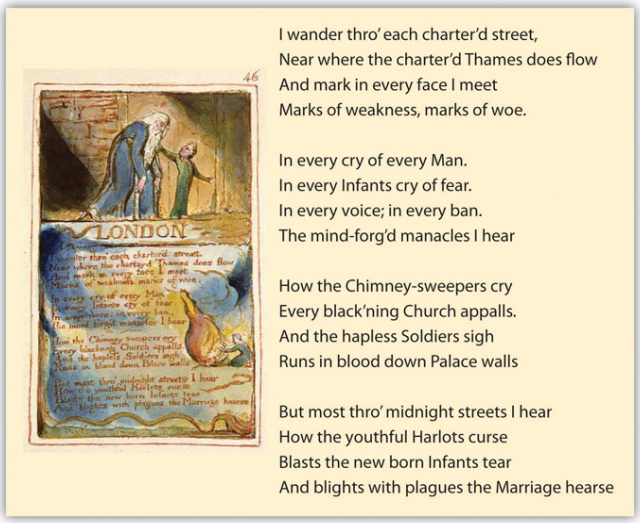



*Illustration by William Blake for "London" from his Songs of Innocence and Experience (1794).*

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.

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from "New Historical Criticism: An Overview" from *Creating Literary Analysis* by Ryan Cordell and John Pennington, licensed CC BY NC-SA 4.0

---

This page titled 4.5: New Historicism is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **10.7: New Historicism** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

# 4.6: Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies

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 Erdich, 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

Page adapted from "Postcolonial, Racial, and Ethnic Theory: An Overview."

This page titled 4.6: Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **10.6: Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies Criticism** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 4.7: 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 spongey 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 back-yard 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,—niched 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 enviornmental 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?

## Works Cited


Davis, Rebecca Harding. *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861)

Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Wordsworth, William. "The World Is Too Much with Us" (1807)


## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from "Ecocriticism: An Overview" from Creating Literary Analysis by Ryan Cordell and John Pennington, licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0


This page titled 4.7: Ecocriticism is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **10.8: Ecocriticism** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

# 4.8: "On the Gull's Road" by Willa Cather (1908)

## I

It often happens that one or another of my friends stops before a red chalk drawing in my study and asks me where I ever found so lovely a creature. I have never told the story of that picture to any one, and the beautiful woman on the wall, until yesterday, in all these twenty years has spoken to no one but me. Yesterday a young painter, a countryman of mine, came to consult me on a matter of business, and upon seeing my drawing of Alexandra Ebbling, straightway forgot his errand. He examined the date upon the sketch and asked me, very earnestly, if I could tell him whether the lady were still living. When I answered him, he stepped back from the picture and said slowly:

“So long ago? She must have been very young. She was happy?”

“As to that, who can say — about any one of us?” I replied. “Out of all that is supposed to make for happiness, she had very little.”

We returned to the object of his visit, but when he bade me goodbye at the door his troubled gaze again went back to the drawing, and it was only by turning sharply about that he took his eyes away from her.

I went back to my study fire, and as the rain kept away less impetuous visitors, I had a long time in which to think of Mrs. Ebbling. I even got out the little box she gave me, which I had not opened for years, and when Mrs. Hemway brought my tea I had barely time to close the lid and defeat her disapproving gaze.

My young countryman’s perplexity, as he looked at Mrs. Ebbling, had recalled to me the delight and pain she gave me when I was of his years. I sat looking at her face and trying to see it through his eyes — freshly, as I saw it first upon the deck of the Germania, twenty years ago. Was it her loveliness, I often ask myself, or her loneliness, or her simplicity, or was it merely my own youth? Was her mystery only that of the mysterious North out of which she came? I still feel that she was very different from all the beautiful and brilliant women I have known; as the night is different from the day, or as the sea is different from the land. But this is our story, as it comes back to me.

For two years I had been studying Italian and working in the capacity of clerk to the American legation at Rome, and I was going home to secure my first consular appointment. Upon boarding my steamer at Genoa, I saw my luggage into my cabin and then started for a rapid circuit of the deck. Everything promised well. The boat was thinly peopled, even for a July crossing; the decks were roomy; the day was fine; the sea was blue; I was sure of my appointment, and, best of all, I was coming back to Italy. All these things were in my mind when I stopped sharply before a chaise longue placed sidewise near the stern. Its occupant was a woman, apparently ill, who lay with her eyes closed, and in her open arm was a chubby little red-haired girl, asleep. I can still remember that first glance at Mrs. Ebbling, and how I stopped as a wheel does when the band slips. Her splendid, vigorous body lay still and relaxed under the loose folds of her clothing, her white throat and arms and red-gold hair were drenched with sunlight. Such hair as it was: wayward as some kind of gleaming seaweed that curls and undulates with the tide. A moment gave me her face; the high cheek-bones, the thin cheeks, the gentle chin, arching back to a girlish throat, and the singular loveliness of the mouth. Even then it flashed through me that the mouth gave the whole face its peculiar beauty and distinction. It was proud and sad and tender, and strangely calm. The curve of the lips could not have been cut more cleanly with the most delicate instrument, and whatever shade of feeling passed over them seemed to partake of their exquisiteness.

But I am anticipating. While I stood stupidly staring (as if, at twenty-five, I had never before beheld a beautiful woman) the whistles broke into a hoarse scream, and the deck under us began to vibrate. The woman opened her eyes, and the little girl struggled into a sitting position, rolled out of her mother’s arm, and ran to the deck rail. After putting my chair near the stern, I went forward to see the gang-plank up and did not return until we were dragging out to sea at the end of a long tow-line.

The woman in the chaise longue was still alone. She lay there all day, looking at the sea. The little girl, Carin, played noisily about the deck. Occasionally she returned and struggled up into the chair, plunged her head, round and red as a little pumpkin, against her mother’s shoulder in an impetuous embrace, and then struggled down again with a lively flourishing of arms and legs. Her mother took such opportunities to pull up the child’s socks or to smooth the fiery little braids; her beautiful hands, rather large and very white, played about the riotous little girl with a quieting tenderness. Carin chattered away in Italian and kept asking for her father, only to be told that he was busy.

When any of the ship’s officers passed, they stopped for a word with my neighbor, and I heard the first mate address her as Mrs. Ebbling. When they spoke to her, she smiled appreciatively and answered in low, faltering Italian, but I fancied that she was glad when they passed on and left her to her fixed contemplation of the sea. Her eyes seemed to drink the color of it all day long, and after every interruption they went back to it. There was a

kind of pleasure in watching her satisfaction, a kind of excitement in wondering what the water made her remember or forget. She seemed not to wish to talk to any one, but I knew I should like to hear whatever she might be thinking. One could catch some hint of her thoughts, I imagined, from the shadows that came and went across her lips, like the reflection of light clouds. She had a pile of books beside her, but she did not read, and neither could I. I gave up trying at last, and watched the sea, very conscious of her presence, almost of her thoughts. When the sun dropped low and shone in her face, I rose and asked if she would like me to move her chair. She smiled and thanked me, but said the sun was good for her. Her yellow-hazel eyes followed me for a moment and then went back to the sea.

After the first bugle sounded for dinner, a heavy man in uniform came up the deck and stood beside the chaise longue, looking down at its two occupants with a smile of satisfied possession. The breast of his trim coat was hidden by waves of soft blond beard, as long and heavy as a woman's hair, which blew about his face in glittering profusion. He wore a large turquoise ring upon the thick hand that he rubbed good-humoredly over the little girl's head. To her he spoke Italian, but he and his wife conversed in some Scandinavian tongue. He stood stroking his fine beard until the second bugle blew, then bent stiffly from his hips, like a soldier, and patted his wife's hand as it lay on the arm of her chair. He hurried down the deck, taking stock of the passengers as he went, and stopped before a thin girl with frizzed hair and a lace coat, asking her a facetious question in thick English. They began to talk about Chicago and went below. Later I saw him at the head of his table in the dining room, the befrizzed Chicago lady on his left. They must have got a famous start at luncheon, for by the end of the dinner Ebbling was peeling figs for her and presenting them on the end of a fork.

The Doctor confided to me that Ebbling was the chief engineer and the dandy of the boat; but this time he would have to behave himself, for he had brought his sick wife along for the voyage. She had a bad heart valve, he added, and was in a serious way.

After dinner Ebbling disappeared, presumably to his engines, and at ten o'clock, when the stewardess came to put Mrs. Ebbling to bed, I helped her to rise from her chair, and the second mate ran up and supported her down to her cabin. About midnight I found the engineer in the card room, playing with the Doctor, an Italian naval officer, and the commodore of a Long Island yacht club. His face was even pinker than it had been at dinner, and his fine beard was full of smoke. I thought a long while about Ebbling and his wife before I went to sleep.

The next morning we tied up at Naples to take on our cargo, and I went on shore for the day. I did not, however, entirely escape the ubiquitous engineer, whom I saw lunching with the Long Island commodore at a hotel in the Santa Lucia. When I returned to the boat in the early evening, the passengers had gone down to dinner, and I found Mrs. Ebbling quite alone upon the deserted deck. I approached her and asked whether she had had a dull day. She looked up smiling and shook her head, as if her Italian had quite failed her. I saw that she was flushed with excitement, and her yellow eyes were shining like two clear topazes.

"Dull? Oh, no! I love to watch Naples from the sea, in this white heat. She has just lain there on her hillside among the vines and laughed for me all day long. I have been able to pick out many of the places I like best."

I felt that she was really going to talk to me at last. She had turned to me frankly, as to an old acquaintance, and seemed not to be hiding from me anything of what she felt. I sat down in a glow of pleasure and excitement and asked her if she knew Naples well.

"Oh, yes! I lived there for a year after I was first married. My husband has a great many friends in Naples. But he was at sea most of the time, so I went about alone. Nothing helps one to know a city like that. I came first by sea, like this. Directly to Naples from Finmark, and I had never been South before." Mrs. Ebbling stopped and looked over my shoulder. Then, with a quick, eager glance at me, she said abruptly: "It was like a baptism of fire. Nothing has ever been quite the same since. Imagine how this bay looked to a Finmark girl. It seemed like the overture to Italy."

I laughed. "And then one goes up the country — song by song and wine by wine."

Mrs. Ebbling sighed. "Ah, yes. It must be fine to follow it. I have never been away from the seaports myself. We live now in Genoa."

The deck steward brought her tray, and I moved forward a little and stood by the rail. When I looked back, she smiled and nodded to let me know that she was not missing anything. I could feel her intentness as keenly as if she were standing beside me.

The sun had disappeared over the high ridge behind the city, and the stone pines stood black and flat against the fires of the afterglow. The lilac haze that hung over the long, lazy slopes of Vesuvius warmed with golden light, and films of blue vapor began to float down toward Baiae. The sky, the sea, and the city between them turned a shimmering violet, fading grayer as the lights began to glow like luminous pearls along the water-front, — the necklace of an irreclaimable queen. Behind me I heard a low exclamation; a slight, stifled sound, but it seemed the

perfect vocalization of that weariness with which we at last let go of beauty, after we have held it until the senses are darkened. When I turned to her again, she seemed to have fallen asleep.

That night, as we were moving out to sea and the tail lights of Naples were winking across the widening stretch of black water, I helped Mrs. Ebbling to the foot of the stairway. She drew herself up from her chair with effort and leaned on me wearily. I could have carried her all night without fatigue.

“May I come and talk to you to-morrow?” I asked. She did not reply at once. “Like an old friend?” I added. She gave me her languid hand, and her mouth, set with the exertion of walking, softened altogether. “Grazia,” she murmured.

I returned to the deck and joined a group of my countrywomen, who, primed with inexhaustible information, were discussing the baseness of Renaissance art. They were intelligent and alert, and as they leaned forward in their deck chairs under the circle of light, their faces recalled to me Rembrandt’s picture of a clinical lecture. I heard them through, against my will, and then went to the stern to smoke and to see the last of the island lights. The sky had clouded over, and a soft, melancholy wind was rushing over the sea. I could not help thinking how disappointed I would be if rain should keep Mrs. Ebbling in her cabin to-morrow. My mind played constantly with her image. At one moment she was very clear and directly in front of me; the next she was far away. Whatever else I thought about, some part of my consciousness was busy with Mrs. Ebbling; hunting for her, finding her, losing her, then groping again. How was it that I was so conscious of whatever she might be feeling? that when she sat still behind me and watched the evening sky, I had had a sense of speed and change, almost of danger; and when she was tired and sighed, I had wished for night and loneliness.

## II

Though when we are young we seldom think much about it, there is now and again a golden day when we feel a sudden, arrogant pride in our youth; in the lightness of our feet and the strength of our arms, in the warm fluid that courses so surely within us; when we are conscious of something powerful and mercurial in our breasts, which comes up wave after wave and leaves us irresponsible and free. All the next morning I felt this flow of life, which continually impelled me toward Mrs. Ebbling. After the merest greeting, however, I kept away. I found it pleasant to thwart myself, to measure myself against a current that was sure to carry me with it in the end. I was content to let her watch the sea — the sea that seemed now to have come into me, warm and soft, still and strong. I played shuffleboard with the Commodore, who was anxious to keep down his figure, and ran about the deck with the stout legs of the little pumpkin-colored Carin about my neck. It was not until the child was having her afternoon nap below that I at last came up and stood beside her mother.

“You are better to-day,” I exclaimed, looking down at her white gown. She colored unreasonably, and I laughed with a familiarity which she must have accepted as the mere foolish noise of happiness, or it would have seemed impertinent.

We talked at first of a hundred trivial things, and we watched the sea. The coast of Sardinia had lain to our port for some hours and would lie there for hours to come, now advancing in rocky promontories, now retreating behind blue bays. It was the naked south coast of the island, and though our course held very near the shore, not a village or habitation was visible; there was not even a goat-herd’s hut hidden away among the low pinkish sand hills. Pinkish sand hills and yellow head-lands; with dull-colored scrubby bushes massed about their bases and following the dried water-courses. A narrow strip of beach glistened like white paint between the purple sea and the umber rocks, and the whole island lay gleaming in the yellow sunshine and translucent air. Not a wave broke on that fringe of white sand, not the shadow of a cloud played across the bare hills. In the air about us, there was no sound but that of a vessel moving rapidly through absolutely still water. She seemed like some great sea-animal, swimming silently, her head well up. The sea before us was so rich and heavy and opaque that it might have been lapis lazuli. It was the blue of legend, simply; the color that satisfies the soul like sleep.

And it was of the sea we talked, for it was the substance of Mrs. Ebbling’s story. She seemed always to have been swept along by ocean streams, warm or cold, and to have hovered about the edge of great waters. She was born and had grown up in a little fishing town on the Arctic ocean. Her father was a doctor, a widower, who lived with his daughter and who divided his time between his books and his fishing rod. Her uncle was skipper on a coasting vessel, and with him she had made many trips along the Norwegian coast. But she was always reading and thinking about the blue seas of the South.

“There was a curious old woman in our village, Dame Ericson, who had been in Italy in her youth. She had gone to Rome to study art, and had copied a great many pictures there. She was well connected, but had little money, and as she grew older and poorer she sold her pictures one by one, until there was scarcely a well-to-do family in our district that did not own one of Dame Ericson’s paintings. But she brought home many other strange things; a little orange-tree which she cherished until the day of her death, and bits of colored marble, and sea shells and pieces of coral, and a thin flask full of water from the Mediterranean. When I was a little girl she used to show me her things and tell me about the South; about the coral fishers, and the pink islands,

and the smoking mountains, and the old, underground Naples. I suppose the water in her flask was like any other, but it never seemed so to me. It looked so elastic and alive, that I used to think if one unsealed the bottle something penetrating and fruitful might leap out and work an enchantment over Finmark."

Lars Ebbling, I learned, was one of her father's friends. She could remember him from the time when she was a little girl and he a dashing young man who used to come home from the sea and make a stir in the village. After he got his promotion to an Atlantic liner and went South, she did not see him until the summer she was twenty, when he came home to marry her. That was five years ago. The little girl, Carin, was three. From her talk, one might have supposed that Ebbling was proprietor of the Mediterranean and its adjacent lands, and could have kept her away at his pleasure. Her own rights in him she seemed not to consider.

But we wasted very little time on Lars Ebbling. We talked, like two very young persons, of arms and men, of the sea beneath us and the shores it washed. We were carried a little beyond ourselves, for we were in the presence of the things of youth that never change; fleeing past them. To-morrow they would be gone, and no effort of will or memory could bring them back again. All about us was the sea of great adventure, and below us, caught somewhere in its gleaming meshes, were the bones of nations and navies . . . . . nations and navies that gave youth its hope and made life something more than a hunger of the bowels. The unpeopled Sardinian coast unfolded gently before us, like something left over out of a world that was gone; a place that might well have had no later news since the corn ships brought the tidings of Actium.

"I shall never go to Sardinia," said Mrs. Ebbling. "It could not possibly be as beautiful as this."

"Neither shall I," I replied.

As I was going down to dinner that evening, I was stopped by Lars Ebbling, freshly brushed and scented, wearing a white uniform, and polished and glistening as one of his own engines. He smiled at me with his own kind of geniality. "You have been very kind to talk to my wife," he explained. "It is very bad for her this trip that she speaks no English. I am indebted to you."

I told him curtly that he was mistaken, but my acrimony made no impression upon his blandness. I felt that I should certainly strike the fellow if he stood there much longer, running his blue ring up and down his beard. I should probably have hated any man who was Mrs. Ebbling's husband, but Ebbling made me sick.

## III

The next day I began my drawing of Mrs. Ebbling. She seemed pleased and a little puzzled when I asked her to sit for me. It occurred to me that she had always been among dull people who took her looks as a matter of course, and that she was not at all sure that she was really beautiful. I can see now her quick, confused look of pleasure. I thought very little about the drawing then, except that the making of it gave me an opportunity to study her face; to look as long as I pleased into her yellow eyes, at the noble lines of her mouth, at her splendid, vigorous hair.

"We have a yellow vine at home," I told her, "that is very like your hair. It seems to be growing while one looks at it, and it twines and tangles about itself and throws out little tendrils in the wind."

"Has it any name?"

"We call it love vine."

How little a thing could disconcert her!

As for me, nothing disconcerted me. I awoke every morning with a sense of speed and joy. At night I loved to hear the swish of the water rushing by. As fast as the pistons could carry us, as fast as the water could bear us, we were going forward to something delightful; to something together. When Mrs. Ebbling told me that she and her husband would be five days in the docks in New York and then return to Genoa, I was not disturbed, for I did not believe her. I came and went, and she sat still all day, watching the water. I heard an American lady say that she watched it like one who is going to die, but even that did not frighten me: I somehow felt that she had promised me to live.

All those long blue days when I sat beside her talking about Finmark and the sea, she must have known that I loved her. I sat with my hands idle on my knees and let the tide come up in me. It carried me so swiftly that, across the narrow space of deck between us, it must have swayed her, too, a little. I had no wish to disturb or distress her. If a little, a very little of it reached her, I was satisfied. If it drew her softly, but drew her, I wanted no more. Sometimes I could see that even the light pressure of my thoughts made her paler. One still evening, after a long talk, she whispered to me, "You must go and walk now, and — don't think about me." She had been held too long and too closely in my thoughts, and she begged me to release her for a little while. I went out into the bow and put her far away, at the sky line, with the faintest star, and thought of her gently across the water. When I went back to her, she was asleep.

But even in those first days I had my hours of misery. Why, for instance, should she have been born in Finmark, and why

should Lars Ebbling have been her only door of escape? Why should she be silently taking leave of the world at the age when I was just beginning it, having had nothing, nothing of whatever is worth while?

She never talked about taking leave of things, and yet I sometimes felt that she was counting the sunsets. One yellow afternoon, when we were gliding between the shores of Spain and Africa, she spoke of her illness for the first time. I had got some magnolias at Gibraltar, and she wore a bunch of them in her girdle and the rest lay on her lap. She held the cool leaves against her cheek and fingered the white petals. “I can never,” she remarked, “get enough of the flowers of the South. They make me breathless, just as they did at first. Because of them I should like to live a long while — almost forever.”

I leaned forward and looked at her. “We could live almost forever if we had enough courage. It’s of our lives that we die. If we had the courage to change it all, to run away to some blue coast like that over there, we could live on and on, until we were tired.”

She smiled tolerantly and looked southward through half shut eyes. “I am afraid I should never have courage enough to go behind that mountain, at least. Look at it, it looks as if it hid horrible things.”

A sea mist, blown in from the Atlantic, began to mask the impassive African coast, and above the fog, the grey mountain peak took on the angry red of the sunset. It burned sullen and threatening until the dark land drew the night about her and settled back into the sea. We watched it sink, while under us, slowly but ever increasing, we felt the throb of the Atlantic come and go, the thrill of the vast, untamed waters of that lugubrious and passionate sea. I drew Mrs. Ebbling’s wraps about her and shut the magnolias under her cloak. When I left her, she slipped me one warm, white flower.

## IV

From the Straits of Gibraltar we dropped into the abyss, and by morning we were rolling in the trough of a sea that drew us down and held us deep, shaking us gently back and forth until the timbers creaked, and then shooting us out on the crest of a swelling mountain. The water was bright and blue, but so cold that the breath of it penetrated one’s bones, as if the chill of the deep under-fathoms of the sea were being loosed upon us. There were not more than a dozen people upon the deck that morning, and Mrs. Ebbling was sheltered behind the stern, muffled in a sea jacket, with drops of moisture upon her long lashes and on her hair. When a shower of icy spray beat back over the deck rail, she took it gleefully.

“After all,” she insisted, “this is my own kind of water; the kind I was born in. This is first cousin to the Pole waters, and the sea we have left is only a kind of fairy tale. It’s like the burnt out volcanoes; its day is over. This is the real sea now, where the doings of the world go on.”

“It is not our reality, at any rate,” I answered.

“Oh, yes, it is! These are the waters that carry men to their work, and they will carry you to yours.”

I sat down and watched her hair grow more alive and iridescent in the moisture. “You are pleased to take an attitude,” I complained.

“No, I don’t love realities any more than another, but I admit them, all the same.”

“And who are you and I to define the realities?”

“Our minds define them clearly enough, yours and mine, everybody’s. Those are the lines we never cross, though we flee from the equator to the Pole. I have never really got out of Finmark, of course. I shall live and die in a fishing town on the Arctic ocean, and the blue seas and the pink islands are as much a dream as they ever were. All the same, I shall continue to dream them.”

The Gulf Stream gave us warm blue days again, but pale, like sad memories. The water had faded, and the thin, tepid sunshine made something tighten about one’s heart. The stars watched us coldly, and seemed always to be asking me what I was going to do. The advancing line on the chart, which at first had been mere foolishness, began to mean something, and the wind from the west brought disturbing fears and forebodings. I slept lightly, and all day I was restless and uncertain except when I was with Mrs. Ebbling. She quieted me as she did little Carin, and soothed me without saying anything, as she had done that evening at Naples when we watched the sunset. It seemed to me that every day her eyes grew more tender and her lips more calm. A kind of fortitude seemed to be gathering about her mouth, and I dreaded it. Yet when, in an involuntary glance, I put to her the question that tortured me, her eyes always met mine steadily, deep and gentle and full of reassurance. That I had my word at last, happened almost by accident.

On the second night out from shore there was the concert for the Sailors’ Orphanage, and Mrs. Ebbling dressed and went down to dinner for the first time, and sat on her husband’s right. I was not the only one who was glad to see her. Even the women were pleased. She wore a pale green gown, and she came up out of it regally white and gold. I was so proud that I blushed when any one spoke of her. After dinner she was standing by her deck-chair talking to her husband when people began to go below for the concert. She took up a long cloak and attempted to put it on.

The wind blew the light thing about, and Ebbling chatted and smiled his public smile while she struggled with it. Suddenly his roving eye caught sight of the Chicago girl, who was having a similar difficulty with her draperies, and he pranced half the length of the deck to assist her. I had been watching from the rail, and when she was left alone I threw my cigar away and wrapped Mrs. Ebbling up roughly.

“Don’t go down,” I begged. “Stay up here. I want to talk to you.”

She hesitated a moment and looked at me thoughtfully. Then, with a sigh, she sat down. Every one hurried down to the saloon, and we were absolutely alone at last, behind the shelter of the stern, with the thick darkness all about us and a warm east wind rushing over the sea. I was too sore and angry to think. I leaned toward her, holding the arm of her chair with both hands, and began anywhere.

“You remember those two blue coasts out of Gibraltar? It shall be either one you choose, if you will come with me. I have not much money, but we shall get on somehow. There has got to be an end of this. We are neither one of us cowards, and this is humiliating, intolerable.”

She sat looking down at her hands, and I pulled her chair impatiently toward me.

“I felt,” she said at last, “that you were going to say something like this. You are sorry for me, and I don’t wish to be pitied. You think Ebbling neglects me, but you are mistaken. He has had his disappointments, too. He wants children and a gay, hospitable house, and he is tied to a sick woman who can not get on with people. He has more to complain of than I have, and yet he bears with me. I am grateful to him, and there is no more to be said.”

“Oh, isn’t there?” I cried, “and I?”

She laid her hand entreatingly upon my arm. “Ah, you! you! Don’t ask me to talk about that. You — ” Her fingers slipped down my coat sleeve to my hand and pressed it. I caught her two hands and held them, telling her I would never let them go.

“And you meant to leave me day after tomorrow, to say goodbye to me as you will to the other people on this boat? You meant to cut me adrift like this, with my heart on fire and all my life unspent in me?”

She sighed despondently. “I am willing to suffer — whatever I must suffer — to have had you,” she answered simply. “I was ill — and so lonely — and it came so quickly and quietly. Ah, don’t begrudge it to me! Do not leave me in bitterness. If I have been wrong, forgive me.” She bowed her head and pressed my fingers entreatingly. A warm tear splashed on my hand. It occurred to me that she bore my anger as she bore little Carin’s importunities, as she bore Ebbling. What a circle of pettiness she had about her! I fell back in my chair and my hands dropped at my side. I felt like a creature with its back broken. I asked her what she wished me to do.

“Don’t ask me,” she whispered. “There is nothing that we can do. I thought you knew that. You forget that — that I am too ill to begin my life over. Even if there were nothing else in the way, that would be enough. And that is what has made it all possible, our loving each other, I mean. If I were well, we couldn’t have had even this much. Don’t reproach me. Hasn’t it been at all pleasant to you to find me waiting for you every morning, to feel me thinking of you when you went to sleep? Every night I have watched the sea for you, as if it were mine and I had made it, and I have listened to the water rushing by you, full of sleep and youth and hope. And everything you had done or said during the day came back to me, and when I went to sleep it was only to feel you more. You see there was never any one else; I have never thought of any one in the dark but you.” She spoke pleadingly, and her voice had sunk so low that I could scarcely hear her.

“And yet you will do nothing,” I groaned. “You will dare nothing. You will give me nothing.”

“Don’t say that. When I leave you day after tomorrow, I shall have given you all my life. I can’t tell you how, but it is true. There is something in each of us that does not belong to the family or to society, not even to ourselves. Sometimes it is given in marriage, and sometimes it is given in love, but oftener it is never given at all. We have nothing to do with giving or withholding it. It is a wild thing that sings in us once and flies away and never comes back, and mine has flown to you. When one loves like that, it is enough, somehow. The other things can go if they must. That is why I can live without you, and die without you.”

I caught her hands and looked into her eyes that shone warm in the darkness. She shivered and whispered in a tone so different from any I ever heard from her before or afterward: “Do you grudge it to me? You are so young and strong, and you have everything before you. I shall have only a little while to want you in — and I could want you forever and not weary.” I kissed her hair, her cheeks, her lips, until her head fell forward on my shoulder and she put my face away with her soft, trembling fingers. She took my hand and held it close to her, in both her own. We sat silent, and the moments came and went, bringing us closer and closer, and the wind and water rushed by us, obliterating our tomorrows and all our yesterdays.

The next day Mrs. Ebbling kept her cabin, and I sat stupidly by her chair until dark, with the rugged little girl to keep me

company, and an occasional nod from the engineer.

I saw Mrs. Ebbling again only for a few moments, when we were coming into the New York harbor. She wore a street dress and a hat, and these alone would have made her seem far away from me. She was very pale, and looked down when she spoke to me, as if she had been guilty of a wrong toward me. I have never been able to remember that interview without heartache and shame, but then I was too desperate to care about anything. I stood like a wooden post and let her approach me, let her speak to me, let her leave me. She came up to me as if it were a hard thing to do, and held out a little package, timidly, and her gloved hand shook as if she were afraid of me.

“I want to give you something,” she said. “You will not want it now, so I shall ask you to keep it until you hear from me. You gave me your address a long time ago, when you were making that drawing. Some day I shall write to you and ask you to open this. You must not come to tell me goodbye this morning, but I shall be watching you when you go ashore. Please don’t forget that.”

I took the little box mechanically and thanked her. I think my eyes must have filled, for she uttered an exclamation of pity, touched my sleeve quickly, and left me. It was one of those strange, low, musical exclamations which meant everything and nothing, like the one that had thrilled me that night at Naples, and it was the last sound I ever heard from her lips.

An hour later I went on shore, one of those who crowded over the gang-plank the moment it was lowered. But the next afternoon I wandered back to the docks and went on board the Germania. I asked for the engineer, and he came up in his shirt sleeves from the engine room. He was red and dishevelled, angry and voluble; his bright eye had a hard glint, and I did not once see his masterful smile. When he heard my inquiry he became profane. Mrs. Ebbling had sailed for Bremen on the Hobenstauffen that morning at eleven o’clock. She had decided to return by the northern route and pay a visit to her father in Finmark. She was in no condition to travel alone, he said. He evidently smarted under her extravagance. But who, he asked, with a blow of his fist on the rail, could stand between a woman and her whim? She had always been a wilful girl, and she had a doting father behind her. When she set her head with the wind, there was no holding her; she ought to have married the Arctic Ocean. I think Ebbling was still talking when I walked away.

I spent that winter in New York. My consular appointment hung fire (indeed, I did not pursue it with much enthusiasm), and I had a good many idle hours in which to think of Mrs. Ebbling. She had never mentioned the name of her father’s village, and somehow I could never quite bring myself to go to the docks when Ebbling’s boat was in and ask for news of her. More than once I made up my mind definitely to go to Finmark and take my chance at finding her; the shipping people would know where Ebbling came from. But I never went. I have often wondered why. When my resolve was made and my courage high, when I could almost feel myself approaching her, suddenly everything crumbled under me, and I fell back as I had done that night when I dropped her hands, after telling her, only a moment before, that I would never let them go.

In the twilight of a wet March day, when the gutters were running black outside and the Square was liquefying under crusts of dirty snow, the housekeeper brought me a damp letter which bore a blurred foreign postmark. It was from Niels Nannestad, who wrote that it was his sad duty to inform me that his daughter, Alexandra Ebbling, had died on the second day of February, in the twenty-sixth year of her age. Complying with her request, he inclosed a letter which she had written some days before her death.

I at last brought myself to break the seal of the second letter. It read thus:

“My Friend: —

You may open now the little package I gave you. May I ask you to keep it? I gave it to you because there is no one else who would care about it in just that way. Ever since I left you I have been thinking what it would be like to live a lifetime caring and being cared for like that. It was not the life I was meant to live, and yet, in a way, I have been living it ever since I first knew you.

“Of course you understand now why I could not go with you. I would have spoiled your life for you. Besides that, I was ill — and I was too proud to give you the shadow of myself. I had much to give you, if you had come earlier. As it was, I was ashamed. Vanity sometimes saves us when nothing else will, and mine saved you. Thank you for everything. I hold this to my heart, where I once held your hand. Alexandra.”

The dusk had thickened into night long before I got up from my chair and took the little box from its place in my desk drawer. I opened it and lifted out a thick coil, cut from where her hair grew thickest and brightest. It was tied firmly at one end, and when it fell over my arm it curled and clung about my sleeve like a living thing set free. How it gleamed, how it still gleams in the firelight! It was warm and softly scented under my lips, and stirred under my breath like seaweed in the tide. This, and a withered magnolia flower, and two pink sea shells; nothing more. And it was all twenty years ago!

## Contributors and Attributions


- On the Gull's Road. **Authored by**: Willa Cather. **License**: Public Domain: No Known Copyright

This page titled 4.8: "On the Gull's Road" by Willa Cather (1908) is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **5.11: Cather, Willa. "On the Gull's Road" (1908)** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed Public Domain.

# 4.9: Literary Concept Map Group Assignment

## Group Assignment #1: Literary Theory Concept Map

### Context:

We have been studying the elements of fiction as well as the way that some literary theories have influenced our interpretation of literature. This group project will enable you to go a bit deeper in applying a literary theory to a specific literary work, as well as to see how other groups apply other theories to that same literary work.

### The Overall Assignment:

You and your group members will work on annotating an assigned short story through the lens of a particular literary theory. Your group will then create a concept map which provides a visual representation of how this literary theory might be applied to this short story. Your group will then present this concept map to the rest of the class.

> **Please note:** I know that working with a group presents many challenges; however, it also offers many opportunities to increase your creativity, knowledge, and critical thinking skills, so please try to navigate the challenges of working with your team members. If you find that some of your team members are not participating, do your best to reach out to them and see if they may need some encouragement to join in. You can also reach out to me if they don't seem to be responding to your messages.
>
> *** Also, if you absolutely do not want to work with a group, you may choose to do this assignment on your own. However, you need to let me know on the day that you receive this assignment so that I do not place you into a group.

### Preparation for the Assignment:

> **Step 1— Individual Responsibilities**
> Please make sure to work together in order to evenly distribute the work for the assignment. It is your responsibility to work with your group to make sure that you have a job to do. At the end of the assignment, you will be asked to submit a reflection assignment that explains how you contributed to the assignment. If you did not contribute a relatively equal amount of work, it will affect your grade.
>
> **Step 2— Communication**
> Each group will decide the best way for the group to communicate. You will have parts of two class sessions to connect and collaborate with your group; however, you will need to communicate and collaborate outside of class as well. You might decide that the group would like to have Zoom video meetings, group phone texts, Canvas messages, a Discord group, etc. Whichever method your group chooses, please commit to checking this method regularly so that your group members can rely on you.
>
> **Step 3—Deadlines**
> Please fill out these blank lines with the dates from the calendar. We will also go over these in class.
> _____ Groups Assigned
> _____ Class Session #1 for Working with Group
> _____ Class Session #2 for Working with Group
> _____ Class Presentations
>
> Each group should decide on deadlines that work for the group. For example, your group may decide that you want to have everyone gather their information by a certain date and put it into a Google doc so that you all can provide input before putting it onto the Canvas page. Or maybe your group would rather just send all of their materials to one person who will be responsible for organizing them and putting them together on the concept map. Whatever your group decides, make sure that you all agree on a deadline to have all of your materials done before the actual class presentation date. That way, nobody is waiting around at the last minute and wondering if one of the group mates is going to complete his or her work on time.

## Requirements for Your Concept Map:

The purpose of your concept map is to make connections between your assigned literary theory and the elements of literature within the short story. All of the groups will be using the short story called “On the Gull’s Road,” by Willa Cather to apply their assigned literary theory.

Your group may choose to create this concept map on Padlet, Slickplan, another electronic platform, or on a poster board. I will be modeling how to create a concept map during one of our class sessions.

These are the minimum requirements for concept map. You are welcome to do more than this, but in order to receive full credit on the assignment, your map should have at least these items.

- 5 points: The center of the map should have the story’s title and author as well as the literary theory being applied.
- 5 points: Somewhere relatively close to that center should be a branch which suggests a theme that could be interpreted based upon your literary theory. You may want to save the theme for last because it is often easier to identify the theme once you have established the other elements and can begin to see patterns emerging between them.
- 5 points: Coming out from the center should be a branch to each literary element–character, plot, setting, point of view/narrator, symbolism, and literary and rhetorical devices. Please include an image for each of these elements as well as the text that identifies the element. These can be images from the Internet or ones that you create.
- 15 points: Connected to each element, please include 1-3 specific examples from the text that relate to each element with a brief description of how that example would be interpreted through your literary theory’s lens. Depending upon your particular theory, you may have more examples for some elements than others. Use textual examples in addition to the literary terminology. These examples may include specific references to events, characters, or items in the story or short quotations with page numbers.
- 5 points: Use colors and/or shapes around ideas in order to connect them to other ideas on the concept map that may not be directly linked together by annotated lines. For example, in “The Shawl,” one might identify the shawl under the element of symbol. However, that shawl might also be connected to the character section of the concept map in an example related to the sister. Therefore, you may want to choose a particular shape to draw around or color to use for each mention of the shawl in order to connect these ideas. This concept map is a graphic representation of your group’s interpretation of the story. Therefore, the organization of the elements, examples, and terminology should be clearly evident through brief explanations, as well as the use of color and/or shapes.
- 5 points: Somewhere on the map, include a brief description of some of the challenges of applying this theory.
- 5 points: Presenting your map to the class on the due date.
- 5 points: Individual reflection on your contributions to the assignment and evaluation of your groupmates’ contributions.

* You are welcome to include additional components besides those listed above. However, these are the required components.

**Note: It is perfectly acceptable for you to consult other sources as you are creating your page, but if you choose to use any of the ideas, quotations, pictures, etc. from these sources on your page, please make sure that you cite them properly with an in-text citation as well as a Works Cited section at the end on your map.**

---

This page titled 4.9: Literary Concept Map Group Assignment is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Kelsey Ford.

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

## 5: Drama


5.1: What is Drama?

5.2: Elements of Drama

5.3: Reading and Responding to Drama

5.4: Trifles by Susan Glaspell (1916)


---

5: Drama is shared under a CC BY-NC license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 5.1: 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.

Works Cited

Finnegan, Ruth. "Drama." *Oral Literature in Africa*. 1st ed., vol. 1, Open Book Publishers, Cambridge, UK, 2012, pp. 485–502. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vjsmr. Accessed 11 October 2019.

Miller, N. P. “The Origins of Greek Drama. A Summary of the Evidence and a Comparison with Early English Drama.” *Greece & Rome*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1961, pp. 126–137. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/641643.

Scodel, Ruth. *An Introduction to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cpid,uid&custid=s4302453&db=nlebk&AN=331330&site=eds-live.

Walker, Steven F. “The Invention of Theater: Recontextualizing the Vexing Question.” *Comparative Literature*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1–22. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4122284.

---

This page titled 5.1: What is Drama? is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **8.1: What is Drama?** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 5.2: 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 Tieresias.
- **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,*
>
> *What, is Horatio there?*
>
> *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!

## Works Cited

"AN ACTOR DEMORALIZED BY TOMATOES" *The New York Times*, 1883 https://www.nytimes.com/1883/10/28/a...-tomatoes.html

## Contributors

- Adapted from material originally published in "Drama as a Genre" from *Writing and Literature: Composition as Inquiry, Learning, Thinking, and Communication* by Dr. Tanya Long Bennett of the University of North Georgia, CC BY-SA 4.0

This page titled 5.2: Elements of Drama is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **8.2: Elements of Drama** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-SA 4.0.

# 5.3: 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 verions
- 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,

    þeodcyninga, 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 Canturbury 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 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 riualls 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:

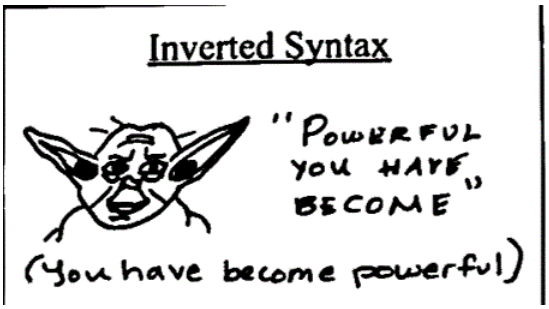
Shall **I** com**pare** thee **to** a **sum**mer's **day**?

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-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-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.

This page titled 5.3: Reading and Responding to Drama is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **8.3: Reading and Responding to Drama** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 5.4: Trifles by Susan Glaspell (1916)

## Trifles

by Susan Glaspell

First performed by the Provincetown Players at the Wharf Theatre, Provincetown, Mass., August 8, 1916.

### Characters

GEORGE HENDERSON (County Attorney)

HENRY PETERS (Sheriff)

LEWIS HALE, A neighboring farmer

MRS PETERS

MRS HALE

### Scene 1

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 incompleted 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*.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*rubbing his hands*) This feels good. Come up to the fire, ladies.

MRS PETERS: (*after taking a step forward*) I'm not—cold.

SHERIFF: (*unbuttoning his overcoat and stepping away from the stove as if to mark the beginning of official business*) Now, Mr Hale, before we move things about, you explain to Mr Henderson just what you saw when you came here yesterday morning.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: By the way, has anything been moved? Are things just as you left them yesterday?

SHERIFF: (*looking about*) It's just the same. When it dropped below zero last night I thought I'd better send Frank out this morning to make a fire for us—no use getting pneumonia with a big case on, but I told him not to touch anything except the stove—and you know Frank.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Somebody should have been left here yesterday.

SHERIFF: Oh—yesterday. When I had to send Frank to Morris Center for that man who went crazy—I want you to know I had my hands full yesterday. I knew you could get back from Omaha by today and as long as I went over everything here myself—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Well, Mr Hale, tell just what happened when you came here yesterday morning.

HALE: Harry and I had started to town with a load of potatoes. We came along the road from my place and as I got here I said, 'I'm going to see if I can't get John Wright to go in with me on a party telephone.' I spoke to Wright about it once before and he put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked was peace and quiet—I guess you know about how much he talked himself; but I thought maybe if I went to the house and talked about it before his wife, though I said to Harry that I didn't know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Let's talk about that later, Mr Hale. I do want to talk about that, but tell now just what happened when you got to the house.

HALE: I didn't hear or see anything; I knocked at the door, and still it was all quiet inside. I knew they must be up, it was past eight o'clock. So I knocked again, and I thought I heard somebody say, 'Come in.' I wasn't sure, I'm not sure yet, but I opened the door—this door (*indicating the door by which the two women are still standing*) and there in that rocker—(*pointing to it*) sat Mrs Wright.

(*They all look at the rocker*.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: What—was she doing?

HALE: She was rockin' back and forth. She had her apron in her hand and was kind of—pleating it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And how did she—look?

HALE: Well, she looked queer.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: How do you mean—queer?

HALE: Well, as if she didn't know what she was going to do next. And kind of done up.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: How did she seem to feel about your coming?

HALE: Why, I don't think she minded—one way or other. She didn't pay much attention. I said, 'How do, Mrs Wright it's cold, ain't it?' And she said, 'Is it?'—and went on kind of pleating at her apron. Well, I was surprised; she didn't ask me to come up to the stove, or to set down, but just sat there, not even looking at me, so I said, 'I want to see John.' And then she—laughed. I guess you would call it a laugh. I thought of Harry and the team outside, so I said a little sharp: 'Can't I see John?' 'No', she says, kind o' dull like. 'Ain't he home?' says I. 'Yes', says she, 'he's home'. 'Then why can't I see him?' I asked her, out of patience. "Cause he's dead', says she. *'Dead*?' says I. She just nodded her head, not getting a bit excited, but rockin' back and forth. 'Why—where is he?' says I, not knowing what to say. She just pointed upstairs—like that (*himself pointing to the room above*) I got up, with the idea of going up there. I walked from there to here—then I says, 'Why, what did he die of?' 'He died of a rope round his neck', says she, and just went on pleatin' at her apron. Well, I went out and called Harry. I thought I might—need help. We went upstairs and there he was lyin'—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I think I'd rather have you go into that upstairs, where you can point it all out. Just go on now with the rest of the story.

HALE: Well, my first thought was to get that rope off. It looked ... (*stops, his face twitches*) ... but Harry, he went up to him, and he said, 'No, he's dead all right, and we'd better not touch anything.' So we went back down stairs. She was still sitting that same way. 'Has anybody been notified?' I asked. 'No', says she unconcerned. 'Who did this, Mrs Wright?' said Harry. He said it business-like—and she stopped pleatin' of her apron. 'I don't know', she says. 'You don't *know*?' says Harry. 'No', says she. 'Weren't you sleepin' in the bed with him?' says Harry. 'Yes', says she, 'but I was on the inside'. 'Somebody slipped a rope round his neck and strangled him and you didn't wake up?' says Harry. 'I didn't wake up', she said after him. We must 'a looked as if we didn't see how that could be, for after a minute she said, 'I sleep sound'. Harry was going to ask her more questions but I said maybe we ought to let her tell her story first to the coroner, or the sheriff, so Harry went fast as he could to Rivers' place, where there's a telephone.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And what did Mrs Wright do when she knew that you had gone for the coroner?

HALE: She moved from that chair to this one over here (*pointing to a small chair in the corner*) and just sat there with her hands held together and looking down. I got a feeling that I ought to make some conversation, so I said I had come in to see if John wanted to put in a telephone, and at that she started to laugh, and then she stopped and looked at me—scared, (*the* COUNTY ATTORNEY, *who has had his notebook out, makes a note*) I dunno, maybe it wasn't scared. I wouldn't like to say it was. Soon Harry got back, and then Dr Lloyd came, and you, Mr Peters, and so I guess that's all I know that you don't.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*looking around*) I guess we'll go upstairs first—and then out to the barn and around there, (*to the* SHERIFF) You're convinced that there was nothing important here—nothing that would point to any motive.

SHERIFF: Nothing here but kitchen things.

(*The* COUNTY ATTORNEY, *after again looking around the kitchen, opens the door of a cupboard closet. He gets up on a chair and looks on a shelf. Pulls his hand away, sticky*.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Here's a nice mess.

(*The women draw nearer*.)

MRS PETERS: (*to the other woman*) Oh, her fruit; it did freeze, (*to the* LAWYER) She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break.

SHERIFF: Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

HALE: Well, women are used to worrying over trifles.

(*The two women move a little closer together*.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*with the gallantry of a young politician*) And yet, for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies? (*the women do not unbend. He goes to the sink, takes a dipperful of water from the pail and pouring it into a basin, washes his hands. Starts to wipe them on the roller-towel, turns it for a cleaner place*) Dirty towels! (*kicks his foot against the pans under the sink*) Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?

MRS HALE: (*stiffly*) There's a great deal of work to be done on a farm.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: To be sure. And yet (*with a little bow to her*) I know there are some Dickson county farmhouses which do not have such roller towels. (*He gives it a pull to expose its length again*.)

MRS HALE: Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Ah, loyal to your sex, I see. But you and Mrs Wright were neighbors. I suppose you were friends, too.

MRS HALE: (*shaking her head*) I've not seen much of her of late years. I've not been in this house—it's more than a year.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And why was that? You didn't like her?

MRS HALE: I liked her all well enough. Farmers' wives have their hands full, Mr Henderson. And then—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Yes—?

MRS HALE: (*looking about*) It never seemed a very cheerful place.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: No—it's not cheerful. I shouldn't say she had the homemaking instinct.

MRS HALE: Well, I don't know as Wright had, either.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: You mean that they didn't get on very well?

MRS HALE: No, I don't mean anything. But I don't think a place'd be any cheerfuller for John Wright's being in it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I'd like to talk more of that a little later. I want to get the lay of things upstairs now. (*He goes to the left, where three steps lead to a stair door*.)

SHERIFF: I suppose anything Mrs Peters does'll be all right. She was to take in some clothes for her, you know, and a few little things. We left in such a hurry yesterday.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Yes, but I would like to see what you take, Mrs Peters, and keep an eye out for anything that might be of use to us.

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mr Henderson.

(*The women listen to the men's steps on the stairs, then look about the kitchen*.)

MRS HALE: I'd hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticising.

(*She arranges the pans under sink which the* LAWYER *had shoved out of place*.)

MRS PETERS: Of course it's no more than their duty.

MRS HALE: Duty's all right, but I guess that deputy sheriff that came out to make the fire might have got a little of this on. (*gives the roller towel a pull*) Wish I'd thought of that sooner. Seems mean to talk about her for not having things slicked up when she had to come away in such a hurry.

MRS PETERS: (*who has gone to a small table in the left rear corner of the room, and lifted one end of a towel that covers a pan*) She had bread set. (*Stands still*.)

MRS HALE: (*eyes fixed on a loaf of bread beside the bread-box, which is on a low shelf at the other side of the room. Moves slowly toward it*) She was going to put this in there, (*picks up loaf, then abruptly drops it. In a manner of returning to familiar*

*things*) It's a shame about her fruit. I wonder if it's all gone. (*gets up on the chair and looks*) I think there's some here that's all right, Mrs Peters. Yes—here; (*holding it toward the window*) this is cherries, too. (*looking again*) I declare I believe that's the only one. (*gets down, bottle in her hand. Goes to the sink and wipes it off on the outside*) She'll feel awful bad after all her hard work in the hot weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer.

(*She puts the bottle on the big kitchen table, center of the room. With a sigh, is about to sit down in the rocking-chair. Before she is seated realizes what chair it is; with a slow look at it, steps back. The chair which she has touched rocks back and forth.*)

MRS PETERS: Well, I must get those things from the front room closet, (*she goes to the door at the right, but after looking into the other room, steps back*) You coming with me, Mrs Hale? You could help me carry them.

(*They go in the other room; reappear,* MRS PETERS *carrying a dress and skirt,* MRS HALE *following with a pair of shoes.*)

MRS PETERS: My, it's cold in there.

(*She puts the clothes on the big table, and hurries to the stove.*)

MRS HALE: (*examining the skirt*) Wright was close. I think maybe that's why she kept so much to herself. She didn't even belong to the Ladies Aid. I suppose she felt she couldn't do her part, and then you don't enjoy things when you feel shabby. She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that—oh, that was thirty years ago. This all you was to take in?

MRS PETERS: She said she wanted an apron. Funny thing to want, for there isn't much to get you dirty in jail, goodness knows. But I suppose just to make her feel more natural. She said they was in the top drawer in this cupboard. Yes, here. And then her little shawl that always hung behind the door. (*opens stair door and looks*) Yes, here it is.

(*Quickly shuts door leading upstairs.*)

MRS HALE: (*abruptly moving toward her*) Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: Do you think she did it?

MRS PETERS: (*in a frightened voice*) Oh, I don't know.

MRS HALE: Well, I don't think she did. Asking for an apron and her little shawl. Worrying about her fruit.

MRS PETERS: (*starts to speak, glances up, where footsteps are heard in the room above. In a low voice*) Mr Peters says it looks bad for her. Mr Henderson is awful sarcastic in a speech and he'll make fun of her sayin' she didn't wake up.

MRS HALE: Well, I guess John Wright didn't wake when they was slipping that rope under his neck.

MRS PETERS: No, it's strange. It must have been done awful crafty and still. They say it was such a—funny way to kill a man, rigging it all up like that.

MRS HALE: That's just what Mr Hale said. There was a gun in the house. He says that's what he can't understand.

MRS PETERS: Mr Henderson said coming out that what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger, or—sudden feeling.

MRS HALE: (*who is standing by the table*) Well, I don't see any signs of anger around here, (*she puts her hand on the dish towel which lies on the table, stands looking down at table, one half of which is clean, the other half messy*) It's wiped to here, (*makes a move as if to finish work, then turns and looks at loaf of bread outside the breadbox. Drops towel. In that voice of coming back to familiar things.*) Wonder how they are finding things upstairs. I hope she had it a little more red-up up there. You know, it seems kind of sneaking. Locking her up in town and then coming out here and trying to get her own house to turn against her!

MRS PETERS: But Mrs Hale, the law is the law.

MRS HALE: I s'pose 'tis, (*unbuttoning her coat*) Better loosen up your things, Mrs Peters. You won't feel them when you go out.

(MRS PETERS *takes off her fur tippet, goes to hang it on hook at back of room, stands looking at the under part of the small corner table.*)

MRS PETERS: She was piecing a quilt. (*She brings the large sewing basket and they look at the bright pieces*.)

MRS HALE: It's log cabin pattern. Pretty, isn't it? I wonder if she was goin' to quilt it or just knot it?

(*Footsteps have been heard coming down the stairs*. The SHERIFF enters followed by HALE and the COUNTY ATTORNEY.)

SHERIFF: They wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it! (*The men laugh, the women look abashed*.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*rubbing his hands over the stove*) Frank's fire didn't do much up there, did it? Well, let's go out to the barn and get that cleared up. (*The men go outside*.)

MRS HALE: (*resentfully*) I don't know as there's anything so strange, our takin' up our time with little things while we're waiting for them to get the evidence. (*she sits down at the big table smoothing out a block with decision*) I don't see as it's anything to laugh about.

MRS PETERS: (*apologetically*) Of course they've got awful important things on their minds.

(*Pulls up a chair and joins MRS HALE at the table*.)

MRS HALE: (*examining another block*) Mrs Peters, look at this one. Here, this is the one she was working on, and look at the sewing! All the rest of it has been so nice and even. And look at this! It's all over the place! Why, it looks as if she didn't know what she was about!

(*After she has said this they look at each other, then start to glance back at the door. After an instant* MRS HALE *has pulled at a knot and ripped the sewing*.)

MRS PETERS: Oh, what are you doing, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: (*mildly*) Just pulling out a stitch or two that's not sewed very good. (*threading a needle*) Bad sewing always made me fidgety.

MRS PETERS: (nervously) I don't think we ought to touch things.

MRS HALE: I'll just finish up this end. (*suddenly stopping and leaning forward*) Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: What do you suppose she was so nervous about?

MRS PETERS: Oh—I don't know. I don't know as she was nervous. I sometimes sew awful queer when I'm just tired. (MRS HALE *starts to say something, looks at* MRS PETERS, *then goes on sewing*) Well I must get these things wrapped up. They may be through sooner than we think, (*putting apron and other things together*) I wonder where I can find a piece of paper, and string.

MRS HALE: In that cupboard, maybe.

MRS PETERS: (*looking in cupboard*) Why, here's a bird-cage, (*holds it up*) Did she have a bird, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: Why, I don't know whether she did or not—I've not been here for so long. There was a man around last year selling canaries cheap, but I don't know as she took one; maybe she did. She used to sing real pretty herself.

MRS PETERS: (*glancing around*) Seems funny to think of a bird here. But she must have had one, or why would she have a cage? I wonder what happened to it.

MRS HALE: I s'pose maybe the cat got it.

MRS PETERS: No, she didn't have a cat. She's got that feeling some people have about cats—being afraid of them. My cat got in her room and she was real upset and asked me to take it out.

MRS HALE: My sister Bessie was like that. Queer, ain't it?

MRS PETERS: (*examining the cage*) Why, look at this door. It's broke. One hinge is pulled apart.

MRS HALE: (*looking too*) Looks as if someone must have been rough with it.

MRS PETERS: Why, yes.

(*She brings the cage forward and puts it on the table*.)

MRS HALE: I wish if they're going to find any evidence they'd be about it. I don't like this place.

MRS PETERS: But I'm awful glad you came with me, Mrs Hale. It would be lonesome for me sitting here alone.

MRS HALE: It would, wouldn't it? (*dropping her sewing*) But I tell you what I do wish, Mrs Peters. I wish I had come over sometimes when *she* was here. I—(*looking around the room*)—wish I had.

MRS PETERS: But of course you were awful busy, Mrs Hale—your house and your children.

MRS HALE: I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful—and that's why I ought to have come. I—I've never liked this place. Maybe because it's down in a hollow and you don't see the road. I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now—(*shakes her head*)

MRS PETERS: Well, you mustn't reproach yourself, Mrs Hale. Somehow we just don't see how it is with other folks until—something comes up.

MRS HALE: Not having children makes less work—but it makes a quiet house, and Wright out to work all day, and no company when he did come in. Did you know John Wright, Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Not to know him; I've seen him in town. They say he was a good man.

MRS HALE: Yes—good; he didn't drink, and kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts. But he was a hard man, Mrs Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him—(*shivers*) Like a raw wind that gets to the bone, (*pauses, her eye falling on the cage*) I should think she would 'a wanted a bird. But what do you suppose went with it?

MRS PETERS: I don't know, unless it got sick and died.

(*She reaches over and swings the broken door, swings it again, both women watch it*.)

MRS HALE: You weren't raised round here, were you? (*MRS PETERS shakes her head*) You didn't know—her?

MRS PETERS: Not till they brought her yesterday.

MRS HALE: She—come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself—real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and—fluttery. How—she—did—change. (*silence; then as if struck by a happy thought and relieved to get back to everyday things*) Tell you what, Mrs Peters, why don't you take the quilt in with you? It might take up her mind.

MRS PETERS: Why, I think that's a real nice idea, Mrs Hale. There couldn't possibly be any objection to it, could there? Now, just what would I take? I wonder if her patches are in here—and her things.

(*They look in the sewing basket*.)

MRS HALE: Here's some red. I expect this has got sewing things in it. (*brings out a fancy box*) What a pretty box. Looks like something somebody would give you. Maybe her scissors are in here. (*Opens box. Suddenly puts her hand to her nose*) Why—(MRS PETERS *bends nearer, then turns her face away*) There's something wrapped up in this piece of silk.

MRS PETERS: Why, this isn't her scissors.

MRS HALE: (*lifting the silk*) Oh, Mrs Peters—it's—

(MRS PETERS *bends closer*.)

MRS PETERS: It's the bird.

MRS HALE: (*jumping up*) But, Mrs Peters—look at it! It's neck! Look at its neck!

It's all—other side *to*.

MRS PETERS: Somebody—wrung—its—neck.

(*Their eyes meet. A look of growing comprehension, of horror. Steps are heard outside*. MRS HALE *slips box under quilt pieces, and sinks into her chair. Enter* SHERIFF *and* COUNTY ATTORNEY. MRS PETERS *rises*.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*as one turning from serious things to little pleasantries*) Well ladies, have you decided whether she was going to quilt it or knot it?

MRS PETERS: We think she was going to—knot it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Well, that's interesting, I'm sure. (*seeing the birdcage*) Has the bird flown?

MRS HALE: (*putting more quilt pieces over the box*) We think the—cat got it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*preoccupied*) Is there a cat?

(MRS HALE *glances in a quick covert way at* MRS PETERS.)

MRS PETERS: Well, not now. They're superstitious, you know. They leave.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*to* SHERIFF PETERS, *continuing an interrupted conversation*) No sign at all of anyone having come from the outside. Their own rope. Now let's go up again and go over it piece by piece. (*they start upstairs*) It would have to have been someone who knew just the—

(MRS PETERS *sits down. The two women sit there not looking at one another, but as if peering into something and at the same time holding back. When they talk now it is in the manner of feeling their way over strange ground, as if afraid of what they are saying, but as if they can not help saying it*.)

MRS HALE: She liked the bird. She was going to bury it in that pretty box.

MRS PETERS: (*in a whisper*) When I was a girl—my kitten—there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes—and before I could get there—(*covers her face an instant*) If they hadn't held me back I would have—(*catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly*)—hurt him.

MRS HALE: (*with a slow look around her*) I wonder how it would seem never to have had any children around, (*pause*) No, Wright wouldn't like the bird—a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too.

MRS PETERS: (*moving uneasily*) We don't know who killed the bird.

MRS HALE: I knew John Wright.

MRS PETERS: It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs Hale. Killing a man while he slept, slipping a rope around his neck that choked the life out of him.

MRS HALE: His neck. Choked the life out of him.

(*Her hand goes out and rests on the bird-cage*.)

MRS PETERS: (*with rising voice*) We don't know who killed him. We don't *know*.

MRS HALE: (*her own feeling not interrupted*) If there'd been years and years of nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful—still, after the bird was still.

MRS PETERS: (*something within her speaking*) I know what stillness is. When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old, and me with no other then—

MRS HALE: (*moving*) How soon do you suppose they'll be through, looking for the evidence?

MRS PETERS: I know what stillness is. (*pulling herself back*) The law has got to punish crime, Mrs Hale.

MRS HALE: (*not as if answering that*) I wish you'd seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang. (*a look around the room*) Oh, I *wish* I'd come over here once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?

MRS PETERS: (*looking upstairs*) We mustn't—take on.

MRS HALE: I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be—for women. I tell you, it's queer, Mrs Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing, (*brushes her eyes, noticing the bottle of fruit, reaches out for it*) If I was you, I wouldn't tell her her fruit was gone. Tell her it *ain't*. Tell her it's all right. Take this in to prove it to her. She—she may never know whether it was broke or not.

MRS PETERS: (*takes the bottle, looks about for something to wrap it in; takes petticoat from the clothes brought from the other room, very nervously begins winding this around the bottle. In a false voice*) My, it's a good thing the men couldn't hear us.

Wouldn't they just laugh! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a—dead canary. As if that could have anything to do with—with—wouldn't they *laugh*!

(*The men are heard coming down stairs*.)

MRS HALE: (*under her breath*) Maybe they would—maybe they wouldn't.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: No, Peters, it's all perfectly clear except a reason for doing it. But you know juries when it comes to women. If there was some definite thing. Something to show—something to make a story about—a thing that would connect up with this strange way of doing it—

(*The women's eyes meet for an instant. Enter HALE from outer door*.)

HALE: Well, I've got the team around. Pretty cold out there.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I'm going to stay here a while by myself, (*to the* SHERIFF) You can send Frank out for me, can't you? I want to go over everything. I'm not satisfied that we can't do better.

SHERIFF: Do you want to see what Mrs Peters is going to take in?

(*The* LAWYER *goes to the table, picks up the apron, laughs*.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Oh, I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked out. (*Moves a few things about, disturbing the quilt pieces which cover the box. Steps back*) No, Mrs Peters doesn't need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff's wife is married to the law. Ever think of it that way, Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Not—just that way.

SHERIFF: (*chuckling*) Married to the law. (*moves toward the other room*) I just want you to come in here a minute, George. We ought to take a look at these windows.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*scoffingly*) Oh, windows!

SHERIFF: We'll be right out, Mr Hale.

(HALE *goes outside. The* SHERIFF *follows the* COUNTY ATTORNEY *into the other room. Then* MRS HALE *rises, hands tight together, looking intensely at* MRS PETERS, *whose eyes make a slow turn, finally meeting* MRS HALE's. *A moment* MRS HALE *holds her, then her own eyes point the way to where the box is concealed. Suddenly* MRS PETERS *throws back quilt pieces and tries to put the box in the bag she is wearing. It is too big. She opens box, starts to take bird out, cannot touch it, goes to pieces, stands there helpless. Sound of a knob turning in the other room*. MRS HALE *snatches the box and puts it in the pocket of her big coat. Enter* COUNTY ATTORNEY *and* SHERIFF.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*facetiously*) Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what is it you call it, ladies?

MRS HALE: (*her hand against her pocket*) We call it—knot it, Mr Henderson.

(CURTAIN)

---

This page titled 5.4: Trifles by Susan Glaspell (1916) is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **9.1: Glaspell, Susan. Trifles and The Verge (1916)** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

## 6: Poetry


6.1: What is Poetry?
6.2: Music and Poetry
6.3: Reading Poetry
6.4: Close Reading of a Poem
6.5: Why Analyze Poetry?
6.6: Imagery
6.7: The Line in Poetry
6.8: Word Choice, Word Order, and Tone
6.9: Voice
6.10: Figurative Language
6.11: Form in Poetry
6.12: Meter
6.13: Alliteration, Consonance, Assonance
6.14: Rhyme
6.15: Video- Why Shakespeare Loved Iambic Pentameter
6.16: Poetry Canvas Page and Video Group Assignment


---


6: Poetry is shared under a CC BY-NC license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 6.1: What is Poetry?



Image by Rolandmey via Pixabay

## What is Poetry?

Poetry is a condensed form of writing. As an art, it can effectively invoke a range of emotions in the reader. It can be presented in a number of forms — ranging from traditional rhymed poems such as sonnets to contemporary free verse. Poetry has always been intrinsically tied to music and many poems work with rhythm. It often brings awareness of current issues such as the state of the environment, but can also be read just for the sheer pleasure.

A poet makes the invisible visible. The invisible includes our deepest feelings and angsts, and also our joys, sorrows, and unanswered questions of being human. How is a poet able to do this? A poet uses **fresh** and **original language**, and is more interested in how the arrangement of words affects the reader rather than solely grammatical construction. The poet thinks about how words **sound**, the musicality within each word and also how the words come together.

Like fiction writers, poets mostly **show rather than tell**. They describe the scene vividly using as few words as possible and prefer to describe rather than analyze, leaving the latter to the people who read and write about poetry as you are doing in this class.

## The Purpose of Poetry

If you've taken a composition or freshman writing course, you might recognize some familiar terms used above — summarizes, sources, persuades, ethos. These are 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 Hirsh's definition of poem. How does this poem typify his explanation? Are there any ways in which it does not? Write a short response (300 words or less) explaining how you see your selected poem in relation to Hirsch's definition.

## Video: Billy Collins, A Poet, Speaks Out

**Watch** Billy Collins' audio/visual poem:







Video 6.1.1 : Introduction to Poetry by Billy Collins

After watching the video above, read the poem here, and click on the link below to listen to a lecture by Billy Collins on his craft and how it relates to the reader.

## Contributors and Attributions

Adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory, sourced from SUNY, CC-BY-NC-SA

This page titled 6.1: What is Poetry? is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.1: What is Poetry?** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

# 6.2: Music and Poetry

## Music and Poetry: Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen - Rock Poets

Musicians have been bringing poetry to a mass audience who might not listen to or read poetry. The ultimate synthesis between rock music and lyrics can be a tricky one. The two forms of expression must complement each other in some kind of balance. Most rock productions tend to lean more on the music than the textual expression, while some singer/songwriters put more emphasis on the poetic choice of words in their songs. Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen belong in the last category; their literary contributions to rock and pop over half a century ranks them among the greatest modernist and contemporary poets. Cohen said about Dylan that "he put the word back into the jukebox," signifying the intrusion of art into popular culture. Dylan's rich imagery and often surreal texts and Cohen's silent and sharp poetic observations certainly were, and still are, read and listened to by an increasing audience all over the world. The songs are personal, often political but always original.

### Background



Bob Dylan. (CC BY-SA-NC; Supplier Corbis Supplier NTB scanpix via ScanPix)

The American political scene of the sixties was one of turmoil and unrest with the assassinations of great leaders, race riots, civil rights rallies, the Vietnam War, the Cuba Crisis, student riots, anti-communism, and the Cold War – to list some of the key factors that characterised American society at the time. Like many of the modernist artists, Cohen and Dylan were more into their art than what was going on around them. After songs like "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and "Masters of War" Bob Dylan was embraced as a protest singer by the anti-war activists, who wanted to make him the voice of their generation. Admittedly, "Hard Rain" was spontaneously written during the Cuba Crisis, and he certainly is aware of political malpractice and injustice. But Dylan never wanted to be labelled and put into any specific category, and when he later left his acoustic concept and turned to a loud electric performance of his songs, there was uproar among his fans – accusing him of betraying their cause. But Dylan let them down and went his own unpredictable ways like he has always done.

Leonard Cohen never intended to become a singer at all. His ambition was to make a living out of his talent for writing. He published some novels in the early sixties that did not catch on very well, so he learned fingerpicking guitar and decided to put his poems into songs. This (probably much to his own surprise) went down with the bohemian beatniks of Greenwich Village, who cared more for a profound and mystic piece of poetry than a glittering stage act and loud music.

### Imagery and integrity

Bob Dylan did not set out to be a poet; his ambition was to become a folk singer in the tradition of Woody Guthrie. Leonard Cohen had studied poetry and was more conscious about his poetic project. Hence their poetic approaches are quite different and must be dealt with distinctively. What unifies the two is their integrity and devotion to their work. It is hard to pick representative examples of their massive production that spans over half a century, but the following quotes could be a small sample that may tease the appetite for a more in-depth study of their songs and poetry.

Unlike most modernist poets Cohen's and Dylan's poetry has a distinct rhythm and rhyme, which of course is because the poetry was meant for singing.

#### Bob Dylan's Poems

One of Bob Dylan's most famous songs is "**Mr. Tambourine Man**," from which these poetic lines are taken:

*Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky*
*With one hand waving free*
*Silhouetted by the sea, circled by the circus sands*
*With all memory and fate driven deep beneath the waves*
*Let me forget about today until tomorrow.*

"Desolation Row" is another long poem stacked with enigmatic imagery and references to Shakespeare, Einstein and the Bible; this is the first stanza:

**Desolation Road** (Bob Dylan)
*They're selling postcards of the hanging*
*They're painting the passports brown*
*The beauty parlor is filled with sailors*
*The circus is in town*
*Here comes the blind commissioner*
*They've got him in a trance*
*One hand is tied to the tight-rope dancer*
*The other is in his pants*
*And the riot squad, they're restless*
*They need somewhere to go*
*As Lady and I look out tonight*
*From Desolation Row*

Bono (of U2) said about the following lines: "I don't have a clue about what it means, but it is beautiful":

**I Want You** (Bob Dylan)
*The guilty undertaker sighs*
*The lonesome organ grinder cries*
*The silver saxophones say I should refuse you*
*The cracked bells and washed out horns*
*Blow into my face with scorn*
*But it's not that way*
*I wasn't born to lose you*

The lines are quite surreal; Dylan paints images and creates suggestive associations that stir the curiosity of his audience.




Leonard Cohen CC CC-BY-NC-SA-4.0 Photographer: Erik Thorberg

Leonard Cohen's poetry is more subtle and low-voiced as he in this poem speaks of how love appears where you least expect it to. Note the poetic and evocative juxtapositions (birthmark/stain, snowman/rain etc.)

**Love Calls You By Your Name** (Leonard Cohen)
*You thought that it could never happen*
*To all the people that you became,*
*Your body lost in legend, the beast so very tame.*
*But here, right here,*
*Between the birthmark and the stain*
*Between the ocean and your open vein,*
*Between the snowman and the rain*
*Once again, once again*
*Love calls you by your name.*

*The woman in your scrapbook*
*Whom you still praise and blame*
*You say they chained you to your fingernails*
*And you climb the halls of fame.*
*Oh, but here, right here*
*Between the peanuts and the cage*
*Between the darkness and the stage*
*Between the hour and the age*
*Once again, once again*
*Love calls you by your name*

These are the two first stanzas of a beautiful song included on one of his early albums, *Songs of Love and Hate* (1971). The next example is an excerpt from a more recent poem, included on *The Future* (1992).

**Anthem** (Leonard Cohen)

*The birds they sang*
*At the break of day*
*Start again*
*I heard them say*
*Don't dwell on what*
*Has passed away*
*Or what is yet to be*

*Ah, the wars they will*
*Be fought again*
*The holy dove*
*She will be caught again*
*Bought and sold*
*And bought again*
*The dove is never free*

*Ring the bells that still can ring*
*Forget your perfect offering*
*There is a crack in everything*
*That's how the light gets in*

In his humble way Leonard Cohen has said about this poem that "it is probably the one I am most pleased with." And indeed, the last two lines sum up much of Cohen's poetry beautifully; his melancholy way of pointing out that despite, or even because of our defects we can see our blessings and the bright sides of life. Like the title of one of his novels also indicates, we are *Beautiful Losers*.

Bob Dylan was born in 1941 and Leonard Cohen in 1934. They are still active producing music and poetry, and they are both still touring.

### Exercise 6.2.1

1. What do you make of the imagery of Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man"? What do you associate with it? What is the singer asking for?
2. The imagery of "Desolation Row" is both wild and fantastic. On the internet you will find a full version; read it and play the song. See if you can place all his references and allusions.
3. Like Bono said, it is hard to figure out any meaning in the lines of "I Want You," but find it on the internet, play it, and follow the lyrics. Does it make any sense or is it just words and changing imagery?
4. Look at the juxtapositions of Cohen's "Love Calls You by Your Name." What can you say about the distance between the two items in each one?
5. Read the second stanza of Cohen's "Anthem." What is this about, and how do you interpret "the dove"?
6. Explain the two last lines of Cohen's "Anthem." What do we call such a literary technique?

## Contributors and Attributions

Adapted from Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen - Rock Poets by Jan-Louis Nagel, provided by ndla license: CC CC-BY-SA-4.0

This page titled 6.2: Music and Poetry is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Jan-Louis Nagel.

- **6.2: Music and Poetry** by Jan-Louis Nagel is licensed CC BY-SA 4.0.

# 6.3: Reading Poetry

## Reading Poetry



Image from Pixabay

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 Ruykeyser 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 Ruykeyser 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



Image from Pixabay

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 *em*body 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.

> A big mistake novice readers of poetry make is assuming that they can get the meaning of a poem by reading it just once. Since a poem is condensed language, the meaning reveals itself slowly, unfolding a bit at a time after multiple readings.

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.

> **Note**
>
> Poet Emily Dickinson expresses how she can tell if something is poetry 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."

A poem is structured differently from prose as poems are mostly structured around a **line** rather than a paragraph (poets can also write **prose poems** that use paragraphs). What this means is that, as a reader, you pause briefly after reading a line and moving onto

the next line. Sometimes, poets might break up a sentence midway between lines. This is called **caesura** and poets use this to emphasize the meanings of words either directly before the line break or on the following line. Seeing how a poem is visually laid out is as important as hearing it read as contemporary poets might work more with the white space of the page to emphasize meaning.

Poets break up lines in a poem into **stanzas**, the equivalent of paragraphs in prose. Often, a stanza has a meaning that is distinct from other stanzas. Understanding why a poet has chosen to group lines together in stanzas is important in ascertaining the meaning of the poem at large.

> **Note**
>
> A big mistake novice readers of poetry make is assuming that they can get the meaning of a poem by reading it just once. Since a poem is condensed language, the meaning reveals itself slowly, unfolding a bit at a time after multiple readings.

## Contributors and Attributions

Adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory, sourced from SUNY, CC-BY-NC-SA

---

This page titled 6.3: Reading Poetry is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Michelle Bonczek Evory (OpenSUNY) .

- **6.3: Reading Poetry** by Michelle Bonczek Evory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

# 6.4: Close Reading of a Poem

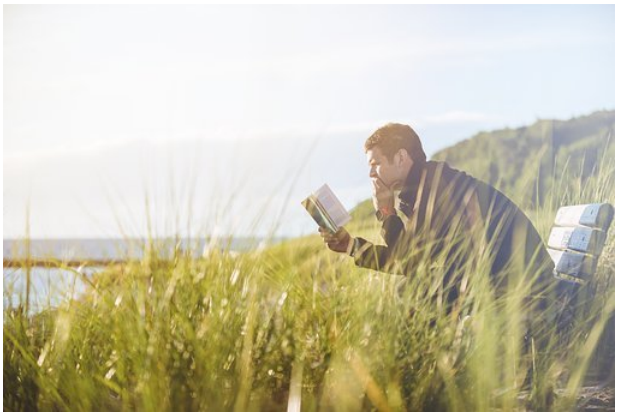


Image from Pixabay

## 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.

**Exercise 6.4.1**

Read the titles of the poems that follow. What do the titles bring up for you? Discuss your findings.

- 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:

### Poem: The Insistence of Beauty by Stephen Dunn

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.



Image from Pixabay

## 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 cliché 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, et cetera). 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.

### Exercise 6.4.1

> 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; 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 a 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?

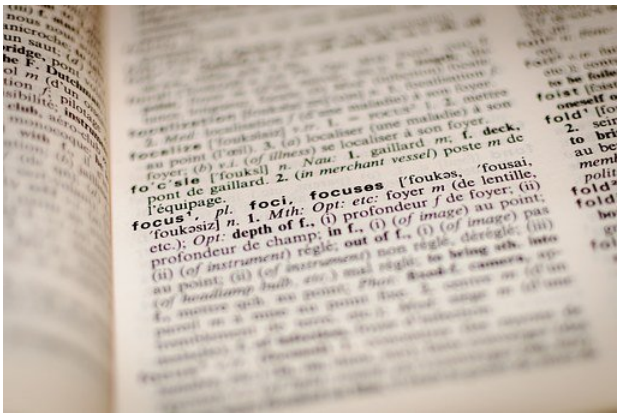


Image from Pixabay

## 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, and 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.

### Activity

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.

### Exercise 6.4.1

Read the poem by Wordsworth below aloud the first time to hear the sound of the words and the brief pauses with each line break. Each and every word, every punctuation mark is deliberately chosen by the poet, so read thoughtfully and carefully. You can also use "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden or "Catch" by Robert Francis.

**I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud** *by William Wordsworth*

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.

Continuous as the stars that shine

And twinkle on the milky way,

They stretched in never-ending line

Along the margin of a bay:

Ten thousand saw I at a glance,

Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they

Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:

A poet could not but be gay,

In such a jocund company:

I gazed—and gazed—but little thought

What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie

In vacant or in pensive mood,

They flash upon that inward eye

Which is the bliss of solitude;

And then my heart with pleasure fills,

And dances with the daffodils.

2) Go through the same process the author used to read Stephen Dunn's poem to do a close reading of Wordsworth's poem. What is your first emotional reaction to the poem? Next, follow the steps below to do a close reading.

1. What does this title do to you? What kind of expectations and tone does it set up?
2. What do you notice about the structure of the poem?
3. How are the lines organized differently than prose? Where do they break?
4. What do you notice about the last word of each line?
5. Is this poem telling a story? Sharing thoughts? Playing with language experimentally?
6. Is the tone serious? Funny? Meditative?
7. Read through and identify the images in the poem and also the tone and places where the tone changes. Discuss how each image makes you feel. To what words or images is your attention drawn? What associations do you make from them?
8. Find connections and ask questions. What does *x* remind me of? Or, what associations am I making? What other connections and patterns can we see?
9. Look closely at diction or word choice, especially as the connotative and denotative meanings of words.
10. What do you think is the most powerful part of the poem?
11. What, if anything, confused you in its reading? Did that change once you conducted a closer reading of the poem?
12. What is your experience of this poem? How do you interpret its meaning? What are the specific approaches you used to come to your interpretation?
13. Now, read the poem in your own mind again once or twice. Pause at each word that “jumps” out at you because it is either an unusual image or it elicits a mood, or it could just be that you don’t know the meaning of the word and will need to refer to a dictionary.
14. Note recurring ideas or images—color code these with highlighters for visual recognition as you look at the poem on the page.
15. Determine formal patterns. Is there a regular rhythm? How would you describe it? Can it be characterized by the number of syllables in each line? If not, do you note a certain number of beats (moments where your voice emphasizes the sound) in the line? Are there rhyming sounds? Where do they occur?
16. What is the overarching effect of all these elements taken together? What do you think is the message conveyed by the poem?

As you learn more about the elements of poetry, you will be looking at word choices a poet makes and also changes in tone. Are there any figures of speech the poet uses? What is the form of the poem? Each of these contributes to the overall meaning of a poem.

## Contributors and Attributions

Adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory under the license CC BY-NC-SA

---

This page titled 6.4: Close Reading of a Poem is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.4: Case Study - A Close Reading of a Poem** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.5: Why Analyze Poetry?

## Analyzing Poetry

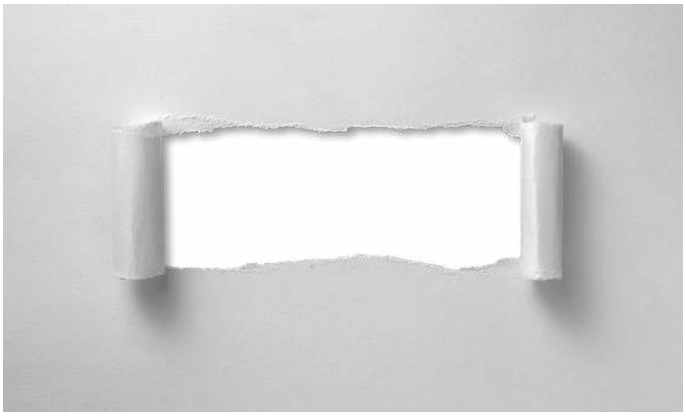


Image from Pixabay

What is the point of analyzing poetry? One simple answer is that the more we know about anything the more interesting it becomes: listening to music or looking at paintings with someone who can tell us a little about what we hear or see–or what we're reading–is one way of increasing our understanding and pleasure. That may mean learning something about the people who produced the writing, music, painting that we are interested in, and why they produced it. But it may also mean understanding why one particular form was chosen rather than another: why, for example, did the poet choose to write a **sonnet** rather than an **ode**, a **ballad**, or a **villanelle**? To appreciate the appropriateness of one form, we need to be aware of a range of options available to that particular writer at that particular time. In the same way, we also need to pay attention to word choice. Why was this particular word chosen from a whole range of words that might have said much the same? Looking at manuscript drafts can be really enlightening, showing how much effort was expended in order to find the most appropriate or most evocative expression.

### Exercise 6.5.1

Click on the link below to read and compare the two versions of William Blake's "Tyger." The one on the left is a draft, the other is the final published version.

**William Blake's "Tyger"**

What are the differences between the two versions?

**Answer**

The most obvious difference between the two is that stanza 4 of the draft does not survive in the published version, and an entirely new stanza, "When the stars threw down their spears," appears in the finished poem. Significantly this introduces the idea of "the Lamb," a dramatic contrast to the tiger, as well as the idea of a "he" who made the lamb. One similarity between draft and final version is that each is made up entirely of unanswered questions. But if you look at the manuscript stanza 5, you can see revisions from "What" to "Where," and the struggle with the third line, where Blake eventually decided that the idea of an arm was redundant, subsumed in the notions of grasping and clasping. The two rhyme words are decided–grasp/clasp–but in which order should they come? "Clasp" is a less aggressive word than "grasp"; "clasp" is not quite as gentle as an embrace, but it is closer to embracing than "grasp" is – so it must be for deliberate effect that we end up with "What dread grasp/Dare its deadly terrors clasp?"

It is rare to have manuscript drafts to examine in this way, but I hope that this convinces you of the kind of attention writers pay to word choice.

### Exercise 6.5.1

Let us take one more example. Think about this first stanza of Thomas Hardy's "Neutral Tones" (1867); what do you notice about the word choice in the last line?

We stood by a pond that winter day,

And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,

And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;

– They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

(Gibson, 1976, p. 12)

**Answer**

Notice that, in the last line, "oak" or "elm" would work just as well as far as the **rhythm** or music of the line is concerned, but "ash" has extra connotations of greyness, of something burnt out, dead, finished ("ashes to ashes," too, perhaps?), all of which contribute to the mood that Hardy conveys in a way that "oak" or "elm" wouldn't.

To return to my original question then, "What is the point of analyzing poetry?", one answer is that only an analytical approach can help us arrive at an informed appreciation and understanding of the poem. Whether we like a poem or not, we should be able to recognize the craftsmanship that has gone into making it, the ways in which stylistic techniques and devices have worked to create meaning. General readers may be entirely happy to find a poem pleasing, or unsatisfactory, without stopping to ask why. But *studying* poetry is a different matter and requires some background understanding of what those stylistic techniques might be, as well as an awareness of constraints and conventions within which poets have written throughout different periods of history.

You may write poetry yourself. If so, you probably know only too well how difficult it is to produce something you feel really expresses what you want to convey. Writing an essay presents enough problems – a poem is a different matter, but certainly no easier. Thinking of poetry as a discipline and a craft which, to some extent, can be learned, is another useful way of approaching analysis. After all, how successful are emotional outpourings on paper? Words one might scribble down in the heat of an intense moment may have some validity in conveying that intensity, but in general might they not be more satisfactory if they were later revised? My own feeling is that a remark Wordsworth made 200 years ago has become responsible for a number of misconceptions about what poetry should do. In the Preface to a volume of poems called *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) he wrote that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Owens and Johnson, 1998, p.85,11.105–6). The second time he uses the same phrase he says something that I think is often forgotten today: "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion *recollected in tranquillity*" (my italics) (ibid., p. 95, ll.557–8). Notice the significant time lapse implied there – the idea that, however powerful or spontaneous the emotion, it needs to be carefully considered before you start writing. He goes on:

> *The emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually reproduced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins.*

You don't have to agree with Wordsworth about what poetry is or how best to achieve it. (Would you always want a poem to express powerful emotion, for example? I referred to Hardy's "Neutral Tones" above, where the whole point is that neither of the two characters described feels anything much at all.) But the idea of contemplation is a useful and important one: it implies distance, perhaps detachment, but above all re-creation, not the thing itself. And if we try to re-create something, we must choose our methods and our words carefully in order to convey what we experienced as closely as possible. A word of warning though: writers do not always aim to express personal experiences; often a persona is created (see discussion of "Voice").

The poet Ezra Pound offered this advice to other poets in an essay written in 1913: "Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something" (Gray, 1990, p. 56). And in the 1950s William Carlos Williams advised, "cut and cut again whatever you write." In his opinion, the "test of the artist is to be able to revise without showing a seam" (loc. cit.). That sewing image he uses appeals to me particularly because it stresses the notion of skilled craftsmanship. Pound and Williams were American, writing

long after Wordsworth, but, as you can see, like countless other poets they too reflected very seriously on their own poetic practice. I hope this helps convince you that as students we owe it to the poems we read to give them close analytical attention.



Image from Pixabay

## Elements of Poetry

In what follows, section headings like "Rhyme," "Rhythm," "Line lengths and line endings," "Alliteration," and so on are intended to act as signposts to help you use this course (if terms are unfamiliar, look them up in the glossary at the end of this free course). But these headings indicate only the *main* technique being discussed. While it is something we need to attempt, it is very difficult to try to isolate devices in this way – to separate out, for example, the effects of rhythm from rhyme. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't look for particular techniques at work in a poem, but we need to be aware that they will be interdependent and the end product effective or not because of the way such elements work together.

If you are working on a poem, it can be a good idea to print it, maybe even enlarge it, and then write anything you find particularly striking in the margins. Use highlighters or coloured pens to underline repetitions and link rhyme words. Patterns may well emerge that will help you understand the way the poem develops. Make the poems your own in this way, and then, if you are the kind of person who doesn't mind writing in books, you can insert notes in a more restrained way in the margins of your book.

If you prefer to work on your computer, you can do a similar thing by using an annnotation tool on your word processor.

Whatever you do, always ask yourself what the effect of a particular technique that you identify is. Noticing an unusual choice of words, a particular **rhyme scheme** or use of **alliteration** (see section on alliteration) is an important first step, but you need to take another one. Unless you go on to say why what you have noticed is effective, what it contributes to the rest of the poem, how it endorses or changes things, then you are doing less than half the job. Get into the habit of asking yourself questions, even if you can't always answer them satisfactorily.

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from Approaching Poetry by Dr. Sue Asbee. Provided by OpenLearn, The Open University. License: CC-NC-SA
- Adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory under the license CC BY-NC-SA

---

This page titled 6.5: Why Analyze Poetry? is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.5: Why Analyze Poetry?** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.6: Imagery



Image from Pixabay

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.

### Exercise 6.9.1

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 effect on the reader's intellect as the images resonate into symbols and create connections and suggestions. What effects 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.

## "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.

## Types of Sensory Images

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.*
(Dorianne 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.

### Exercise 6.9.1

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, et cetera.

**Answer**

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.

**Language is the personal or private choice of words the speaker uses to express himself. Poetry makes pictures with words.**

- Are there any words that are repeated or that stand out?
- Are the sentences long or short?

## Contributors and Attributions

This page titled 6.6: Imagery is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.9: Imagery** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.7: The Line in Poetry

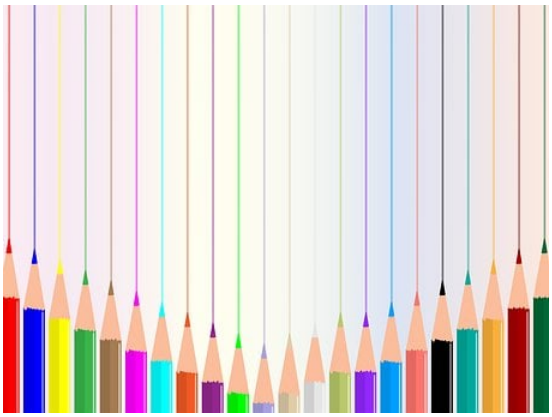


Image from Pixabay

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 **enjambed** 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 *verslibre* in 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.



Image from Pixabay

## 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 Merriwether’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 lay out 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 Nezhukumatathil 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 Merriwether'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, oooooh 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. Nezhukumatathil 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.

**Exercise 6.6.1**

Read the following prose extract taken from Walter Pater's discussion of the *Mona Lisa*, written in 1893, and then complete the activity:

> *She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and*

> *lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands*

When W.B. Yeats was asked to edit *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935* (1936), he chose to begin with this passage from Pater, but he set it out quite differently on the page. Before you read his version, write out the extract as a poem yourself. The exercise is designed to make you think about line lengths, where to start a new line and where to end it when there is no rhyme to give you a clue. There is no *regular* rhythm either, though I'm sure you will discover rhythms in the words, as well as repeated patterns. How can you best bring out these poetic features?

**Answer**

Of course, there is no right answer to this exercise, but you should compare your version to Yeats's, printed below, to see if you made similar decisions.

*She is older than the rocks among which she sits;*
*Like the Vampire,*
*She has been dead many times,*
*And learned the secrets of the grave;*
*And has been a diver in deep seas,*
*And keeps their fallen day about her;*
*And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;*
*And, as Leda,*
*Was the mother of Helen of Troy,*
*And, as St Anne,*
*Was the mother of Mary;*
*And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,*
*And lives*
*Only in the delicacy*
*With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,*
*And tinged the eyelids and the hands.*

I wonder whether you used upper case letters for the first word of each line, as Yeats did? You may have changed the punctuation, or perhaps have left it out altogether. Like Yeats, you may have used "And" at the beginnings of lines to draw attention to the repetitions: nine of the lines begin in this way, emphasising the way the clauses pile up, defining and redefining the mysterious Mona Lisa. Two lines begin with "She": while there was no choice about the first, beginning the third in the same way focuses attention on her right at the start of the poem. Yeats has used Pater's punctuation to guide his line endings in all but two places: lines 13 and 14 run on – a stylistic device known as enjambment. The effect is an interesting interaction between eyes and ears. While we may be tempted to read on without pausing to find the sense, the line endings and white space of the page impose pauses on our reading, less than the commas and semicolons that mark off the other lines, but significant nevertheless.

Yeats's arrangement of the words makes the structure and movement of Pater's long sentence clearer than it appears when written as prose. The poem begins with age–she is "older than the rocks"– and refers to "Vampire", death, and "grave" in the first lines. The decision to single out the two words "And lives" in a line by themselves towards the end of the poem sets them in direct opposition to the opening; we have moved from great age and living death to life. The arrangement of lines 8-11 highlights her links with both pagan and Christian religions: the Mona Lisa was the mother of Helen of Troy and the Virgin Mary. The wisdom and knowledge she has acquired is worn lightly, nothing more than "the sound of lyres and flutes", apparent only in the "delicacy" of colour on "eyelids and hands."

The aim of the preceding exercise was to encourage you to think about form and structure even when a poem does not appear to follow a conventional pattern. Because you have now "written" a poem and had the opportunity to compare it with someone else's version of the same words, you should begin to realize the importance of decisions about where exactly to place a word for maximum effect, and how patterns can emerge which will control our reading when, for example, successive lines begin with repetitions. It should have made you think about the importance of the beginnings of

lines, as well as line endings. What has been achieved by using a short line here, a longer one there? How do these decisions relate to what is being said? These are questions that can usefully be asked of any poem.

Earlier, discussing the extract from Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, I asked you to concentrate on the sound qualities of the poetry. Here, I want you to consider the visual impact of the poem on the page. It is a good thing to be aware of what a complex task reading is, and to be alive to the visual as well as the aural qualities of the verse.

## Length of a Line




Image from Pixabay

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 effect 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 Levis'.

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 effects 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.

### Exercise 6.6.1

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.



Image from Pixabay

**“Lines”, from *The Star-Spangled Banner*** by Denise Duhamel

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.

*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?

### Exercise 6.6.1

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.

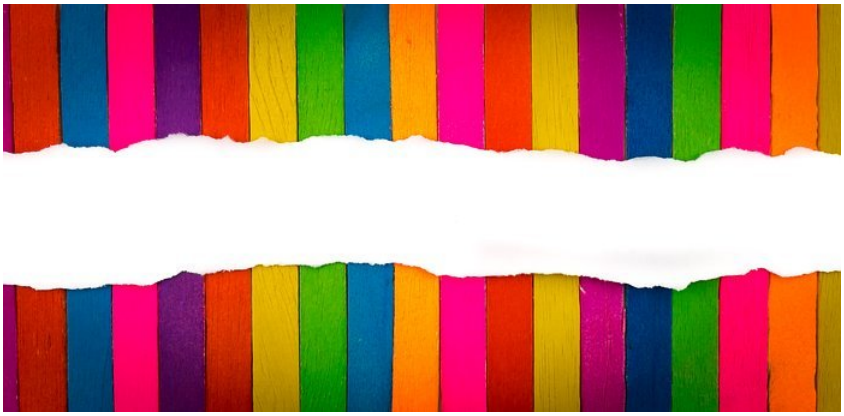


Image from Pixabay

## 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

#### 1) To label the past, present, and future:

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

**A Story**

*by Li Young Li*

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!

#### 2) To illustrate differences in location:

Read Chad Sweeny's poem below to see how stanza breaks affect location:

**The Mile**

*by Chad Sweeny*

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

somnolence 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.

*Copyright © Chad Sweeney. "The Mile" is licensed CC-BY-NA-SA.*

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.

### 3) 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. Look for the shifts in voice or address in the stanzas below:

**Dinner Out**

*by Christopher Howell*

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.

### 4) 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…"

### 5) 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,

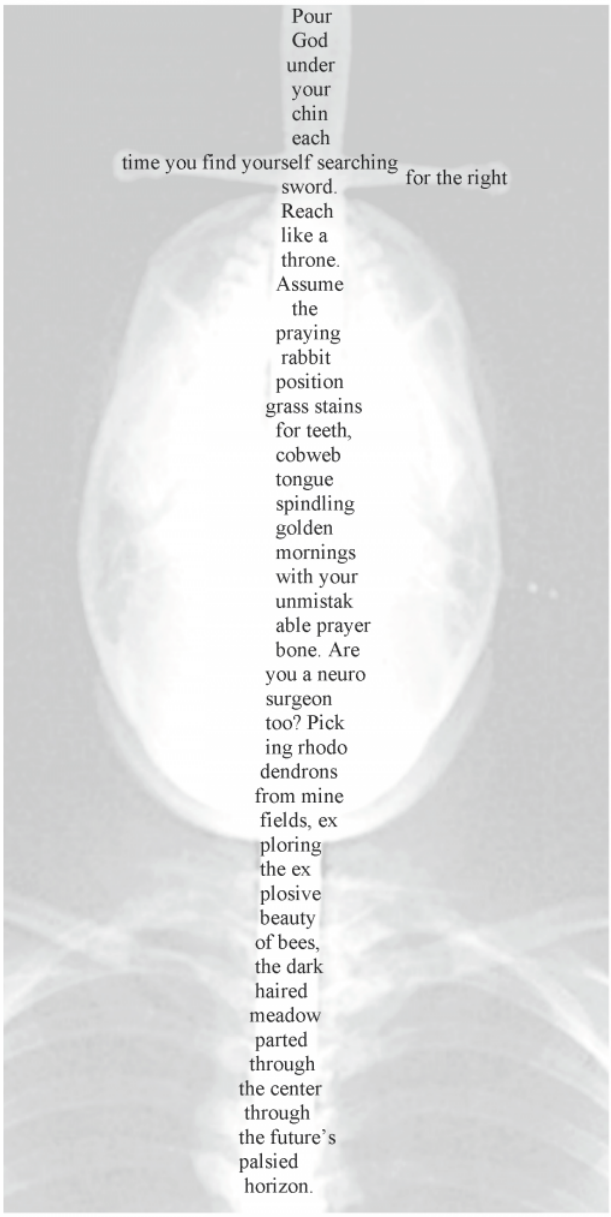
like a nursing home lunch.

(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.

### 6) Create an image with the words on the page




## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory under the license CC BY-NC-SA
- Adapted from Approaching Poetry, by Dr. Sue Asbee. Provided by OpenLearn, The Open University. License: CC-NC-SA

---

This page titled 6.7: The Line in Poetry is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.6: The Line in Poetry** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.8: Word Choice, Word Order, and Tone

In the previous section, we discussed the importance of word choice in poetry. Furthering this idea, and also the idea of "show versus tell," we will explore how a poet's use of concrete words makes all the difference. Also, since the best way to appreciate poetry or any art is to practice it, we will try writing a few lines of poetry.



Image from Pixabay

## Abstract Versus 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 recreate 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 recreates 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 concrete words, 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.

**Activity**

In contrast to abstractions, take in these words:

- Apple
- Blue
- Boat

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

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

Next, begin with the following vague categories and narrow down the word making it more and more specific:

- Food
- Vehicle
- Animal

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

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.

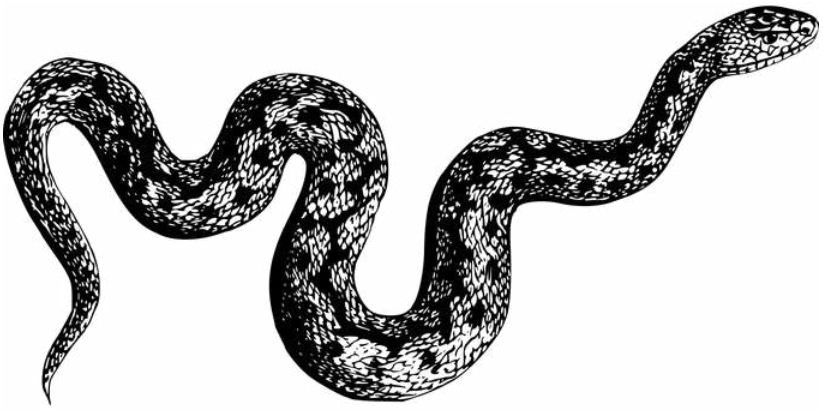


Image from Pixabay

## Word Order

A poet not only chooses words carefully, but also the order in which to present them to emphasize the desired meaning. According to Dictionary.com, syntax is the “arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language.”

## Poetic Inversion

Poetic inversion, or changing the usual word order of speech, is often linked to the need to maintain a rhythm or to find a rhyme. We noticed Pope's poetic inversion in *An Essay on Criticism* and saw how the rhyme was intimately linked to the rhythm of the verse. The song "Dancing in the Street," first recorded by Martha and the Vandellas in the 1960s, does violence to word order in the interests of rhyme—"There'll be dancing in the street/ A chance new folk to meet"—but, because the words are sung to a driving rhythm, we are unlikely to notice how awkward they are. There's a convention that we recognize, however unconsciously, that prevents us from mentally re-writing the line as "a chance to meet new people." ("People" rather than "folk" would be more usual usage for me, but, as with the Pope example, this would mean that the rhythm too would be lost.)

### Activity

- Read Emily Dickinson's poem about a snake. Discuss how her choice of word order affects the poem.

## Tone

Watch out for changes in **tone** for they can happen within a line or a few lines of poem and are critical in understanding a poem. Poems can be serious, sarcastic, grieving, happy et cetera. One of the definitions of tone, according to Dictionary.com, is "the general character or attitude of a place, piece of writing, situation, etc." Words that have positive or negative associations give a specific tone to writing.

Poets use both **denotation**, or the actual/dictionary meaning of words, as well as **connotation**, or the implied meaning of words. For example, the dictionary definition of "home" is a place where one lives, but the connotation can mean security, warmth, belonging. The connotation of words lends to the tone of the poem as words with a positive connotation lends itself to a happier tone. Connotations change over time as they are based upon readers' experiences within a given period of time. An **allusion**, according to Dictionary.com, is an expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly; an indirect or passing reference. Allusions, like connotative words, refer to something beyond just the dictionary meaning of the word.

### Additional poems to study diction and tone

**To a Captious Critic**

*by Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906)*

Dear critic, who my lightness so deplores,

Would I might study to be prince of bores,

Right wisely would I rule that dull estate—

But, sir, I may not, till you abdicate.

**To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time**

*by Robert Herrick (1591-1674)*

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,

Old Time is still a-flying;

And this same flower that smiles today

Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,

The higher he's a-getting,

The sooner will his race be run,

And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,

When youth and blood are warmer;

But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.
Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry;
For having lost but once your prime,
You may forever tarry.

**To his Coy Mistress**

*by Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)*

Had we but world enough and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.
But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,

And into ashes all my lust;

The grave’s a fine and private place,

But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue

Sits on thy skin like morning dew,

And while thy willing soul transpires

At every pore with instant fires,

Now let us sport us while we may,

And now, like amorous birds of prey,

Rather at once our time devour

Than languish in his slow-chapped power.

Let us roll all our strength and all

Our sweetness up into one ball,

And tear our pleasures with rough strife

Through the iron gates of life:

Thus, though we cannot make our sun

Stand still, yet we will make him run.

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory under the license CC BY-NC-SA
- Adapted from "Approaching Poetry" by Dr. Sue Asbee. Provided by OpenLearn, The Open University. License: CC-NC-SA

---

This page titled 6.8: Word Choice, Word Order, and Tone is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.7: Word Choice, Word Order, and Tone** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.9: Voice

## Voice



Image by Kathleen Tyler Conklin: CC BY: Attribution

The speaker is the bridge between the poem's experience and the reader. 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 then 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.

### Exercise 6.8.1

Is the speaker in a poem one and the same as the writer? Stop and consider this for a few moments. Can you think of any poems you have read where a writer has created a character, or persona, whose voice we hear when we read?

Wordsworth's *The Prelude* was written as an autobiographical poem, but there are many instances where it is obvious that poet and persona are different. Charlotte Mew's poem "The Farmer's Bride" (1916) begins like this:

*Three summers since I chose a maid,*
*Too young maybe — but more's to do*
*At harvest-time than bide and woo.*
*When us was wed she turned afraid*
*Of love and me and all things human;*

(Warner, 1981, pp. 1–2)

**Answer**

Mew invents a male character here, and clearly separates herself as a writer from the voice in her poem. Some of the most well-known created characters—or personae—in poetry are Browning's dramatic monologues.

## Exercise 6.8.1

**Analysis of Voice in Browning's Poetry**

Consider the opening lines from three Robert Browning poems below. Robert Browning was one of the most important poets of the Victorian period (1812-1889). Who do you think is speaking?

Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister (1842)

Gr-r- r — there go, my heart's abhorrence!
Water your damned flower-pots, do!
If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
God's blood, would not mine kill you!
What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming?
Oh, that rose has prior claims —
Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?
Hell dry you up with its flames!

The Last Duchess (1842)

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Porphyria's Lover (1842)

The rain set early in to-night,

The sullen wind was soon awake,

It tore the elm-tops down for spite,

And did its worst to vex the lake:

I listened with heart fit to break.

**Answer**

Well, the first speaker isn't named, but we can infer that, like Brother Lawrence whom he hates, he's a monk. The second must be a Duke since he refers to his "last Duchess" and, if we read to the end of the third poem, we discover that the speaker is a man consumed with such jealousy that he strangles his beloved Porphyria with her own hair. Each of the poems is written in the first person ("*my* heart's abhorrence"; "That's *my* last Duchess"; "*I* listened with heart fit to break"). None of the characters Browning created in these poems bears any resemblance to him: the whole point of a dramatic monologue is the creation of a character who is most definitely not the poet. Charlotte Mew's poem can be described in the same way.

## Contributors and Attributions

- "Voice" section Adapted from "Chapter Four: Voice" *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory under the license CC BY-NC-SA
- Exercises Adapted from "8: Voice" from "Approaching Poetry" by Dr. Sue Asbee. Provided by OpenLearn, The Open University. License: CC-NC-SA

---

This page titled 6.9: Voice is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.8: Voice** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.10: Figurative Language

## Figurative Language

**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 *golden delicious*, *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

### Metaphor

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 in Poets.org, would go so far as to say that poetry *is* **metaphor**:

Quote:

> The most conspicuous point of contact between meaning and poetry is *metaphor*. For one of the first things that a students 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.
>
> (Owen Barfield, "Metaphor")



Image from Pixabay

**"Nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses"**

"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 *The pen 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 *The whole world loves you* (where *whole world* 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. Can you identify the 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
inthe 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 that 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.

**Activity**

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? Explore how figurative language allows us to use concrete language to relate abstract ideas.

### Video

Watch the video: *The Art of the Metaphor* by Jane Hirshfield, animation by Ben Pearce.






Video 6.10.1 : The Art of the Metaphor

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory under the license CC BY-NC-SA

---

This page titled 6.10: Figurative Language is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.10: Figurative Language** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.11: Form in Poetry



Image from Pixabay

Form is the "shape" of a poem, its layout on the page. Specific poetic forms have been developed by many cultures over time. In more developed, closed or "received" poetic forms, which are forms that have been handed down over the generations, the rhyming scheme, meter and other elements of a poem are based on sets of rules, ranging from the relatively loose rules that govern the construction of an *elegy* to the highly formalized structure of the ghazal or villenelle. These forms are also known as "fixed" forms as they follow a set pattern or rules. More contemporary poets might choose to create their own forms where the poet dictates the rhythm, and uses techniques such as the spatial arrangement of the lines on the page. Open form poems will be discussed in the next section.

## Poetic Forms Based on Stanza

Many forms use variations of a **stanza** that dictate its poetic form. Poetry is grouped in lines called stanzas. Stanzas are the poetic equivalent to paragraphs in prose. Traditional poems often use stanzas that have **rhyme schemes**. Words that end each line dictate the rhyme scheme in a stanza. We denote the end rhyme schemes with a lower case letter starting with a. Examples of rhyme schemes are ABAB or ABCD. See the example below:

A.E. HOUSMAN (1859-1936)

### Loveliest of Trees, the cherry now

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now (A)
Is hung with bloom along the bough, (A)
And stands about the woodland ride (B)
Wearing white for Eastertide. (B)

Now, of my threescore years and ten, (C)
Twenty will not come again, (C)
And take from seventy springs a score, (D)
It only leaves me fifty more. (D)

And since to look at things in bloom (E)
Fifty springs are little room, (E)
About the woodlands I will go (F)
To see the cherry hung with snow. (F)

## Types of Stanzas

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

Expanded examples:

A **couplet** are two line stanzas with end words that rhyme. Poets in the 17th-18th century like Alexander Pope often wrote "heroic couplets." See an example from Pope's "Essay of Criticism below" using a couplet rhyme scheme:

- But you who seek to give and merit fame, (A)
- And justly bear a critic's noble name, (A)
- Be sure your self and your own reach to know, (B)
- How far your genius, taste, and learning go; (B)
- Launch not beyond your depth, but be discreet, (C)
- And mark that point where sense and dulness meet. (C)

A **tercet** or three line stanza uses three interlocking end rhyme-schemes: ABA, BCB CDC, DED. Dante's *Divine Comedy* uses this pattern, as does Robert Frost's *I Have Been Well Acquainted With the Night*.

The most common stanaic form is the **quatrain** which has four lines. Common rhyme schemes include AABB, ABBA, AABA and ABCB, which is used by the ballad stanza, a form that consists of alternating eight and six syllable lines. See the excerpt from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

It is an ancient Mariner,

And he stoppeth one of three.

'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,

Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?

The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,

And I am next of kin;

The guests are met, the feast is set:

May'st hear the merry din.'



Image from Pixabay

## Non-Stanzaic Poetic Forms

Poems can also have fixed forms that do not have stanzas. A few examples of these forms are sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, and epigrams.

### 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 sextet, 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 sextet 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.

This kind of poetry is not for the amateur. A sonnet is a poem that has to comply with a certain system of rhyme and rhythm. The Shakespearian sonnet has fourteen lines with the rhyme scheme abab, cdcd, efef, gg, in a 4+4+4+2 structure. The sonnet will open for the writer's creativity within these strict rules, like a sport for poets who wants to excel and show off their word craft. The sonnet may present the poet’s view on certain aspects of life, the world, himself — but most often the sonnet is about love. Many of Shakespeare's sonnets look like passionate love letters to a lady he is in love with, while others are a sort of dialogue with a friend. Scholars have ever since wanted to find out the autobiographical background of Shakespeare's sonnets, but so far no one has succeeded in any identification of the characters. His first collection of sonnets was published in 1609 (probably without Shakespeare's approval) and tells the tale of a romantic narrator who conveys his love to a lady or renders his reflections of different aspects of life. Some of them may seem like poetic finger exercises and a bit monotone in their rigorous style. But still, Shakespeare's sonnets clearly demonstrate his poetic skills and his immaculate way with words.

### Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

### If By Dull Rhymes Our English Must Be Chain'd

BY JOHN KEATS

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,

And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet

Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness;

Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,

Sandals more interwoven and complete

To fit the naked foot of poesy;

Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress

Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd

By ear industrious, and attention meet:

Misers of sound and syllable, no less

Than Midas of his coinage, let us be

Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;

So, if we may not let the Muse be free,

She will be bound with garlands of her own.

Described below are some common fixed forms of poetry widely used across a number of languages.



Image from Pixabay

### 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.

*Copyright © Michelle Bonczek Evory. “Lake Affected” is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.*

### 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 Brimball:

### 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 *Paradise 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.

*Copyright © William Heyen. "Elegy for Wilt the Stilt" is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.*

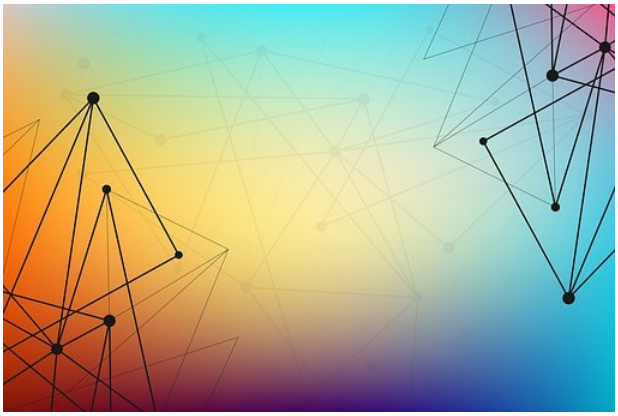


Image from Pixabay

### 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.

#### Exercise 6.14.1

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 canceled 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, unmetered 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

### 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.

*Copyright © Melissa Rhoades. "Dutch East India Company" is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.*

### 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.

### Exercise 6.14.1

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 a 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' 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.

*Copyright © Devon Moore. "Motion Sickness" is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.*



Image from Pixabay

## 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*.

*Copyright © Chad Sweeney. "Michigan Sestina" is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.*

### 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.

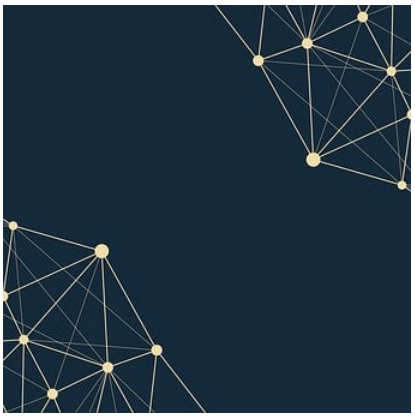


Image from Pixabay

### 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. It is 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.*

## Contributors and Attributions

Adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory under the license CC BY-NC-SA

This page titled 6.11: Form in Poetry is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.14: Form in Poetry** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.12: Meter



Image from Pixabay

## Meter: Length and Rhythm

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.

**Rhythm**

All speech has rhythm because we naturally stress some words or syllables more than others. The rhythm can sometimes be very regular and pronounced, as in a children's nursery rhyme—"JACK and JILL went UP the HILL"—but even in the most ordinary sentence the important words are given more stress. In poetry, rhythm is extremely important: patterns are deliberately created and repeated for varying effects.

The rhythmical pattern of a poem is called its **meter** and we can analyze, or scan, lines of poetry to identify stressed and unstressed syllables. In marking the text to show this, the mark "/" is used to indicate a stressed syllable, and "x" to indicate an unstressed syllable. Each complete unit of stressed and unstressed syllables is called a **foot**, which usually has one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables.

The most common foot in English is known as the **iamb**, which is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (x /). Many words in English are iambic: a simple example is the word "**forgot**." When we say this, the stresses naturally fall in the sequence:

x /
'forgot'.

Iambic rhythm is in fact the basic sound pattern in ordinary English speech. If you say the following line aloud you will hear what I mean:

"I went across the road and bought a pair of shoes"

x / x / x / x / x / x /
I went across the road and bought a pair of shoes.

The next most common foot is the **trochee**, a stressed syllable (or beat) followed by an unstressed one (/ x), as in the word "**mountain**"

/ x
'mountain'.

Both the iamb and the trochee have two syllables, the iamb being a "rising" rhythm and the trochee a "falling" rhythm. Another two-syllable foot known as the **spondee** has two equally stressed beats (/ /), as in the phrase "**blue spurt**"

/ /
'blue spurt'.

Other important feet have three syllables. The most common are the **anapest** (x x /) and the **dactyl** (/ x x), which are triple rhythms, rising and falling respectively, as in the words "unimpressed" and "probably"

x x / / x x
'unimpressed' and 'probably'.

Here are some fairly regular examples of the four main kinds of meter used in poetry. (I have separated the feet by using a vertical slash.) You should say the lines aloud, listening for the stress patterns and noting how the **beats** fall on particular syllables or words.

*Iambic meter*

"The curfew tolls the knell of parting day"

x / x / x / x / x /
The cur- | few tolls | the knell | of part- | ing day

*Trochaic meter*

"Tiger tiger burning bright"

/ x / x / x /
Tiger | tiger | burning | bright

*Anapestic meter*

"She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps"

x x / x x / x x / x x /
She is far | from the land | where her young | hero sleeps

*Dactylic meter*

"Woman much missed how you call to me, call to me"

/ x x / x x / x x / x x
Woman much | missed how you | call to me, | call to me

The other technical point that you need to know about is the way the lengths of lines of verse are described. This is done according to the number of feet they contain, and the names given to different lengths of lines are as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| monometer | a line of one foot |
| dimeter | a line of two feet |
| trimeter | a line of three feet |
| tetrameter | a line of four feet |
| pentameter | a line of five feet |
| hexameter | a line of six feet |
| heptameter | a line of seven feet |
| octameter | a line of eight feet |

By far the most widely used of these are the **tetrameter** and the **pentameter**. If you look back at the four lines of poetry given as examples above, you can count the feet. You will see that the first one has five feet, so it is an iambic pentameter line; the second one has four feet, so it is a trochaic tetrameter line; the fourth and fifth also have four feet, so are anapestic and dactylic tetrameter lines respectively. Lines do not always have exactly the "right" number of beats. Sometimes a pentameter line will have an extra beat, as in the famous line from *Hamlet*, "To be or not to be: that is the question," where the "tion" of question is an eleventh, unstressed beat. (It is worth asking yourself why Shakespeare wrote the line like this. Why did he not write what would have been a perfectly regular ten-syllable line, such as "The question is, to be or not to be"?)

Having outlined some of the basic meters of English poetry, it is important to say at once that very few poems would ever conform to a perfectly regular metrical pattern. The effect of that would be very boring indeed: imagine being restricted to using only iambic words, or trying to keep up a regular trochaic rhythm. Poets therefore often include trochaic or anapestic or dactylic words or phrases within what are basically iambic lines, in order to make them more interesting and suggestive, and to retain normal pronunciation. Here is a brief example from Shakespeare to show you what this mean. These lines were spoken by Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Act 1, scene 2. This first version has been marked to show you the basic iambic meter.

"My father loved Sir Rowland as his soul,

And all the world was of my father's mind"

x / x / x / x / x /
My fa- | ther loved | Sir Row- | land as | his soul,
x / x / x / x / x /
And all | the world | was of | my fa | ther's mind.

If you say the lines out loud in this regular way you can hear that the effect is very unnatural. Here is one way the lines might be scanned to show how the stresses would fall in speech (though there are other ways of scanning them):

/ / x / x x x x x /
My father loved Sir Rowland as his soul,
x / x / x x x / x /
And all the world was of my father's mind.

It must be emphasized that there is no need to feel that you must try to remember all the technical terms in poetry. The purpose has been to help you to become aware of the importance of rhythmic effects in poetry, and it can be just as effective to try to describe these in your own words.

The thing to hang on to when writing about the rhythm of a poem is that, as Ezra Pound put it, "Rhythm MUST have meaning. It can't be merely a careless dash off with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense, a tumty tum tumpty tum tum ta" (quoted in Gray, 1990, p. 56). There are occasions, of course, when a tum-ty-ty-tum rhythm may be appropriate and have meaning. When Tennyson wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade," he recreated the sound, pace, and movement of horses thundering along with the emphatic dactyls of "Half a league, half a league, half a league onward / Into the valley of death rode the six hundred." For a very different example, look at a short two-line poem by Pound himself. This time there is no fixed meter: like much twentieth century poetry, this poem is in free verse. Its title is "In a Station of the Metro" (the Metro being the Paris underground railway). It was written in 1916:

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough."

x x xx x x / / x x /
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
/ x x x / / /
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Here you can see that the rhythm plays a subtle part in conveying the meaning. The poem is comparing the faces of people in a crowded underground to petals that have fallen on to a wet bough. The rhythm not only highlights the key words in each line, but produces much of the emotional feeling of the poem by slowing down the middle words of the first line and the final three words of the second.

For our final example of rhythm, here is a passage from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711).

**Activity**

Take a look at this excerpt from Pope's *An Essay of Criticism*. Read it aloud if you can. Listen to the rhythm, and identify why the rhythm is appropriate to the meaning.

Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,

And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;

But when loud billows lash the sounding shore,

The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.

> When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
>
> The line too labours, and the words move slow:
>
> Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
>
> Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main. (Book II, ll.366–73)

## Discussion

Pope here uses a basic structure of iambic pentameters with variations, so that the lines sound as if they have a different pace, faster or slower, depending on what is being described. It is not just rhythm that contributes to the effect here: rhyme and alliteration (successive words beginning with the same sound) recreate smooth, rough, slow and swift movement. Rhythm is entirely dependent on word choice, but is also influenced by other interdependent stylistic devices. Pope's lines enact what they describe simply because of the care that has gone into choosing the right words. It doesn't matter if you don't recognize the classical allusions: from the descriptions it is clear that Ajax is a strong man and Camilla is quick and light. If you count the beats of each line, you'll notice that, in spite of the variety of sound and effect, all have five stresses, except the last, which has six. Strangely enough it is the last and longest line that creates an impression of speed. How is this achieved? Try to hear the lines by reading them again out loud.

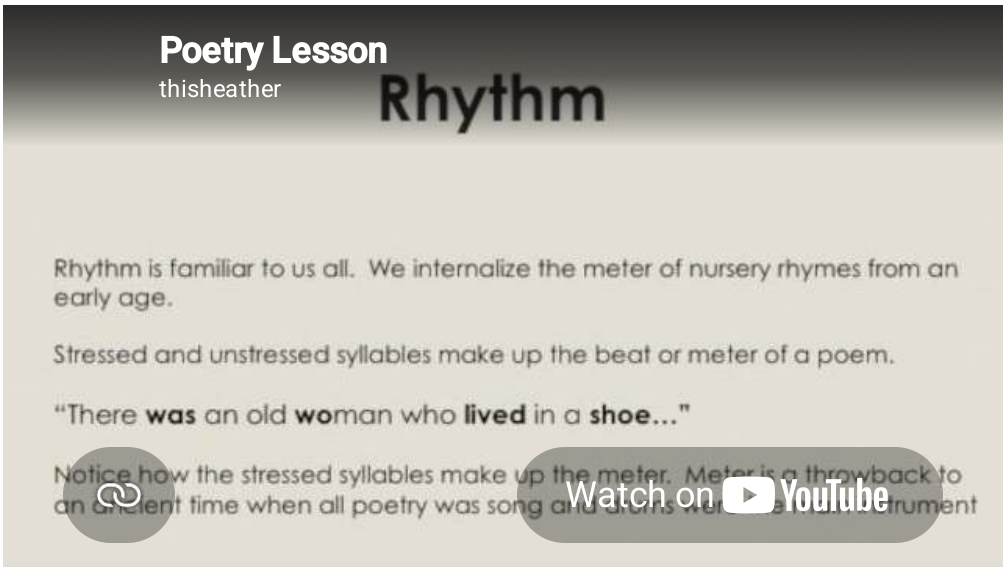
There is really only one way, and that is through the words chosen to represent movement: the repeated 's' sounds associated with Camilla trip swiftly off the tip of the tongue, whereas Ajax's lines demand real physical effort from mouth, lips, and tongue. You will get a much stronger sense of this if you form the words in this way, even if you are unable to say them out loud. In an exam, for instance, silent articulation of a poem will help you grasp many poetic techniques and effects that may otherwise be missed.

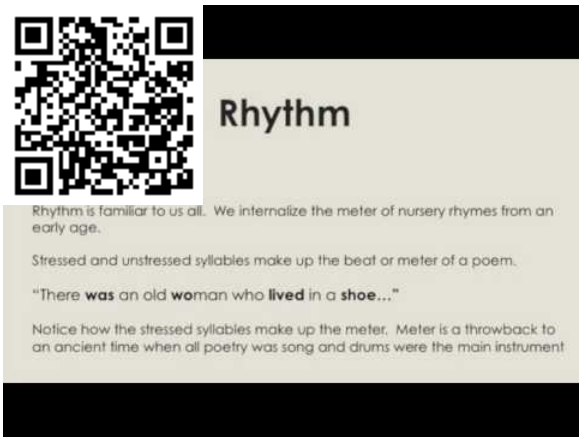
This extract from Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, like the whole poem, is written in rhyming couplets (lines rhyming in pairs). They confer a formal, regular quality to the verse. The punctuation helps to control the way in which we read: notice that there is a pause at the end of each line, either a comma, a semi-colon, or a full stop. This use of the end-stopped line is characteristic of eighteenth-century heroic couplets (iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs), where the aim was to reproduce classical qualities of balance, harmony, and proportion.

Get into the habit of looking at rhyme words. Are any of Pope's rhymes particularly interesting here? One thing I noticed was what is known as poetic inversion. The rhyme shore/roar is clearly important to the sound sense of the verse, but the more natural word order (were this ordinary speech) would be "The hoarse rough verse should roar like the torrent." Had he written this, Pope would have lost the sound qualities of the rhyme shore/roar. He would have had to find a word such as "abhorrent" to rhyme with "torrent," and the couplet would have had a very different meaning. He would also have lost the rhythm of the line, in spite of the fact that the words are exactly the same.

Before we leave *An Essay on Criticism*, did you notice that Pope's subject in this poem is really poetry itself? Like Wordsworth, Pound, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom were quoted earlier, Pope too was concerned with poetry as a craft.

Click below for a Power Point presentation video that gives college students a poetry lesson.




## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from Approaching Poetry, author: Dr. Sue Asbee. Provided by OpenLearn, The Open University. License: CC-NC-SA

---

This page titled 6.12: Meter is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.11: Sound in Poetry - Meter** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.13: Alliteration, Consonance, Assonance



Image from Pixabay

## Alliteration

This is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words. Read the poem "There Come Soft Rains" by Sarah Teasdale below to see if you can spot the alliteration:

### There Will Come Soft Rains

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pool singing at night,
And wild plum trees in tremulous white;

Robins will wear their feathery fire,
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree,
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself when she woke at dawn
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

CC CC-BY-SA-4.0 Originator: Sara Teasdale

## Assonance

This is the repetition of vowel sounds within a word. An example of assonance can be found in the following poem by Edgar Allen Poe*: "**On**ce up**on** a midnight dr**ea**ry, while I pondered w**ea**k and w**ea**ry..."* Can you find any more?

### The Raven

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

"Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -
Only this, and nothing more.'

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow; - vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow - sorrow for the lost Lenore -
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore -
Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me - filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
"Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door -
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door; -
This it is, and nothing more,'

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
'Sir,' said I, 'or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you' - here I opened wide the door; -
Darkness there, and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before
But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, 'Lenore!'
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, 'Lenore!'
Merely this and nothing more.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.
'Surely,' said I, 'surely that is something at my window lattice;
Let me see then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore -
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore; -
'Tis the wind and nothing more!'

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately raven of the saintly days of yore.
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door -
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door -
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
'Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,' I said, 'art sure no craven.
Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the nightly shore -
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!'

Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'

Much I marveled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
Though its answer little meaning - little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door -
Bird or beast above the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
With such name as 'Nevermore.'

But the raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only,
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing further then he uttered - not a feather then he fluttered -
Till I scarcely more than muttered 'Other friends have flown before -
On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before.'
Then the bird said, 'Nevermore.'

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
'Doubtless,' said I, 'what it utters is its only stock and store,
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore -
Till the dirges of his hope that melancholy burden bore
Of "Never-nevermore."'

But the raven still beguiling all my sad soul into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird and bust and door;
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore -
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking 'Nevermore.'

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core;
This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o'er,
But whose velvet violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o'er,
She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, me thought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
'Wretch,' I cried, 'thy God hath lent thee - by these angels he has sent thee
Respite - respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore!
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe, and forget this lost Lenore!'
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'

'Prophet!' said I, 'thing of evil! - prophet still, if bird or devil! -
Whether tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted -
On this home by horror haunted - tell me truly, I implore -
Is there - is there balm in Gilead? - tell me - tell me, I implore!'
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'

'Prophet!' said I, 'thing of evil! - prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us - by that God we both adore -
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels named Lenore -
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden, whom the angels named Lenore?'
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'

'Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!' I shrieked upstarting -
'Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken! - quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!'
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'

And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted - nevermore!

## Consonance

This is the repetition of consonant sounds at the end of words. An example of consonance is found in the following poem by Adrian Henry:

*“Love is feeling cold in the back of **vans***
*Love is a fanclub with only two **fans***
*Love is walking holding paintstained h**ands**…"*

### Exercise 6.12.1

Read a stanza from Arthur Hugh Clough's poem, "Natura naturans." There is not enough space to quote the whole poem, but to give you some idea of the context of this stanza so that you can more fully appreciate what Clough is doing, it is worth explaining that "Natura naturans" describes the sexual tension between a young man and woman who sit next to each other in a railway carriage. They have not been introduced, and they neither speak nor exchange so much as a glance. The subject matter and its treatment is unusual and also extraordinarily frank for the time of writing (about 1849), but you need to know what is being described in order to appreciate the physicality of the lines I quote.

**Natura Naturans by Arthur Hugh Clough (1890)**

Flashed flickering forth fantastic flies,

Big bees their burly bodies swung,

Rooks roused with civic dim the elms,

And lark its wild reveillez rung;

In Libyan dell the light gazelle,

The leopard lithe in Indian glade,

And dolphin, brightening tropic seas,

In us were living, leapt and played: (Clough, 1890, p.262)

1. What is the single most striking technique used, and what are the effects?

2. How would you describe the imagery, and what does it contribute to the overall effect?

**Answer**

1) Visually the use of alliteration is striking, particularly in the first line and almost equally so in the second. If you took the advice above about paying attention to the physical business of articulating the words too, you should be in a good position to discriminate between the rapidity of the flies and the heavier movement of the bees, and to notice how tactile the language is. The effect is actually to create sensuality in the stanza.

2) Notice that though we begin with flies, bees and rooks, all of which are fairly common flying creatures, we move to the more romantic lark with its "wild" song, and then to the positively exotic gazelle, leopard, and dolphin. From the rather homely English air (flies, bees, birds), we move to foreign locations "Libyan dell" and "Indian glade," and from there to "tropic seas." (Cod in the North Sea would have very different connotations from dolphins in the tropics.) Air, earth, and sea are all invoked to help express the variety of changing highly charged erotic feelings that the speaker remembers. The images are playful and preposterous, joyfully expressing the familiar poetic subject of sexual attraction and arousal in a way that makes it strange and new. Notice that in each case the image is more effective because the alliteration emphasizes it.

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory. Provided by Open SUNY Textbooks, license CC BY-NC-SA
- Adapted from Approaching Poetry by Dr. Sue Asbee. Provided by OpenLearn, The Open University, license CC-NC-SA
- Adapted from Sound by Carol Dwankowski. Provided by NDLA, license CC BY-NC-SA

---

This page titled 6.13: Alliteration, Consonance, Assonance is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.12: Sound in Poetry - Alliteration, Consonance, Assonance** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.14: Rhyme

## 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.

### Exercise 6.13.1

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?

If a poem rhymes, then considering how the rhyme works is always important. Rhyme schemes can be simple or highly intricate and complex; it will always be worth considering why a particular rhyme pattern was chosen and trying to assess its effects.

A summary of rhyme terms follows:

**End rhyme**: rhyme occurring on stressed syllables at the ends of verse lines. The most common form of rhyme. Couplet: a pair of end-rhyming verse lines, usually of the same length. E.g.:

Had we but World enough, and Time,

This coyness Lady were no crime.

We would sit down, and think which way

To walk, and pass our long Loves Day.

—Marvell, "To his Coy Mistress"

**Internal rhyme**: rhyme occurring within a single verse line.

**Crossed rhyme**: the rhyming of one word in the middle of a verse line with a word in the middle of the following line.

**Half rhyme**: also known as **slant rhyme**; an incomplete form of rhyme in which final consonants match but vowel sounds do not. E.g.:

I have heard that hysterical women say

They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow.

Of poets that are always gay,

For everybody knows or else should know

That if nothing drastic is done

Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out.

Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in

Until the town lie beaten flat.

—Yeats, "Lapis Lazuli"

The first quatrain is an example of full end rhyme; the second quatrain an example of half rhyme.

**Para-rhyme**: a form of half rhyme; when all the consonants of the relevant words match, not just the final consonants. E.g.:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, —
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

—Wilfred Owen, “Strange Meeting”

**Eye rhyme**: a visual-only rhyme; i.e. when spellings match but in pronunciation there is no rhyme, e.g. want/pant, five/give.

**Double rhyme**: a rhyme on two syllables, the first stressed, the second unstressed. E.g.

I want a hero: —an uncommon want,

When every year and month sends forth a new one,

Till, after cloying the gazettes with can't,

The age discovers he is not the true one

—Byron, *Don Juan*, I.i

The second and fourth lines are double rhymes; the first and third lines are examples of half rhyme/eye rhyme.

## Exercise 6.13.1

What is the poem about, and how does the rhyme contribute to the meaning and overall effect?

**Love from the North by Christina Rossetti (1862)**

I had a love in soft south land,
Beloved through April far in May;
He waited on my lightest breath,
And never dared to say me nay.

He saddened if my cheer was sad,
But gay he grew if I was gay;
We never differed on a hair,
My yes his yes, my nay his nay.

The wedding hour was come, the aisles
Were flushed with sun and flowers that day;
I pacing balanced in my thoughts,—
"It's quite too late to think of nay."—

My bridegroom answered in his turn,
Myself had almost answered "yea":
When through the flashing nave I heard.
A struggle and resounding "nay."

Bridemaids and bridegroom shrank in fear,
But I stood high who stood at bay:
"And if I answer yea, fair Sir,
What man art thou to bar with nay?"

He was a strong man from the north,
Light-locked, with eyes of dangerous gray:
"Put yea by for another time
In which I will not say thee nay.

He took me in his strong white arms,
He bore me on his horse away
O'er crag, morass, and hair-breadth pass,
But never asked me yea or nay.

He made me fast with book and bell,
With links of love he makes me stay;
Till now I've neither heart nor power
Nor will nor wish to say him nay.

**Answer**

"Love From the North" tells a simple story. A woman about to marry one man is whisked away by another, just as she is about to exchange vows. The form of the poem is very simple: the second and fourth lines of each of the eight 4-line

stanzas rhyme. More significantly, because the last word of each stanza is "nay," there is only one rhyme sound throughout. There are more internal rhymes relying on the same repeated sound, however, aren't there? Look at the last lines of stanzas 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8 where "say" "nay"; "nay" "nay"; "say" "nay"; "yea" "nay"; and "say" "nay" appear. In the second stanza, "gay" occurs twice in line 2; stanza five and six both have "yea" in line 3. What is the effect of this?

Do you think the effect might be to help over-simplify the story? Clearly the woman has doubts about the man from the south's devotion: he "never dared" to say no to her. He seems to have no will of his own: he "saddens" when she does, is "gay" when she is, wants only what she does. On her wedding day she thinks: "It's quite too late to think of nay." But is she any happier with the strong man from the north? Who is he? Has he carried her off against her will? And what exactly do you make of the last stanza? Do the "links of love" imply a chain? This strong-minded woman who imposed her will on the man from the south has "neither heart nor power/Nor will nor wish" to say no to the man from the north. Is that good, or bad? And what do you make of the "book and bell" with which she's made to stay? Certainly they imply something different from the conventional Christian marriage she was about to embark on in the middle of the poem — witchcraft, perhaps, or magic? And are the words "Till now" particularly significant at the beginning of line 3 in the last stanza? Might they suggest a new resolve to break free?

How important is it to resolve such questions? It is very useful to ask them, but not at all easy to find answers. In fact, that is one of the reasons I like the poem so much. The language is very simple and so is the form—eight quatrains (or four-line stanzas)–and yet the more I think about the poem, the more interesting and ambiguous it seems. In my opinion, that is its strength. After all, do we always know exactly what we want or how we feel about relationships? Even if we do, is it always possible to put such feelings into words? Aren't feelings often ambivalent rather than straightforward?

It is also worth bearing in mind the fact that the poem is written in ballad form. A ballad tells a story, but it does only recount events — part of the convention is that ballads don't go into psychological complexities. It is likely that Rossetti chose this ancient oral verse form because she was interested in raising ambiguities. But perhaps the point of the word "nay" chiming throughout "Love From the North" is to indicate the female speaker saying no to both men — the compliant lover and his opposite, the demon lover, alike? After all, "nay" is the sound which gives the poem striking unity and coherence.

## Exercise 6.13.1

Keats's "Eve of St Agnes" (1820) also tells a tale of lovers, but it isn't a ballad, even though the rhyme scheme of the first four lines is the same as Rossetti's quatrains. The stanzas are longer, and the form more complex and sophisticated. The rhyme pattern is the same throughout all 42 stanzas, the first two of which are reproduced for the following activity: Read the first two stanzas of Keats's poem above. How would you describe the rhyme scheme, and does it seem appropriate for the subject matter?

**Eve of St. Agnes by Keats**

St. Agnes' Eve — Ah bitter chill it was!

The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;

The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,

And silent was the flock in woolly fold:

Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told

His rosary, and while his frosted breath,

Like pious incense from a censer old,

Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,

Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;

Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,

And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,

Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:

The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,

Emprison'd in black purgatorial rails:

Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,

He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails

To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

**Answer**

In comparison to the Rossetti poem the rhyme sounds form complex patterns, don't they? While "was"/"grass" in the first stanza and "man"/"wan" in the second do not quite produce a full rhyme (depending on your accent), the first and third lines do rhyme in subsequent stanzas. Using a letter of the alphabet to describe each new rhyme sound, we could describe the pattern like this: a b a b b c b c c (imagine sustaining that intricate patterning for 42 stanzas). This kind of formula is useful up to a point for showing how often the same sounds recur, and it does show how complicated the interweaving of echoing sounds is. But it says nothing about how the sounds relate to what is being said — and, as I have been arguing all along, it is the relationship between meaning and word choice that is of particular interest. To give a full answer to my own question, I'd really need to consider the function of rhyme throughout the poem. It would not be necessary to describe what happens in each stanza, but picking out particular pertinent examples would help me argue a case. With only the first two stanzas to work with, I could say that, if nothing else, the intricate rhyme pattern seems appropriate not only for the detailed descriptions but also for the medieval, slightly gothic setting of the chapel where the holy man prays.

## Exercise 6.13.1

Read the extract from the poem below. Again, this comes from a longer poem, so it would be useful to look it up and read the rest if you have the opportunity.

Consider the following questions:

1. Describe the rhyme in the stanza from Tennyson's "Mariana."
2. What is the first stanza about?

**Mariana by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1830)**

With blackest moss the flower-plots

Were thickly crusted, one and all:

The rusted nails fell from the knots

That held the pear to the gable-wall.

The broken sheds looked sad and strange:

Unlifted was the clinking latch;

Weeded and worn the ancient thatch

Upon the lonely moated grange.

She only said, "My life is dreary,

He cometh not," she said;

She said, "I am aweary, aweary,

I would that I were dead!" (Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p.396)

**Answer**

1) As with the Keats poem, the rhyme scheme here is quite complicated. Using the same diagrammatic formula of a letter for each new rhyme sound, we could describe this as ‘a b a b c d d c e f e f. You might notice too that indentations at the beginning of each line emphasise lines that rhyme with each other: usually the indentations are alternate, except for lines 6 and 7, which form a couplet in the middle of the stanza. It is worth telling you too that each of the stanzas ends with a variation of the line "I would that I were dead" (this is known as a refrain) so—as in Christina Rossetti’s "Love From the North"—a dominant sound or series of sounds throughout helps to control the mood of the poem.

2) We may not know who Mariana is, or why she is in the lonely, crumbling grange, but she is obviously waiting for a man who is slow in arriving. The "dreary"/"aweary" and "dead"/"said" rhymes, which, if you read the rest of the poem, you will see are repeated in each stanza, convey her dejection and express the boredom of endless waiting. As with the stanzas from Keats's "Eve of St Agnes," there is plenty of carefully observed detail—black moss on the flower-plots, rusty nails, a clinking latch on a gate or door—all of which description contributes to the desolation of the scene and Mariana's mood. Were the moated grange a lively, sociable household, the poem would be very different. Either Mariana would be cheerful, or her suicidal misery would be in sharp contrast to her surroundings. It is always worth considering what settings contribute to the overall mood of a poem.

## Free Verse

Free verse refers to poetry that does not follow standard or regularized meter (the organization of stressed and unstressed syllables) or rhyme scheme. As opposed to more traditional poetry, which tends to use recurring line lengths, metrical patterns, and rhyme to unify individual lines of verse and tie them to other lines within the same poem, free verse can, at times, seem to be random, having no pattern or organization at all. Yet in the hands of many poets, free verse enables a different kind of organization, as they balance free verse's openness, its ability to provide elements of the poem with a different amount of emphasis, with the use of repeated imagery or syntactic patterns (parallel organization of grammatical elements) to maintain coherence and create a sense of connection among lines.

Free verse does, at times, draw on metrical patterns and occasional rhyme to tie lines together. What distinguishes free verse from other traditional forms of verse is that it only uses these elements occasionally—for a few lines here and there in a longer poem—and does not use them to structure the poem as a whole. A poem in free verse, then, does not lack structure—or, in many cases, some instances of metrical organization or rhyme—it simply does not maintain or use a regular pattern of meter or rhyme to structure the poem as a whole. Instead, free verse relies more on thematic, syntactic, or semantic repetition and development to create coherence.



Photo taken by Gilberto Taccari

Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is often credited as introducing free verse into English-language poetry. While not quite true (other experiments and uses preceded his), Whitman's poetry helped to establish free verse's potential for exploring a broad range of topics and its ability to embrace an extensive number of ways of organizing verse lines. Later-nineteenth century poets, such as Matthew Arnold in England, further explored the use of free verse, but it was the French symbolists (Jules Laforgue, Gustave Kahn, and Arthur Rimbaud) who practiced what they called vers libre most fully during this period. In the twentieth century, free verse came to dominate much poetic production in English, beginning with the modernists (such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams) who saw the open form as allowing for the more nimble representation of a modern fragmented and accelerated world.

For more examples, please see the The Poetry Foundation.

## Contributors:

- Adapted from Approaching Poetry, author: Dr. Sue Asbee. Provided by OpenLearn, The Open University. License: CC-NC-SA
- Adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory under the license CC BY-NC-SA
- Adapted from Literary Terms: A Guide by Simon F. Davies. License: CC BY: Attribution
- Adapted from Free Verse, provided by The Saylor Foundation. License: CC BY: Attribution

---

This page titled 6.14: Rhyme is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **6.13: Sound in Poetry - Rhyme** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 6.15: Video- Why Shakespeare Loved Iambic Pentameter

Why Shakespeare loved iambic pentameter - David T. Freeman and Gregory Taylor




Video produced by Crash Course, all rights reserved. It is not openly licensed but freely available to all.

6.15: Video- Why Shakespeare Loved Iambic Pentameter is shared under a CC BY-NC license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 6.16: Poetry Canvas Page and Video Group Assignment

## Group Assignment: Poetry

### The Overall Assignment:

You and your group members will work on creating a Canvas page which provides analysis of various elements of your chosen poem and a video representation of that poem. You may choose any poem that was shared with the class during the poetry sharing or choose a poem which is located on this website: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/

> **Please note:** I know that working with a group presents many challenges; however, it also offers many opportunities to increase your creativity, knowledge, and critical thinking skills, so please try to navigate the challenges of working with your team members. If you find that some of your team members are not participating, do your best to reach out to them and see if they may need some encouragement to join in. You can also reach out to me if they don't seem to be responding to your messages.

### Preparation for the Assignment:

**Step 1— Individual Responsibilities**

Please make sure to work together in order to evenly distribute the work for the assignment and choose the poem together. It is your responsibility to work with your group to make sure that you have a job to do. At the end of the assignment, you will be asked to submit a reflection assignment that explains how you contributed to the assignment. If you did not contribute a relatively equal amount of work, it will affect your grade.

**Step 2— Communication**

Each group will decide the best way for the group to communicate.

**Step 3—Deadlines**

Each group should decide on deadlines that work for the group. For example, your group may decide that you want to have everyone gather their information by a certain date and put it into a Google doc so that you all can provide input before putting it onto the Canvas page. Or maybe your group would rather just send all of their materials to one person who will be responsible for organizing them and putting them into the Canvas site. Whatever your group decides, make sure that you all agree on a deadline to have all of your materials done before the actual due date. That way, nobody is left wondering on the night it is due whether one of the group mates will complete their work.

### Requirements for Your Canvas Page:

The purpose of your Canvas page is to provide information on your chosen poem. I have created a Canvas page for each group to edit as they build.

These are the minimum requirements for your Canvas page. You are welcome to do more than this, but in order to receive full credit on the assignment, your page should have at least these items.

> **The Video Representation (15 points):**

- Your video representation should include the entire poem. You may decide to have the text visually appear in the video or it may be read aloud. If the text only appears on screen, make sure that your reader has enough time to read it before you move on to the next set of text.
- While the text is being seen or heard, there should be visual items that represent the language and imagery created by the text. When you break up the text for each video segment, keep in mind that a poem should be read without regard to line breaks, so break the poem at each piece of end punctuation whether it's being read aloud or simply visible on the page.

> **The Analysis (25 points):**

- 5 points: A brief overview of the message of the poem.
- 5 points: 3-5 sentences analyzing some of the dominant imagery and how it relates to the overall message of the poem
- 5 points: 3-5 sentences analyzing some of the figurative language and how it relates to the overall message of the poem

- 5 points: 3-5 sentences analyzing some of the sound elements(meter, rhyme, alliteration, consonance, assonance) and how they relate to the overall message of the poem
- 5 points: 3-5 sentences analyzing significant components related to the voice, form, the line, and the word choice/order/tone, and how they relate to the overall message of the poem. You do not necessarily need to analyze all of these, but choose a few important ones.

For your Canvas page, you are welcome to include additional elements besides those listed above. However, these are the required elements.

In addition to the Canvas Page, you will also need to complete the following items.

> **The Presentation to the Class (15 points):** Be sure that each group member presents some part of the Canvas page.
>
> **Your Reflection (10 points):** Submit your thoughts on how you and your group members worked together on this assignment.

Note: It is perfectly acceptable for you to consult other sources as you are creating your page, but if you choose to use any of the ideas, quotations, pictures, etc. from these sources on your page, please make sure that you cite them properly with an in-text citation as well as a Works Cited section at the end of your page.

---

This page titled 6.16: Poetry Canvas Page and Video Group Assignment is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Kelsey Ford.

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

## 7: Writing about Literature


7.1: What Does My Professor Want?
7.2: Literary Response Paper
7.3: The Writing Process for Literary Essays
7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays
7.5: Brainstorming
7.6: Writing About Fiction and Creative Nonfiction
7.7: Literary Thesis Statements
7.8: Essay as Argument
7.9: Summarizing vs. Analyzing Literary Works
7.10: Writing a Literary Analysis Essay
7.11: Sample Student Literary Analysis Essays
7.12: Essays on Comparing and Contrasting Literature
7.13: Writing About Drama
7.14: Literary Research Essays
7.15: How to Perform Literary Research



7: Writing about Literature is shared under a CC BY-NC license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 7.1: What Does My Professor Want?

In your English literature courses, you'll be asked to write a **formal analysis** (sometimes called a "literary analysis," "close reading paper," "rhetorical analysis," or "term paper.") This paper should present an original argument about an aspect or aspects of literature and, depending on the assignment, might engage with **critical sources**. It is important to keep in mind that **this assignment is not a report**. It should not merely rehearse the plot of the literature or the critical arguments that have already been made about your topic. Rather, the argument should be based on your own **close reading** of your chosen text(s) and, at the same time, if the prompt requires it, demonstrate the scholarly maturity that comes with situating this argument in relation to the work of other scholars. Material from these sources should be carefully documented using the **MLA style of documentation**.

**Here are some tips:**

- All professors will want to see a strong **argument**, cogently advanced and well-supported by **evidence from the literature**.
- **Organization** counts. Make sure you have a focused, detailed **thesis** within your **introductory paragraph**. **Succeeding paragraphs** should state a topic and supply evidence and argument to support that topic. Don't forget the **conclusion**. A strong conclusion leaves your reader with a clear sense of your perspective and helps the reader to recall the most important aspects of your argument.
- If engaging with scholarly articles or literary theory, don't let the critics run away with your paper. **Subordinate their views to your own**, and make sure that the preponderance of the paper is yours. Never cite a critical view that you do not understand.
- Remember to **revise** your work and proof-read carefully. Some professors care more about one aspect of paper writing than others. Some particularly hate to see documentation errors; for others sloppy writing (lots of spelling, punctuation and other mechanical errors) spells doom. Always do your best work, and don't assume that you can neglect any aspect of your essay.
- Your professor will give you specific guidelines for topic selection, but general topics often include: **poetry explication**, analysis of **theme(s)**, exploration of one or more characteristic(s) of an **author's style and approach**, placement of a work or works in **literary historical context**, the **comparison/contrast of works** sharing similarities but written by different authors and/or in different literary periods.
- You may find the **MLA Bibliography tutorial** particularly useful.



## Appropriate General Topics

### Analysis of theme(s)

A theme is a recurring idea or concept in a text. It is not explicit; therefore, the writer must to look for repeated imagery or symbols, examine the relationships between plot, setting, characters, and structure, and think about the feelings evoked throughout the text. Common themes in literature include love, jealousy, and friendship. If assigned to analyze a theme in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, you could analyze the theme of friendship between Huck and Jim.

### Exploration of one or more characteristic(s) of an author's style and approach

Consider analyzing the author's use of imagery or setting:

**Analyzing Setting**

"Setting refers to the natural or artificial scenery or environment in which characters in literature live and move. Seeing also includes what in the theater would be called props or properties—the implements employed by the characters in various activities. Such things as the time of day and the consequent amount of light at which an event occurs, the flora and fauna, the sounds described, the smells, and the weather are also part of the setting. Paintbrushes, apples, pitchforks, rafts, six-shooters, watches, automobiles, horses and buggies, and innumerable other items belong to the setting. References to clothing, descriptions of

physical appearance, and spatial relationships among the characters are also part of setting." (Edgar V. Roberts, Writing Themes about Literature)

In order to create an argument about the function of the setting in a particular work, you need to identify the principal settings and to see how they work. Here are some steps you can take:

1) Read the story and mark references to setting. Start with the place and time of the action and then focus upon recurrent details and objects.

2) Think about what the story is about. What happens? What is its point? Is it a story about love, jealousy, gain, or loss? What is the main experience here?

3) Look through your setting notes and see if they fall into any pattern. What are the interesting shifts and contrasts?

4) Determine how the setting relates to either the main point of the story (step 2) or to some part of it. In other words what does the setting have to do with character or action? What are its effects? Whatever you decide here will be your thesis statement.

5) Make an outline, indicating what aspects of setting you will discuss and what you intend to say about them. Discard notes that are not central to your plan (you don't have to discuss everything). Focus on the four or five key passages in the story that you wish to examine. List them in your outline in the order in which they occur.

**Analyzing Imagery**

As distinct from character, theme, and plot, imagery occurs primarily in language, in the metaphors (i.e. comparisons), similes (comparisons with "like" or "as"), or other forms of figurative (pictorial) language in a literary work. Sometimes setting, i.e., the locality or placing of scenes, or stage props (like swords, flowers, blood, winecups) can also be considered under the rubric of imagery. But whatever the expression, images primarily are visual and concrete, i.e., things which the reader sees or can imagine seeing. Some examples are flowers, tears, animals, the moon, sun, stars, diseases, floods, metals, darkness and light.

In order to create an argument about the significance of an image in a particular work, identify a principal image or image cluster and to see how it works by following these steps:

1) Read the work and mark recurrent images or image clusters. If you are seeing references to roses, e.g., references to other thorns or to other flowers might also be pertinent parts of a cluster. Look at notes to the images carefully. Take out your microscope. You may also track down occurrences of related words with the help of a concordance (See Marvin Spevack's Concordance to Shakespeare in the library) or electronic word searches. You can use secondary sources for this assignment as well.

2) Think about what the play is about. What happens? What is its point? Is it a play about love, jealousy, gain, or loss? What is the main experience here? Look through your images and image clusters and see if they fall into any pattern. What are the interesting shifts? Do they generally appear in the speeches of certain characters? in certain scenes? Do we have a progression or development? Significant contrasts?

3) Determine how the images or image clusters (step 3) relate to either the main point of the play (step 2) or to some part of it. In other words what do the images have to do with character or action? What are their effects? Whatever you decide here will be your thesis statement.

4) Make an outline, indicating what your image pattern is and what you intend to say about it. Discard images that are not central to your plan (you don't have to discuss everything). Focus on the four or five key passages in the play that you wish to examine. List them in your outline in the order in which they occur.

5) Read criticism and watch films to deepen understanding and refine your thesis. Compile a bibliography. Adjust outline as necessary.

## Argumentative Thesis

Your thesis must make an argument, not an observation.

An "observation" suggests something that is generally true about the text, like an objective element of the plot or an image used by the author. For example, if we are writing about the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* we might make an observation about the way animal imagery seems to function for the Geat warriors. We might observe that while the Geats feature an image of a boar on their

battle helmets (thus seemingly identifying with this ferocious animal), there are other moments in the text when the Geats shun vicious monsters (when they are reluctant to fight the dragon, for example.) Someone who has read the work carefully probably wouldn't disagree with this observation; it refers to an image used by the narrator and a specific plot point. This observation does, however, pose a question or "problem" for the careful reader: what do we as readers make of this apparent contradiction? Why is this juxtaposition important for the narrative more broadly? What are the consequences of this juxtaposition on plot, theme, or character? *So what*?

An "argument"—your thesis statement—is your solution to this problem. The thesis answers the "so what" question by explaining the significance of the observation and explaining why an invested reader should care about this detail. For example, one might argue that the juxtaposition of the Geats ferocious helmets and their subsequent unwillingness to approach the dragon suggests an inherent difference between the warriors' appearance (outward show) and their actions. This seems to be a theme in the work. The Danish coastguard who greets the Geats when they arrive in Denmark remarks that there is often a difference between "what is said" and "what is done," and at the end of the epic, Wiglaf says that this discrepancy between word and action will ultimately impair the Geats' ability to protect their kingdom. A thesis statement could read: "The difference between the Geats ferocious appearance and their later unwillingness to fight fearful monsters like the dragon suggests a devastating discrepancy between their appearance and their actions—a discrepancy that is responsible for the deterioration of the warrior culture in the epic."

It is important to keep in mind that your thesis statement should argue something with which a reader can disagree. If I argued the thesis above, the body of my essay would not only need to prove that there is, in fact, a contradiction between the Geats' appearance and action, but would also necessarily provide additional textual examples of how this discrepancy contributes to the deterioration of the warrior kingdoms in the epic. And, I'd need to be aware that other readers might not see the same contradiction. For example, another viable thesis statement could read: "As clear from biblical references in the text, humans identify with animals over monsters because animals are more like humans. Both humans and animals were created by God and thereby remind men of Divinity; whereas, monsters are perversions of God's nature and thereby indicate a diabolic presence." Rather than suggesting a contradiction, the imagery on the helmet suggests a righteous identification with God's creation and an equally righteous aversion to things that are not "of God." These two thesis statements offer opposite solutions to the problem posed above; both are viable and could be supported with textual evidence; and both make points with which a careful reader could disagree.

## Close Reading

Before a literary scholar can begin writing about a piece of literature, one must engage in the exercise of close reading. As the term suggests, "close reading" means closely examining the words on a page in order to come up with a reading or an interpretation about the greater meaning of a work.

How does one "read closely"?

- The first task involves dissecting a passage or phrase by analyzing literary elements that stick out. For instance, is the tone, diction, syntax, style, imagery, figurative language, theme(s), cultural/historical/religious references, rhyme, rhythm and meter, etc. significant in the passage or stanza? Take notes on whatever seems significant by writing in the margins of your text or keeping a reading journal.
- After taking notes, the second task in close reading is looking for patterns or interruptions of patterns. Gather the evidence collected and think about how each one works together to create the work as a whole or how these elements contribute to or complicate larger issues such as theme, setting, characterization.
- Finally, think about the purpose and the effect of these significant elements/patterns in the work as a whole. This means asking *why* and *how*: Why is an author using a particular metaphor, tone, diction, etc. and how does it affect one's understanding of the passage? How are they all related to one another? How do they help us understand the larger work?

The steps listed above are a pre-writing exercise, designed to help you identify a potential thesis. Once you have formulated a thesis about how to read a larger work, you can use the smaller significant elements as evidence. This evidence will then need to be analyzed in order to support that thesis.

## Formal Analysis

Formal analysis involves a close reading of the literary elements of a text. A formal analysis examines elements such as setting, imagery, characters, tone, form/structure, and language. The goal of a formal analysis is to create meaning by exploring how these elements work together in any given text. You can compare parts of a text or you can analyze how parts of a text relate to the whole text.

## MLA Style of Documentation

Follow the MLA style of documentation, which is a parenthetical style. Remember that you need a "Works Cited" page and a "Bibliography" page, and these should follow MLA format, not one you create on the spur of the moment or borrow from some other discipline. The "Works Cited" page lists all works you cite in the essay, the "Bibliography" lists all the works you consulted, including all of those cited. You should always note your professor's requirements as to minimum number of sources.

The Department's handbook (*A Writer's Reference* by Diana Hacker) provides information under the MLA tab about how to provide parenthetical documentation and prepare a bibliography and list of works cited. A quick look at the sample MLA paper in Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* will give you a general sense of how MLA documentation works.

## Organization

Every paper must contain an **introduction** (which states the argumentative thesis), **subsequent argument paragraphs**, and a **conclusion**.

### Introductory Paragraph

As Janet E. Gardner writes in *Writing About Literature*, "Essentially, an introduction accomplishes two things. First, it gives a sense of both your topic and your approach to that topic, which is why it is common to make your thesis statement a part of the introduction. Second, an introduction compels your readers' interest and makes them want to read on and find out what your paper has to say. Some common strategies used in effective introductions are to begin with a probing rhetorical question, a vivid description, or an intriguing quotation. Weak introductions tend to speak in generalities or in philosophical ideas that are only tangentially related to the real topic of your paper. Don't spin your wheels: get specific and get to the point right away."

Your introduction is your opportunity to catch your reader's attention and involve that person in the ideas you put forth in your paper. Imagine riding in an elevator with someone you'd like to strike up a conversation with about a specific topic. How do you do it? How do you catch that person's attention before the ride is up? You can't just immediately throw your claims and evidence at that person, yet at the same time, he or she is unlikely to be compelled by vague general statements about "the history of time" or where and when a certain person was born. And you can't stand there all day getting to the point. Instead, you look for compelling point of interest that is both related to where you'd like to go with your discussion, and is of shared interest between you and that person. After raising the topic through this point of common ground, you can then put forth what you will claim about it.

### Succeeding Paragraphs

A complete argument paragraph consists of the following components:

1. **Topic Sentence**: Suggests generally what the paragraph is talking about; often includes a transition from previous paragraphs.

2. **Claim**: Makes a very specific claim that the paragraph will argue is true; you'll likely derive this claim from your thesis statement (together,
all your paragraph claims will work to prove your thesis).

3. **Evidence**: Provides the textual support for the claim.

4. **Analysis**: Explains how the evidence actually relates to the argument. This is typically the most challenging part of composing your
paragraph, and it is often forgotten (much to the peril of both reader and writer!). Here, you must articulate how the passage you've just cited supports
the paragraph claim/argument premise. You must explain how the textual evidence means what you think it means. Never rely on the reader to be able to

interpret the evidence on his or her own. That is, if your argument is a statement with which the careful reader can disagree, this means that the evidence
you provide can likely be interpreted in many different ways. You need to guide your reader in interpreting the evidence so as to argue why your claim is
true.

5. **Conclusion**: Offers implications of the argument and evidence, often transitions to the next paragraph. This often answers the "so what?" question. It
articulates why what you've just proven matters and usually articulates how your argument claims relates to/proves the thesis statement.

After the explanation of evidence, a well-developed paragraph might also include:

**Additional Evidence/Explanation**: What other evidence is there to support your claim?

**Concession/ Nonclusion** (these are an inseparable pair!): What evidence might contradict your claim? (The concession acknowledges the perceived
opposition (perhaps in the form of another critic) or the skeptical reader). And, why, despite this evidence, is your argument still more effective than the
concession? (The nonclusion is essential — never end a paragraph with a concession; take the concession into account while further proving your argument!)

### Conclusion

As Janet E. Gardner points out in *Writing About Literature*, "Your conclusion should give your reader something new to think about, a reason not to just forget your essay. Some writers like to use the conclusion to return to an idea, a quotation, or an image first raised in the introduction, creating a satisfying feeling of completeness and self-containment…. Some writers use the conclusion to show the implications of their claims or the connections between literature and real life. This is your chance to make a good final impression, so don't waste it with a simple summary and restatement."

This doesn't mean that your conclusion should not restate your thesis. Your conclusion is the place in which you draw together all the threads of your argument and neatly tie them up. When Gardner says not to "waste" your conclusion with "simple summary and restatement," she means don't ONLY summarize and restate. Your should absolutely recap your main points, but a good conclusion ALSO does more. Additionally, treading the path between not giving your reader anything new in the conclusion and introducing more unsupported claims can be tricky. The conclusion is a good place to SUGGEST the further implications of your argument, for life, for literature, for an author's body of work, etc., but be careful that you don't find yourself making new claims your reader is unlikely to agree with. These implications should follow naturally from the structure of your argument and often are best expressed with less-definitive phrasing (i.e. "perhaps," "implies," "suggests," "hints," "may," etc.).

## Post-Writing

1) Revise again and again. All good writing is rewriting. Clarify, define, smooth-out rough spots. Work to develop ideas, and round out paragraphs. Try to be more accurate and graceful, to clean up mistakes, and to correct embarrassing errors. Look hard at your evidence. Be tough and cut out the nonsense.

2) Proofread carefully, by means of spell-check and by your own reading. Make sure you have supplied a title, page numbers for the paper. (No decorative bindings; use 12-point type, double spaced, with standard page margins.)

3) Make sure you have provided accurate documentation for every quotation and outside source cited or consulted.

## Quoting Critics

• It is a good idea to include a full quotation when the critic says something particularly well. Paraphrase when the idea is important, but the wording is nothing special. (Document both.)

• Don't let the critics run away with your paper. Instead, keep their ideas subordinated to your own and use them to support your own claims. Typically, your paragraphs should begin with your topic sentence, then provide your evidence from the text, and then (perhaps) include a comment or comments from critics. A rare exception might be when you are disagreeing with a critic. In this

instance, you may wish to state the opposing idea first, and then follow up by expressing your disagreement and presenting the evidence for your point of view.

• Cited passages should be integrated into your text and be attributed to their originators. For example, "Elgin Slapworthy has observed that 'Dickens remembered this period in his boyhood as both painful and humiliating'" (237). Don't just pop in a quotation without making the context and source of the quotation clear. Attribution in the text makes the essay read more smoothly and cuts down on the amount of parenthetical documentation that must be provided.

• Quotations of more than three lines should be indented and set off in the text. Setting off indicates quotation, so quotation marks are not needed, unless you have a quotation within a quotation.

As Prof. Bladderstock argues:
Austen's prose has often been imitated but never matched. Even my own brilliant Austen parody, Sense and Susceptibility, fell short in regard to dialogue.
Austen's uncanny ability to combine sense and wit, while suiting words and phrasing to character, is difficult, perhaps impossible to reproduce. (132)

• A quotation within a quotation—say you quote a critic who quotes a passage from Dorothy Sayers—should be indicated by using single quotation marks: According to Evangeline Pink, "Sayers' use of the line, 'So, you're one of them,' echoes a statement in the trial of the infamous Madeline Smith" (299).

## Evidence from Literature

Just as scientists provide data to support their results, literary critics must use evidence from literature in order to convince their audience that they have a cogent argument. Evidence must be provided in every body paragraph in order to support your claims. Where will you find evidence? First, you must do a close reading of the text. It is much easier to first analyze and think about how the smaller literary elements work together to create the whole work, rather than randomly thumbing through a work to find support for your thesis. When you provide evidence, you are providing proof from the text that shows your audience that your thesis is valid. Critics most commonly provide evidence by quoting a line or a passage from a work. When you provide evidence, it is imperative not to take it out of context. For example, if a character is joking with another character that he will kill himself if he fails his chemistry test and there's no other mention of death in the work, it would be unfair to represent this character as suicidal by eliminating the context of him joking. Accurately quoting and fairly representing events/characters/etc. adds to your credibility as a writer. If you find evidence that counters your thesis, you should still engage with it. Think about what your critics would say and come up with a response to show how that particular piece of evidence might still support your stance. Once you're done gathering evidence, you can move on to the analysis portion in which you explain how the evidence supports your claims.

## Contributors and Attributions

"Tips for Writing Papers." Provided by: Loyola English Department. License: CC BY-NC-SA

---

7.1: What Does My Professor Want? is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- **12.1: What Does My Professor Want?** has no license indicated.

# 7.2: Literary Response Paper

## The Response Paper

The **response paper** is likely the most informal type of literary analysis essay students will encounter in a literature course. This essay simply asks the student to read the assigned text(s) and respond to said text(s). There are several purposes in writing such an essay. This kind of essay:

1. helps students better understand the reading through informal analysis
2. enables students to practice close-reading in a low-stakes, informal, and more comfortable way
3. prepares students for writing a more formal essay by recording their initial impressions of a text



"Fernando Pessoa" by Jennifer Fred Merchán, 2006. CC BY-SA 2.0

Usually, the requirements for such an essay are more open-ended than what is expected on more formal essay assignments. For example, students are often allowed to use first-person "I" and **colloquial** (that is, spoken rather than academic) language. A **thesis statement** and formal organization are also usually not required.

What is always required is a willingness to ask questions and engage with the text. The following are some questions students might respond to when writing a response essay:

- **First impressions:** When reading the title and first lines, what impression did you get from the text? How did this impression change as you read the rest of the story or poem? What might the title indicate about the story or poem?
- **Characters:** What kind of character is the main character of the story or poem? Are they likable? Trustworthy? Why? Which character do you like or relate to the most, and why? Which character do you dislike the most, and why? What kinds of characters (**dynamic, round, flat, static**) are featured in this story?
- **Tone:** How would you describe the tone of the story? What words, phrases, images, or snippets of dialogue indicate this tone?
- **Figurative language:** What figurative language or literary devices do you notice? Why do you think certain images appear? What kinds of patterns of language do you notice, and what significance might these patterns or literary devices have on the story or poem?

In addition to these basic literary analysis questions, some helpful tips for writing this kind of essay:

- **Take notes as you read.** Use highlighters to mark quotations or passages that jump out at you, along with post-it notes or page clips to mark those pages so you can find them again when writing the essay. Don't be afraid to write notes in the margins of the book. If you must sell back the book to the bookstore, or don't want to mark the book for other reasons, you can use post-it notes to write your responses. Essentially, effective note-taking is like having a conversation with the text.
- **Keep a document or journal open to record your ideas as you read.** For example, refer to the image at the top of this page. This way, you can begin responding to the text as you read it, making efficient use of your time. You can then simply develop your reading notes in the essay.
- **Cite passages to support your analyses.** Like in an argumentative or persuasive essay, be ready to drop quotations or paraphrase into the essay to support your analysis and show those reading your essay examples of what you are talking about. Be ready to provide page or line numbers to cite the source. For example, if you say Hamlet (the main character of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare) comes across as whiny and egotistical, be prepared to quote or paraphrase the play and point readers to the act, scene, and line numbers which show your point.

### Example Student Response Essay Prompt

| | |
|---|---|
| **Length requirement:** | 250 words minimum (no maximum, but please keep it unc |
| **Essay type:** | Response |
| **Number of sources required:** | One: the primary text you are analyzing. Use MLA citatio |

### Objective

By the end of this assignment, students will be able to engage with a work of literature through analysis and response. They will be able to define and locate examples of at least three basic literary devices within a single literary text.

**Audience:** instructor & classmates

**Purpose:** practice analyzing literature in a less formal environment

**Content:** literary analysis & response, practice for the upcoming literary analysis essay

### Directions

Students will choose one work of literature to analyze (that is, pick apart, zooming in, and looking closely at the literary devices and narrative elements of the story). Students may choose any of the stories we have read so far in class. As you read the story, respond to anything interesting in the text you notice.

- Focus on one story
- Identify & analyze at least three **literary devices** such as character, plot, setting, metaphor, and so forth
- Use either objective third-person or first-person "I"
- Present tense verbs, informal tone
- Quote & paraphrase the text using MLA Works Cited + In-Text citation
- Do not to bring in any secondary sources yet: this should be your personal observations and analysis of the text. Avoid using Shmoop, Cliffnotes, or any other plot summary websites. These will tarnish your reading process. I am interested in YOUR thoughts, not Shmoop's
- Avoid plot summary, unless used briefly to contextualize analysis. I know what happens in the stories. This is NOT a "summarize the story in your own words" exercise, but a "what patterns or interesting devices did you notice? What stuck out to you? Why do you think the author made the choices they did? In what ways does the story's form reflect its content?" exercise.

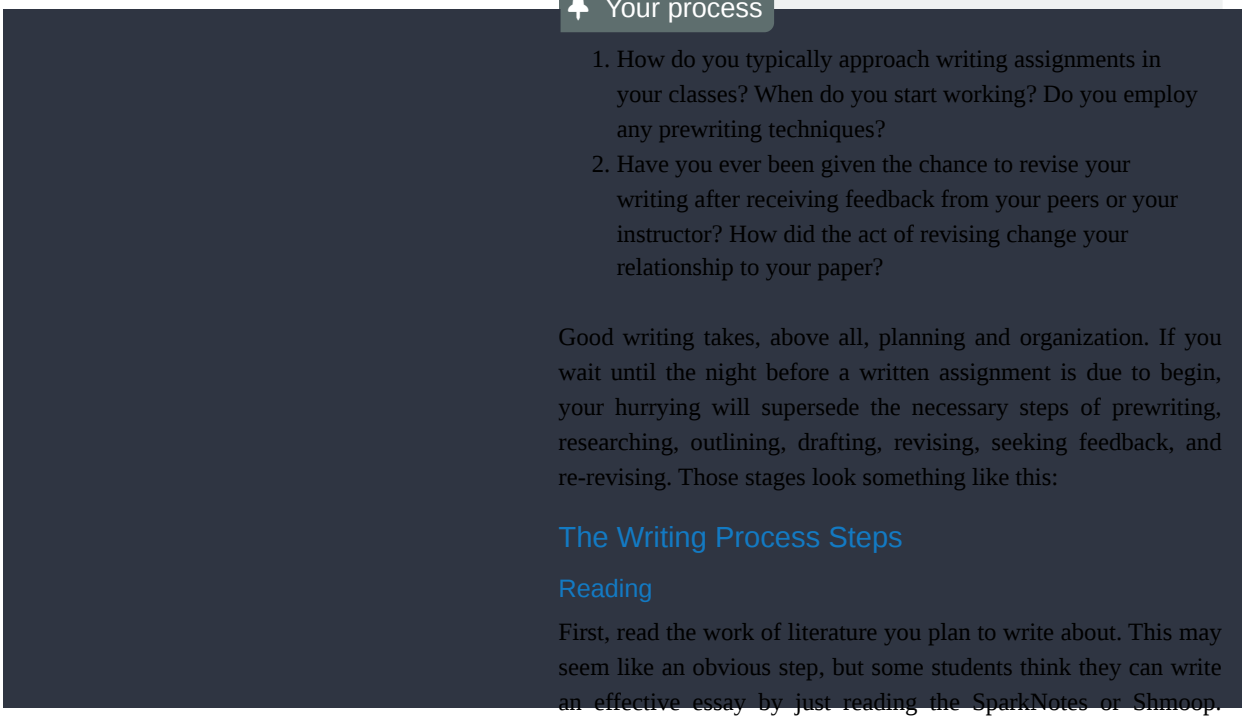
This page titled 7.2: Literary Response Paper is shared under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.9: Essay Type - Literary Response** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-SA 4.0.

# 7.3: The Writing Process for Literary Essays

## Why Follow the Writing Process?

Even the most talented writers rarely get a piece right in their first draft. What's more, few writers create a first draft through a single, sustained effort. Instead, the best writers understand that writing is a process: it takes time; sustained attention; and a willingness to change, expand, and even delete words as one writes. Good writing also takes a willingness to seek feedback from peers and mentors and to accept and use the advice they give. In this book, we will refer to and model the **writing process**, showing how student writers like yourself worked toward compelling papers about literary works. Watch the video below where author Salman Rushdie talks about some misconceptions new writers sometimes have about what it takes to write effectively. Though he is discussing novels specifically, the same concepts apply to literary essays.



The following are a few famous writers' pieces of advice when it comes to following the writing process:

- "For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts"—Anne Lamott
- "The key to writing is concentration, not inspiration"—Salman Rushdie
- "By the time I am nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread and altered and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times. I am suspicious of both facility and speed. Good writing is essentially rewriting. I am positive of this." —Roald Dahl (Vander Hook)
- "I don't write easily or rapidly. My first draft usually has only a few elements worth keeping. I have to find what those are and build from them and throw out what doesn't work, or what simply is not alive." —Susan Sontag (Lee)

Take it from the writing experts: following the writing process is the key to writing success. Following this process can be liberatory in the sense that you don't have to feel an immense pressure to write brilliantly. The best writing takes time, incremental effort, and resilience.

As I often tell my students:

"There is no such thing as bad writers, only writers who give up too soon. There is no such thing as bad writing, just writing in need of revision." This means anyone can write a strong essay if they follow the writing process!

**Your process**

1. How do you typically approach writing assignments in your classes? When do you start working? Do you employ any prewriting techniques?
2. Have you ever been given the chance to revise your writing after receiving feedback from your peers or your instructor? How did the act of revising change your relationship to your paper?

Good writing takes, above all, planning and organization. If you wait until the night before a written assignment is due to begin, your hurrying will supersede the necessary steps of prewriting, researching, outlining, drafting, revising, seeking feedback, and re-revising. Those stages look something like this:

## The Writing Process Steps

### Reading

First, read the work of literature you plan to write about. This may seem like an obvious step, but some students think they can write an effective essay by just reading the SparkNotes or Shmoop. While some students may be able to get away with writing a passing essay this way, most cannot. Besides, by completing the readings, you actually learn!

### Prewriting

Many of the questions and activities peppered throughout sections of this book will be **prewriting** activities. We'll ask you to reflect on your reading, to make connections between your experiences and our text, and to jot down ideas spurred by your engagement with the theories presented here. It's from activities like these that writers often get their ideas for writing. The more engaged you are as a reader, the more engaged you'll be when the time comes to write.

### Researching

This book will also help you start the research process, in which you hone in on those aspects of a given literary text that interest you and seek out a deeper understanding of those aspects. Literary researchers read not only literary texts but also the work of other literary scholars and even sources that are indirectly related to literature, such as primary historical documents and biographies. In other words, they seek a wide range of texts that can supplement their understanding of the story, poem, play, or other text they want to write about. As you research, you should keep prewriting, keeping a record of what you agree with, what you disagree with, and what you feel needs further exploration in the texts you read.

### Outlining

To write well, you should have a plan. As you write, that plan may change while you learn more about your topic and begin to fully understand your own ideas. However, papers are easier to tackle when you first sketch out the broad outline of your ideas, a general arc or path you want your paper to follow. Committing those ideas to paper will help you see how different ideas relate to one another (or don't relate to one another). Don't be afraid to revise your outline — play around with the sequence of your ideas and evidence until you find the most logical progression.

### Drafting

The most important way to improve your writing is to start writing! Because you're treating writing as a process, it's not important that every word you type be perfectly chosen, or that every sentence be exquisitely crafted. When you're drafting, the most important thing is that you get words on paper. Follow your outline and write. If ideas come to you as you're writing, but do not quite fit in that section of the paper, make note of it! You don't have to use it, but few things are more frustrating than forgetting an idea that might work perfectly for your paper.

### Revising

After you've committed words to paper (or, more accurately, to your computer screen), you can go back and shape them more deliberately through **revision**. Cognitive research has shown that a significant portion of reading is actually remembering. As a result, if you read your work immediately after writing it, you probably won't notice any of the potential problems with it. Your brain will "fill in the gaps" of poor grammar, misspelling, or faulty reasoning. Because of this, you should give yourself some time in between drafting and revising—the more time the better. As you revise, try to approach your text as your readers will. Ask yourself skeptical questions (e.g., Are there clear connections between the different claims I'm making in this paper? Do I provide enough evidence to convince someone to believe my claims?). Revisions can often be substantial: you may need to rearrange your points, delete significant portions of what you've written, or rewrite sentences and paragraphs to better reflect the ideas you have developed while writing. Don't be afraid to cut the parts of your paper that aren't working, even if you like a particular fact or anecdote. Don't be afraid to, as they say, "Kill your darlings." Everything in your paper should, on some level, work towards the purpose of your claim. Most importantly, you should revise your introduction several times. Writers often work into their strongest ideas, which then appear in their conclusions but not (if they do not revise) their introductions. Make sure that your introduction reflects the more nuanced claims that appear in the body and conclusion of your paper.

### Seeking Feedback

Even after years of practice revising your writing, you'll never be able to see it in an entirely objective light. To really improve your writing, you need feedback from others who can identify where your ideas are not as clear as they should be. You can seek feedback in a number of ways: you can make an appointment in your college's writing center, you can participate in class peer-review workshops, or you can talk to your instructor during his or her office hours. If you will have a chance to revise your paper after your instructor grades it, his or her comments on that graded draft should be considered essential feedback as you revise.

### Re-revising

Once you've garnered feedback on your writing, you should use that feedback to revise your paper yet again. You should not, however, simply make every change that your colleagues or instructor recommended. You should think about the suggestions they've made and ensure that their suggestions will help you make the argument you want to make. You may decide to incorporate some suggestions and not others. Not all feedback is helpful or applicable. It takes some critical thinking to determine whether the feedback will improve the essay. When you treat writing as a process, it should become a genuine dialogue between you and your readers.

### Publishing

Finally, you will submit your paper to an audience for review. As college students, this primarily means the paper you turn in to your instructor for evaluation.

## Writing Process Not Linear, But a Cycle

The preceding categories suggest that writing is a linear process — that is, that you will follow these steps in the following order:

prewriting → researching → outlining → drafting → revising → feedback → re-revising → publishing.

The reality of the writing process, however, is that as you write you shuttle back and forth in these stages. For example, as you begin writing your thesis paragraph, the beginning of your essay, you will write and revise many times before you are satisfied with

your opening; once you have a complete draft, you will more than likely return to the introduction to revise it again to better match the contents of the completed essay. This shuttling highlights the recursive nature of the writing process and can be diagrammed as follows:

prewriting ↔ researching ↔ outlining ↔ drafting ↔ revising ↔ feedback ↔ re-revising ↔ publishing.

This is a good thing. If you are too rigid in your process, it's easier to get stuck on insisting an idea or claim that might not be working, rather than discovering one or coming to an informed, well-reasoned conclusion. Furthermore, you should be aware that each writer has a unique writing process: some will be diligent outliners, while others may discover ideas as they write. There is no right way to write (so to speak), but the key is the notion of process — all strong writers engage in the writing process and recognize the importance of feedback and revision in the process.

**Your process**

1. Describe your current writing process.
2. Do you normally engage in the stages listed previously?
3. If not, why? If so, what part of the process do you find most helpful?

Share your process with the class to discover the variety of approaches writers take. Always be willing to try new methods of approaching the writing process. You might find a new tool or habit that works well for you!

## Works Cited


Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Random House, 1994.

Lee, Martin. *Telling Stories: The Craft of Narrative and Writing Life*. University of Nebraska Press, 2012.

Rushdie, Salman. "Inspiration is Nonsense." *The Big Think*, 2011. https://bigthink.com/videos/inspiration-is-nonsense

Vander Hook, Sue. *Writing Notable Narrative Nonfiction*. Lerner Publishing Group, 2016.


## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from "What is the Writing Process?" from *Creating Literary Analysis* by Ryan Cordell and John Pennington, CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0


This page titled 7.3: The Writing Process for Literary Essays is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.2: The Writing Process for Literary Essays** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

# 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays

## Reading

The first step in writing a literary analysis essay is actually completing the reading. Sometimes the professor will give you a prompt before you read. If this is the case, look for material which relates to the prompt as you read. If the professor did not give you a prompt, look for any material in the assigned reading that piques your interest or relates to class discussions. Highlight or underline any moments in the reading which stick out to you: something you don't understand, something that relates to a topic you care about, or something weird or surprising. Keeping track of patterns, themes, or literary devices is a great way to engage with a work of literature and prepare for a future discussion or essay.

### Completing the Reading

One time, I was talking with my sister-in-law about her experience in nursing school. Whereas her brother had barely achieved Cs in college, she somehow maintained a 4.0, even though she was simultaneously working and caring for her two young daughters.

"What is your secret to success?" I asked.

"Actually doing the assigned readings," she laughed, "most of my peers didn't. And it showed."

As a college professor who teaches reading-heavy classes, this is not a shock to me. After all, most students taking the required writing and literature courses do not wish to become English majors. They sometimes see their literature class as a means to an end: at best, a stepping stone towards their future career; at worst, a time-suck of hoops to jump through. Also, because of today's gig economy, many students are juggling multiple jobs in addition to multiple college classes. This makes it tempting for students to want to skip the readings and just read SparkNotes or have ChatGPT summarize the literature for them. Truth be told, students who pursue this method, depending on their BSing skills, might be able to pass a literature class. But for the vast majority of students, this popular high school tactic will not work at the college level. More importantly, it means students miss out on many of the exciting benefits of diving deep into analysis, discussion, and engaging with the text. Plus, there might be consequences when SparkNotes or ChatGPT gives you incorrect answers, your instructor asks you not to use these sources, or you plagiarize by using ideas from these sources without credit.

Of course, I want my students to fall in love with the written word. I want my passion for literature to be contagious, to light students' hearts and minds on fire with a hunger for the beauty of syntax and diction and literary devices. But I also completely understand that students have limited time. Therefore, I recommend prioritizing the writing process *by reading attentively* so writers can make the most efficient use of their time. In the long run, while it might seem like skipping the readings saves time, completing the readings is actually the best way for students to optimize their time. This is because a strong essay depends on a deep understanding of the literature. If the class features examinations, these almost always test students on whether they completed and understand the readings. Finally, class will be more fun for students if they understand what their peers are talking about in class discussion, and what their professor is talking about during lectures.

Students who complete the readings and annotate as they go will find it much easier to flip back through their notes to find relevant quotations and information. Successful students often break the readings into small, manageable chunks of twenty to thirty minutes at a time. This helps their brains absorb the information better and retain information for writing and tests.

Students skipping reading often end up performing more work when it comes to writing an essay because they will spend so much time looking up text summaries on the internet (which may or may not be accurate or align with the intricacies of the assignment directions). They will also have to go back and re-read the text to find quotations that fit their prompt. Their essays may not succeed because they do not fulfill the in-depth analysis required by the assignments.

So, long story short: even the most practically-minded, time-crunched students would do well to perform the readings. And, while in pursuit of success, a previously literature-averse student might find themselves liking reading more than they thought they would. Just like watching a favorite movie or show, reading a good book can be fun and relaxing!

### Active versus Passive Reading

Many students, when first reading academic material, read it like they would a timeline of Facebook or Instagram posts: not fully attentive, skimming over the material in search of something interesting or for what they think are "answers" on a test. Or they might read literature with full attention, but read without questioning or engaging with the material. The difference between a student who is successful in a literature class and a student who is not successful is often that the successful student participates in **active reading.**

| Actions | Passive Reading | Active Reading |
|---|---|---|
| **Engagement Level** | Skimming or not giving the reading undivided attention; reading for "gist" rather than substance | Reading closely, annotating, analyzing, and reflecting as you read; reading deeply for understanding |
| **Tools** | Just the book | Book, writing utensils, highlighters, sticky notes, reading journal |
| **Number of Times Read** | Once (or *gasp* not at all!) | Read three or more times:<br>• Once without expectation<br>• Once for comprehension<br>• Once for closely analyzing and annotating |

## Annotating

In a literature class, students encounter a lot of literature, written by many different authors. Annotating, or taking notes on the assigned literature as you read, is a way to have a conversation with the reading. This helps you better absorb the material and engage with the text on a deeper level. There are several annotation methods. These are like tools in a student's learning utility belt. Try them all out to discover which tools or combinations of tools help you learn best!

### Margin Notes & Highlighting

One of the best ways to interact with a text is to write notes as you read. Underlining and/or highlighting relevant passages, yes, but also responding to the text in the margins. For instance, if a character I love makes a bad choice (like Sydney Carton in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*), I will write, "Nooooo, Sydney Carton, don't sacrifice yourself for Lucie's sake!" This helps me remember the events of the plot. Many students also find it helpful to summarize each chapter or section of the literature as they read it. For example, a student said it was helpful for them to draw a picture representing every stanza of "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth to help them understand what was being said. Other ideas include:

- Circling unfamiliar words
- Writing questions in the margins
- Color-coded highlighting to track various literary devices (i.e., blue for metaphors, pink for symbolism, and so forth)

### Sticky Notes

For students who would like to sell their textbooks back to the bookstore, writing notes in the margins might not be a practical choice, as it may devalue the textbook or the bookstore may refuse to take it back. For these students, I recommend using sticky notes instead. If sticky notes are cost-prohibitive, most colleges have plenty of scrap paper students can use as bookmarks to stick between pages. This is also an eco-friendly way to re-use paper!

### Reading Journal

Another option many students find helpful is keeping a reading journal. Students can write notes in their journals as they read. This helps students keep track of readings and materials in a chronological fashion. Just like when annotating the text directly or upon sticky notes, the most effective use of a reading journal, for learning purposes, is going to be active engagement with the text rather than passive absorption. That is, try to summarize the plot of what you read every time you read. Also, ask questions about the text. If you can record quotes and paraphrase along with in-text parenthetical citations (i.e., the page number where you found the material), this will optimize your time because you already have quotes ready to go when you write an essay!

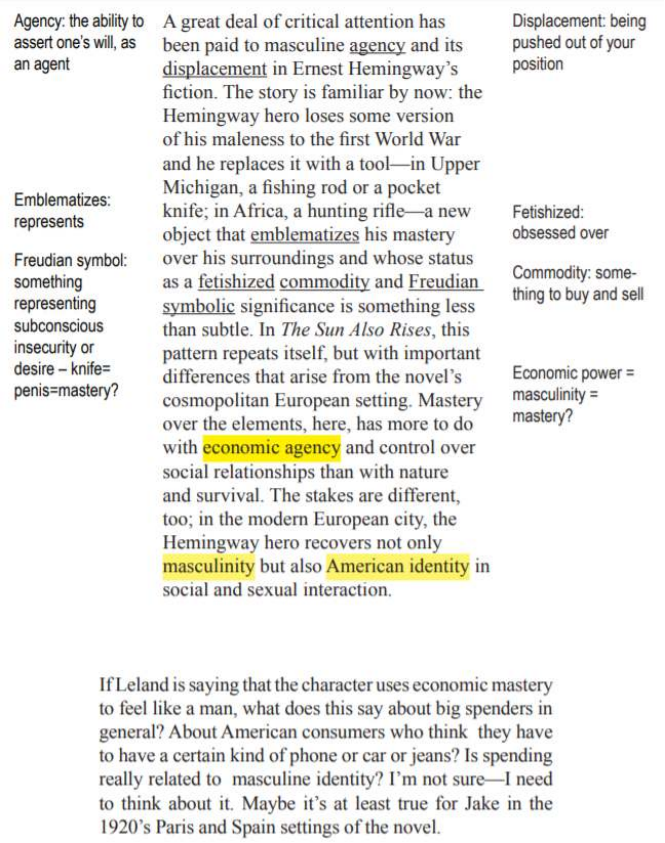
### Example of an Annotated Passage

Using the guidelines above, let's consider this excerpt from a scholarly article by Jacob Michael Leland, "'Yes, That is a Roll of Bills in My Pocket': The Economy of Masculinity in The Sun Also Rises."

> *A great deal of critical attention has been paid to masculine agency and its displacement in Ernest Hemingway's fiction. The story is familiar by now: the Hemingway hero loses some version of his maleness to the first World War and he replaces it with a tool—in Upper Michigan, a fishing rod or a pocket knife; in Africa, a hunting rifle—a new object that emblematizes his mastery over his surroundings and whose status as a fetishized commodity and Freudian*

> *symbolic significance is something less than subtle. In The Sun Also Rises, this pattern repeats itself, but with important differences that arise from the novel's cosmopolitan European setting. Mastery over the elements, here, has more to do with economic agency and control over social relationships than with nature and survival. The stakes are different, too; in the modern European city, the Hemingway hero recovers not only masculinity but also American identity in social and sexual interaction. (37)*

In researching The Sun Also Rises for a project, Ling Ti found Leland's article. What follows is her annotated copy of the above excerpt:




As you can see, this writer highlighted words that seemed important to understanding the text. She included questions in the margins to help her understand the reading. She also provided definitions for terms she did not know, presumably looking them up as she read. Finally, she wrote a brief summary of her reading, also known as a reflection.

## Reflecting on Assigned Literature

Studies show reflecting on reading is one of the best ways to learn. This is called metacognition, or thinking about thinking. It is a way to keep track of the knowledge you have learned as you go. Students who reflect on their reading and learning tend to, as a whole, perform better on essays and examinations. So how can you take advantage of this skill?

If you have a prompt, choose a prompt and read through the assigned literature again, noting any quotes which may relate to the assigned topic. It is recommended at this point that you keep track of your observations in a document: either on a computer (Word, Google Docs) or on a physical piece of paper. Write down any quotations along with page numbers (fiction, nonfiction), line numbers (poem), or act, scene, line numbers (drama). This way, you have all potential evidence in one place, and it makes for easy in-text citations when it comes to knitting the evidence together to form an essay. In fact, it is highly recommended that students start an informal Works Cited page to keep track of every source consulted. This makes it much easier to avoid plagiarism by practicing ethical citation habits. For more information about citations, please see the Citations and Formatting Chapter.

Start with a hypothesis or focus but be willing to refine, adjust, or completely discard it if new evidence refutes it. An essay is not a stagnant piece, but a living, breathing thought experiment. Many students feel reluctant to change their thesis or major parts of their essays because they are afraid it means the previous writing was wasted. As a professional writer, editor, and scholar, I want to clue students in on a secret:

**There is no such thing as wasted writing.**

Even writing that does not end up in the final draft is worthwhile because it is a chance to experiment with ideas. It helps students find a path toward stronger ideas. Just like a gardener might allow branches of a tree to grow to see which ones bear flowers and fruit and then prune the weak, unproductive branches to make the plant stronger and more beautiful, so too must a writer be willing to cut out branches of reasoning which no longer serve the essay. But before you know which ideas or thoughts are worth pursuing, you first have to give them space to grow. You never know what idea branches might prove fruitful!

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from "Reading Like a Professional" in *Writing and Literature: Composition as Inquiry, Learning, Thinking, and Communication* by Dr. Tanya Long Bennett of the University of North Georgia, CC BY-SA 4.0

This page titled 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.3: Prewriting for Literature Essays** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-SA 4.0.

# The Writing Center

College of Arts and Sciences

## Brainstorming

## What this handout is about

This handout discusses techniques that will help you start writing a paper and continue writing through the challenges of the revising process. Brainstorming can help you choose a topic, develop an approach to a topic, or deepen your understanding of the topic's potential.

## Introduction

If you consciously take advantage of your natural thinking processes by gathering your brain's energies into a "storm," you can transform these energies into written words or diagrams that will lead to lively, vibrant writing. Below you will find a brief discussion of what brainstorming is, why you might brainstorm, and suggestions for how you might brainstorm.

Whether you are starting with too much information or not enough, brainstorming can help you to put a new writing task in motion or revive a project that hasn't reached completion. Let's take a look at each case:

When you've got nothing: You might need a storm to approach when you feel "blank" about the topic, devoid of inspiration, full of anxiety about the topic, or just too tired to craft an orderly outline. In this case, brainstorming stirs up the dust, whips some air into our stilled pools of thought, and gets the breeze of inspiration moving again.

7.5: Brainstorming is shared under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

# 7.6: Writing About Fiction and Creative Nonfiction

## Demystifying the Process

Writing an analysis of a piece of fiction can be a mystifying process. First, literary analyses (or papers that offer an interpretation of a story) rely on the assumption that stories must mean something. How does a story mean something? Isn't a story just an arrangement of characters and events? And if the author wanted to convey a meaning, wouldn't he or she be much better off writing an essay just telling us what he or she meant?

It's pretty easy to see how at least some stories convey clear meanings or morals. Just think about a parable like the prodigal son or a nursery tale about "crying wolf." Stories like these are reduced down to the bare elements, giving us just enough detail to lead us to their main points, and because they are relatively easy to understand and tend to stick in our memories, they're often used in some kinds of education.

But if the meanings were always as clear as they are in parables, who would really need to write a paper analyzing them? Interpretations of fiction would not be interesting if the meanings of the stories were clear to everyone who reads them. Thankfully (or perhaps regrettably, depending on your perspective) the stories we're asked to interpret in our classes are a good bit more complicated than most parables. They use characters, settings, and actions to illustrate issues that have no easy resolution. They show different sides of a problem, and they can raise new questions. In short, the stories we read in class have meanings that are arguable and complicated, and it's our job to sort them out.

It might seem that the stories do have specific meanings, and the instructor has already decided what those meanings are. Not true. Instructors can be pretty dazzling (or mystifying) with their interpretations, but that's because they have a lot of practice with stories and have developed a sense of the kinds of things to look for. Even so, the most well-informed professor rarely arrives at conclusions that someone else wouldn't disagree with. In fact, most professors are aware that their interpretations are debatable and actually love a good argument. But let's not go to the other extreme. To say that there is no one answer is not to say that anything we decide to say about a novel or short story is valid, interesting, or valuable. Interpretations of fiction are often opinions, but not all opinions are equal.

So what makes a valid and interesting opinion? A good interpretation of fiction will:

- avoid the obvious (in other words, it won't argue a conclusion that most readers could reach on their own from a general knowledge of the story)
- support its main points with strong evidence from the story
- use careful reasoning to explain how that evidence relates to the main points of the interpretation.

The following steps are intended as a guide through the difficult process of writing an interpretive paper that meets these criteria. Writing tends to be a highly individual task, so adapt these suggestions to fit your own habits and inclinations.

## Writing an Essay on Fiction in 9 Steps

### 1. Become familiar with the text

There's no substitute for a good general knowledge of your story. A good paper inevitably begins with the writer having a solid understanding of the work that they interpret. Being able to have the whole book, short story, or play in your head—at least in a general way—when you begin thinking through ideas will be a great help and will actually allow you to write the paper more quickly in the long run. It's even a good idea to spend some time just thinking about the story. Flip back through the book and consider what interests you about this piece of writing—what seemed strange, new, or important?

### 2. Explore potential topics

Perhaps your instructor has given you a list of topics to choose, or perhaps you have been asked to create your own. Either way, you'll need to generate ideas to use in the paper—even with an assigned topic, you'll have to develop your own interpretation. Let's assume for now that you are choosing your own topic.

After reading your story, a topic may just jump out at you, or you may have recognized a pattern or identified a problem that you'd like to think about in more detail. What is a pattern or a problem?

A pattern can be the recurrence of certain kinds of imagery or events. Usually, repetition of particular aspects of a story (similar events in the plot, similar descriptions, even repetition of particular words) tends to render those elements more conspicuous. Let's say I'm writing a paper on Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. In the course of reading that book, I keep noticing the author's use of biblical imagery: Victor Frankenstein anticipates that "a new species would bless me as its creator and source" (52) while the monster is not sure whether to consider himself as an Adam or a Satan. These details might help me interpret the way characters think about themselves and about each other, as well as allow me to infer what the author might have wanted her reader to think by using the Bible as a frame of reference. On another subject, I also notice that the book repeatedly refers to types of education. The

story mentions books that its characters read and the different contexts in which learning takes place.

A problem, on the other hand, is something in the story that bugs you or that doesn't seem to add up. A character might act in some way that's unaccountable, a narrator may leave out what we think is important information (or may focus on something that seems trivial), or a narrator or character may offer an explanation that doesn't seem to make sense to us. Not all problems lead in interesting directions, but some definitely do and even seem to be important parts of the story. In *Frankenstein*, Victor works day and night to achieve his goal of bringing life to the dead, but once he realizes his goal, he is immediately repulsed by his creation and runs away. Why? Is there something wrong with his creation, something wrong with his goal in the first place, or something wrong with Victor himself? The book doesn't give us a clear answer but seems to invite us to interpret this problem.

If nothing immediately strikes you as interesting or no patterns or problems jump out at you, don't worry. Just start making a list of whatever you remember from your reading, regardless of how insignificant it may seem to you now. Consider a character's peculiar behavior or comments, the unusual way the narrator describes an event, or the author's placement of an action in an odd context. (Step 5 will cover some further elements of fiction that you might find useful at this stage as well.)

There's a good chance that some of these intriguing moments and oddities will relate to other points in the story, eventually revealing some kind of pattern and giving you potential topics for your paper. Also keep in mind that if you found something peculiar in the story you're writing about, chances are good that other people will have been perplexed by these moments in the story as well and will be interested to see how you make sense of it all. It's even a good idea to test your ideas out on a friend, a classmate, or an instructor since talking about your ideas will help you develop them and push them beyond obvious interpretations of the story. And it's only by pushing those ideas that you can write a paper that raises interesting issues or problems and that offers creative interpretations related to those issues.

### 3. Select a topic with a lot of evidence

If you're selecting from a number of possible topics, narrow down your list by identifying how much evidence or how many specific details you could use to investigate each potential issue. Do this step just off the top of your head. Keep in mind that persuasive papers rely on ample evidence and that having a lot of details to choose from can also make your paper easier to write.

It might be helpful at this point to jot down all the events or elements of the story that have some bearing on the two or three topics that seem most promising. This can give you a more visual sense of how much evidence you will have to work with on each potential topic. It's during this activity that having a good knowledge of your story will come in handy and save you a lot of time. Don't launch into a topic without considering all the options first because you may end up with a topic that seemed promising initially but that only leads to a dead end.

### 4. Write out a working thesis

Based on the evidence that relates to your topic—and what you anticipate you might say about those pieces of evidence—come up with a working thesis. Don't spend a lot of time composing this statement at this stage since it will probably change (and a changing thesis statement is a good sign that you're starting to say more interesting and complex things on your subject). At this point in my *Frankenstein* project, I've become interested in ideas on education that seem to appear pretty regularly, and I have a general sense that aspects of Victor's education lead to tragedy. Without considering things too deeply, I'll just write something like, "Victor Frankenstein’s tragic ambition was fueled by a faulty education."

### 5. Make an extended list of evidence

Once you have a working topic in mind, skim back over the story and make a more comprehensive list of the details that relate to your point. For my paper about education in *Frankenstein*, I'll want to take notes on what Victor Frankenstein reads at home, where he goes to school and why, what he studies at school, what others think about those studies, etc. And even though I'm primarily interested in Victor's education, at this stage in the writing, I'm also interested in moments of education in the novel that don't directly involve this character. These other examples might provide a context or some useful contrasts that could illuminate my evidence relating to Victor. With this goal in mind, I'll also take notes on how the monster educates himself, what he reads, and what he learns from those he watches. As you make your notes keep track of page numbers so you can quickly find the passages in your book again and so you can easily document quoted passages when you write without having to fish back through the book.

At this point, you want to include anything, anything, that might be useful, and you also want to avoid the temptation to arrive at definite conclusions about your topic. Remember that one of the qualities that makes for a good interpretation is that it avoids the obvious. You want to develop complex ideas, and the best way to do that is to keep your ideas flexible until you’ve considered the evidence carefully. A good gauge of complexity is whether you feel you understand more about your topic than you did

when you began (and even just reaching a higher state of confusion is a good indicator that you're treating your topic in a complex way).

When you jot down ideas, you can focus on the observations from the narrator or things that certain characters say or do. These elements are certainly important. It might help you come up with more evidence if you also take into account some of the broader components that go into making fiction, things like plot, point of view, character, setting, and symbols.

Plot is the string of events that go into the narrative. Think of this as the "who did what to whom" part of the story. Plots can be significant in themselves since chances are pretty good that some action in the story will relate to your main idea. For my paper on education in *Frankenstein*, I'm interested in Victor's going to the University of Ingolstadt to realize his father's wish that Victor attend school where he could learn about a another culture. Plots can also allow you to make connections between the story you're interpreting and some other stories, and those connections might be useful in your interpretation. For example, the plot of *Frankenstein*, which involves a man who desires to bring life to the dead and creates a monster in the process, bears some similarity to the ancient Greek story of Icarus who flew too close to the sun on his wax wings. Both tell the story of a character who reaches too ambitiously after knowledge and suffers dire consequences.

Your plot could also have similarities to whole groups of other stories, all having conventional or easily recognizable plots. These types of stories are often called genres. Some popular genres include the gothic, the romance, the detective story, the bildungsroman (this is just a German term for a novel that is centered around the development of its main characters), and the novel of manners (a novel that focuses on the behavior and foibles of a particular class or social group). These categories are often helpful in characterizing a piece of writing, but this approach has its limitations. Many novels don't fit nicely into one genre, and others seem to borrow a bit from a variety of different categories. For example, given my working thesis on education, I am more interested in Victor's development than in relating *Frankenstein* to the gothic genre, so I might decide to treat the novel as a bildungsroman.

And just to complicate matters that much more, genre can sometimes take into account not only the type of plot but the form the novelist uses to convey that plot. A story might be told in a series of letters (this is called an epistolary form), in a sequence of journal entries, or in a combination of forms (*Frankenstein* is actually told as a journal included within a letter).

These matters of form also introduce questions of point of view, that is, who is telling the story and what do they or don't they know. Is the tale told by an omniscient or all-knowing narrator who doesn't interact in the events, or is it presented by one of the characters within the story? Can the reader trust that person to give an objective account, or does that narrator color the story with his or her own biases and interests?

Character refers to the qualities assigned to the individual figures in the plot. Consider why the author assigns certain qualities to a character or characters and how any such qualities might relate to your topic. For example, a discussion of Victor Frankenstein's education might take into account aspects of his character that appear to be developed (or underdeveloped) by the particular kind of education he undertakes. Victor tends to be ambitious, even compulsive about his studies, and I might be able to argue that his tendency to be extravagant leads him to devote his own education to writers who asserted grand, if questionable, conclusions.

Setting is the environment in which all of the actions take place. What is the time period, the location, the time of day, the season, the weather, the type of room or building? What is the general mood, and who is present? All of these elements can reflect on the story's events, and though the setting of a story tends to be less conspicuous than plot and character, setting still colors everything that's said and done within its context. If Victor Frankenstein does all of his experiments in "a solitary chamber, or rather a cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a staircase" (53) we might conclude that there is something anti-social, isolated, and stale, maybe even unnatural about his project and his way of learning.

Obviously, if you consider all of these elements, you'll probably have too much evidence to fit effectively into one paper. Your goal is merely to consider each of these aspects of fiction and include only those that are most relevant to your topic and most interesting to your reader. A good interpretive paper does not need to cover all elements of the story — plot, genre, narrative form, character, and setting. In fact, a paper that did try to say something about all of these elements would be unfocused. You might find that most of your topic could be supported by a consideration of character alone. That's fine. For my *Frankenstein* paper, I'm finding that my evidence largely has to do with the setting, evidence that could lead to some interesting conclusions that my reader probably hasn't recognized on his or her own.

### 6. Select your evidence

Once you've made your expanded list of evidence, decide which supporting details are the strongest. First, select the facts which bear the closest relation to your thesis statement. Second,

choose the pieces of evidence you'll be able to say the most about. Readers tend to be more dazzled with your interpretations of evidence than with a lot of quotes from the book. It would be useful to refer to Victor Frankenstein's youthful reading in alchemy, but my reader will be more impressed by some analysis of how the writings of the alchemists—who pursued magical principles of chemistry and physics—reflect the ambition of his own goals. Select the details that will allow you to show off your own reasoning skills and allow you to help the reader see the story in a way he or she may not have seen it before.

### 7. Refine your thesis

Now it's time to go back to your working thesis and refine it so that it reflects your new understanding of your topic. This step and the previous step (selecting evidence) are actually best done at the same time, since selecting your evidence and defining the focus of your paper depend upon each other. Don't forget to consider the scope of your project: how long is the paper supposed to be, and what can you reasonably cover in a paper of that length? In rethinking the issue of education in *Frankenstein*, I realize that I can narrow my topic in a number of ways: I could focus on education and culture (Victor's education abroad), education in the sciences as opposed to the humanities (the monster reads Milton, Goethe, and Plutarch), or differences in learning environments (e.g. independent study, university study, family reading). Since I think I found some interesting evidence in the settings that I can interpret in a way that will get my reader's attention, I'll take this last option and refine my working thesis about Victor's faulty education to something like this: "Victor Frankenstein's education in unnaturally isolated environments fosters his tragic ambition."

### 8. Organize your evidence

Once you have a clear thesis you can go back to your list of selected evidence and group all the similar details together. The ideas that tie these clusters of evidence together can then become the claims that you'll make in your paper. As you begin thinking about what claims you can make (i.e. what kinds of conclusion you can come to) keep in mind that they should not only relate to all the evidence but also clearly support your thesis. Once you're satisfied with the way you've grouped your evidence and with the way that your claims relate to your thesis, you can begin to consider the most logical way to organize each of those claims. To support my thesis about *Frankenstein*, I've decided to group my evidence chronologically. I'll start with Victor's education at home, then discuss his learning at the University, and finally address his own experiments. This arrangement will let me show that Victor was always prone to isolation in his education and that this tendency gets stronger as he becomes more ambitious.

There are certainly other organizational options that might work better depending on the type of points I want to stress. I could organize a discussion of education by the various forms of education found in the novel (for example, education through reading, through classrooms, and through observation), by specific characters (education for Victor, the monster, and Victor's bride, Elizabeth), or by the effects of various types of education (those with harmful, beneficial, or neutral effects).

### 9. Interpret your evidence

Avoid the temptation to load your paper with evidence from your story. Each time you use a specific reference to your story, be sure to explain the significance of that evidence in your own words. To get your readers' interest, you need to draw their attention to elements of the story that they wouldn't necessarily notice or understand on their own. If you're quoting passages without interpreting them, you're not demonstrating your reasoning skills or helping the reader. In most cases, interpreting your evidence merely involves putting into your paper what is already in your head. Remember that we, as readers, are lazy — all of us. We don't want to have to figure out a writer's reasoning for ourselves; we want all the thinking to be done for us in the paper.

## General Hints

The previous nine steps are intended to give you a sense of the tasks usually involved in writing a good interpretive paper. What follows are just some additional hints that might help you find an interesting topic and maybe even make the process a little more enjoyable.

**1. Make your thesis relevant to your readers**

You'll be able to keep your readers' attention more easily if you pick a topic that relates to daily experience. Avoid writing a paper that identifies a pattern in a story but doesn't quite explain why that pattern leads to an interesting interpretation. Identifying the biblical references in *Frankenstein* might provide a good start to a paper—Mary Shelley does use a lot of biblical allusions—but a good paper must also tell the reader why those references are meaningful. So what makes an interesting paper topic? Simply put, it has to address issues that we can use in our own lives. Your thesis should be able to answer the brutal question "So what?" Does your paper tell your reader something relevant about the context of the story you're interpreting or about the human condition?

Some categories, like race, gender, and social class, are dependable sources of interest. This is not to say that all good

papers necessarily deal with one of these issues. My thesis on education in *Frankenstein* does not. But a lot of readers would probably be less interested in reading a paper that traces the instances of water imagery than in reading a paper that compares male or female stereotypes used in a story or that takes a close look at relationships between characters of different races. Again, don't feel compelled to write on race, gender, or class. The main idea is that you ask yourself whether the topic you've selected connects with a major human concern, and there are a lot of options here (for example, issues that relate to economics, family dynamics, education, religion, law, politics, sexuality, history, and psychology, among others).

Also, don't assume that as long as you address one of these issues, your paper will be interesting. As mentioned in step 2, you need to address these big topics in a complex way. Doing this requires that you don't go into a topic with a preconceived notion of what you'll find. Be prepared to challenge your own ideas about what gender, race, or class mean in a particular text.

**2. Select a topic of interest to you**

Though you may feel like you have to select a topic that sounds like something your instructor would be interested in, don't overlook the fact that you'll be more invested in your paper and probably get more out of it if you make the topic something pertinent to yourself. Pick a topic that might allow you to learn about yourself and what you find important.

Of course, your topic can't entirely be of your choosing. We're always at the mercy of the evidence that's available to us. For example, your interest may really be in political issues, but if you're reading *Frankenstein*, you might face some difficulties in finding enough evidence to make a good paper on that kind of topic. If, on the other hand, you're interested in ethics, philosophy, science, psychology, religion, or even geography, you'll probably have more than enough to write about and find yourself in the good position of having to select only the best pieces of evidence.

**3. Make your thesis specific**

The effort to be more specific almost always leads to a thesis that will get your reader's attention, and it also separates you from the crowd as someone who challenges ideas and looks into topics more deeply. A paper about education in general in *Frankenstein* will probably not get my reader's attention as much as a more specific topic about the impact of the learning environment on the main character. My readers may have already thought to some extent about ideas of education in the novel, if they have read it, but the chance that they have thought through something more specific like the educational environment is slim.

## Contributors and Attributions

Adapted from Literature (Fiction). Provided by: UNC College of Arts and Sciences Writing Center. License: *CC BY-NC-ND*.

This page titled 7.6: Writing About Fiction and Creative Nonfiction is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.4: Writing About Fiction and Creative Nonfiction** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 7.7: Literary Thesis Statements

## The Literary Thesis Statement

Literary essays are argumentative or persuasive essays. Their purpose is primarily analysis, but analysis for the purposes of showing readers your interpretation of a literary text. So the thesis statement is a one to two sentence summary of your essay's main argument, or interpretation.

Just like in other argumentative essays, the thesis statement should be a kind of opinion based on observable fact about the literary work.

### Thesis Statements Should Be

- **Debatable**
  - Ex: "While most people reading *Hamlet* think he is the **tragic hero**, Ophelia is the real **hero** of the play as demonstrated through her critique of Elsinore's court through the language of flowers."
    - This thesis takes a position. There are clearly those who could argue against this idea.
- **Rooted in observations about literary devices, genres, or forms**
  - Ex: "Hawthorne's use of **symbolism** in *The Scarlet Letter* falters and ultimately breaks down with the introduction of the **character** Pearl, which shows the perceived danger of female sexuality in a puritanical society."
    - Look at the text in bold. See the strong emphasis on how form (literary devices like symbolism and character) acts as a foundation for the interpretation (perceived danger of female sexuality).
- **Specific**
  - Ex: "Through its **contrasting river and shore scene**s, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that to find the true expression of American ideals, one must leave 'civilized' society and go back to nature" ("Thesis Statements")
    - Through this specific yet concise sentence, readers can anticipate the text to be examined (*Huckleberry Finn)*, the author (Mark Twain), the literary device that will be focused upon (river and shore scenes) and what these scenes will show (true expression of American ideals can be found in nature).

### Thesis Statements Should NOT Be

- **Overly broad or generalized**
  - Ex: "I am going to be writing about "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe."
    - While we know what text and author will be the focus of the essay, we know nothing about what aspect of the essay the author will be focusing upon, nor is there an argument here.
- **More about society than the work of literature**
  - Ex: "Gender roles are bad and should be abolished."
    - This may be well and true, but this thesis does not appear to be about a work of literature. This could be turned into a thesis statement if the writer is able to show how this is the theme of a literary work (like "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid) and root that interpretation in observable data from the story in the form of literary devices.
- **A summary or obvious statement about the text**
  - Ex: "Hamlet is about a prince whose father dies."
    - Yes, this is true. But it is not debatable. You would be hard-pressed to find someone who could argue with this statement. Yawn, boring.
- **A judgment about the quality of the work**
  - Ex: "'La Migra' by Pat Mora is a really good/powerful poem"
    - This may very well be true. But the purpose of a literary critic is not to judge the quality of a literary work, but to make analyses and interpretations of the work based on observable structural aspects of that work.
- **About the author (biographical) rather than literature**
  - Ex: "Edgar Allan Poe and Washington Irving were both creepy towards women in their personal lives but in different ways"

- Again, this might be true, and might make an interesting essay topic, but unless it is rooted in textual analysis, it is not within the scope of a literary analysis essay. **Be careful not to conflate author and speaker! Author, speaker, and narrator are all different entities! See: intentional fallacy.**

## Thesis Statement Formula

One way I find helpful to explain literary thesis statements is through a "formula":

**Thesis statement = Observation + Analysis + Significance**

- Observation: usually regarding the form or structure of the literature. This can be a pattern, like recurring literary devices. For example, "I noticed the poems of Rumi, Hafiz, and Kabir all use **symbols** such as **the lover's longing and Tavern of Ruin**"
- Analysis: You could also call this an opinion. This explains what you think your observations show or mean. "I think these recurring symbols all **represent the human soul's desire."** This is where your debatable argument appears.
- Significance: this explains what the significance or relevance of the interpretation might be. Human soul's desire to do what? Why should readers care that they represent the human soul's desire? "I think these recurring symbols all show the human soul's desire **to connect with God.**" This is where your argument gets more specific.

**Thesis statement:** The works of ecstatic love poets Rumi, Hafiz, and Kabir use **symbols** such as a lover's longing and the Tavern of Ruin **to illustrate** the **human soul's desire to connect with God**.

## Thesis Examples

**SAMPLE THESIS STATEMENTS**

These sample thesis statements are provided as guides, not as required forms or prescriptions.

---

### The Literary Device Thesis Statement

The thesis may focus on an analysis of one of the elements of fiction, drama, poetry or nonfiction as expressed in the work: character, plot, structure, idea, theme, symbol, style, imagery, tone, etc.

**Example 1:**

In "A Worn Path," Eudora Welty creates a fictional character in Phoenix Jackson whose determination, faith, and cunning illustrate the indomitable human spirit.

Note that the work, author, and character to be analyzed are identified in this thesis statement. The thesis relies on a strong verb (creates). It also identifies the element of fiction that the writer will explore (character) and the characteristics the writer will analyze and discuss (determination, faith, cunning).

**Example 2:**

The character of the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet serves as a foil to young Juliet, delights us with her warmth and earthy wit, and helps realize the tragic catastrophe.

---

### The Genre / Theory Thesis Statement

The thesis may focus on illustrating how a work reflects the particular genre's forms, the characteristics of a philosophy of literature, or the ideas of a particular school of thought.

**Example 1:**

Samuel Beckett's Endgame reflects characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd in its minimalist stage setting, its seemingly meaningless dialogue, and its apocalyptic or nihilist vision.

**Example 2:**

A close look at dialogue, characterization, and paragraph structure in “The Story of an Hour” reveals how language, institutions, and expected demeanor suppress the natural desires and aspirations of women.

## Generative Questions

One way to come up with a riveting thesis statement is to start with a generative question. The question should be open-ended and, hopefully, prompt some kind of debate.

- What is the effect of [choose a literary device that features prominently in the chosen text] in this work of literature, and how does it relate to a theme?
- How does this work of literature conform or resist its genre, and to what effect?
- How does this work of literature portray the environment, and to what effect?
- How does this work of literature portray race, and to what effect?
- How does this work of literature portray gender, and to what effect?
- What historical context is this work of literature engaging with, and how might it function as a commentary on this context?

These are just a few common of the common kinds of questions literary scholars engage with. As you write, you will want to refine your question to be even more specific. Eventually, you can turn your generative question into a statement. And, in the essay body paragraphs, you will provide evidence in support of your thesis statement in the form of quotations, paraphrase, and/or summary from the text.

## Expert Examples

While nobody expects you to write professional-quality thesis statements in an undergraduate literature class, it can be helpful to examine some examples. As you view these examples, consider the structure of the thesis statement. You might also think about what kinds of questions the scholar wondered that led to this statement!

- *"Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Achebe 3).
- "...I argue that the approach to time and causality in Boethius' sixth-century *Consolation of Philosophy* can support abolitionist objectives to dismantle modern American policing and carceral systems" (Chaganti 144).
- "I seek to expand our sense of the musico-poetic compositional practices available to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, focusing on the metapoetric dimensions of *Much Ado About Nothing*. In so doing, I work against the tendency to isolate writing as an independent or autonomous feature the work of early modern poets and dramatists who integrated bibliographic texts with other, complementary media" (Trudell 371).

## Works Cited


Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa" *Research in African Literatures 9.1*, Indiana UP, 1978. 1-15.

Chaganti, Seeta. "Boethian Abolition" *PMLA 137.1* Modern Language Association, January 2022. 144-154.

"Thesis Statements in Literary Analysis Papers" Author unknown. https://resources.finalsite.net/imag...handout__1.pdf

Trudell, Scott A. "Shakespeare's Notation: Writing Sound in *Much Ado about Nothing*" *PMLA 135.2*, Modern Language Association, March 2020. 370-377.


## Contributors and Attributions

Thesis Examples. Authored by: University of Arlington Texas. License: CC BY-NC


This page titled 7.7: Literary Thesis Statements is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.6: Literary Thesis Statements** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 7.8: Essay as Argument

## Argument

What is an argument, and why do you need one in your essays on literary analysis?

### Arguments are everywhere

You may be surprised to hear that the word “argument” does not have to be written anywhere in your assignment for it to be an important part of your task. In fact, making an argument—expressing a point of view on a subject and supporting it with evidence—is often the aim of academic writing. Your instructors may assume that you know this and thus may not explain the importance of arguments in class.

Most material you learn in college is or has been debated by someone, somewhere, at some time. Even when the material you read or hear is presented as a simple fact, it may actually be one person’s interpretation of a set of information. Instructors may call on you to examine that interpretation and defend it, refute it, or offer some new view of your own. In writing assignments, you will almost always need to do more than just summarize information that you have gathered or regurgitate facts that have been discussed in class. You will need to develop a point of view on or interpretation of that material and provide evidence for your position.

Consider an example. For nearly 2000 years, educated people in many Western cultures believed that bloodletting—deliberately causing a sick person to lose blood—was the most effective treatment for a variety of illnesses. The claim that bloodletting is beneficial to human health was not widely questioned until the 1800s, and some physicians continued to recommend bloodletting as late as the 1920s. Medical practices have now changed because some people began to doubt the effectiveness of bloodletting; these people argued against it and provided convincing evidence. Human knowledge grows out of such differences of opinion, and scholars like your instructors spend their lives engaged in debates over what claims may be counted as accurate in their fields. In their courses, they want you to engage in similar kinds of critical thinking and debate.

Writing on literary texts is no different. You take a stance and make an argument in your essay with the needed support to back up your points.

Argumentation is not just what your instructors do. We all use argumentation on a daily basis, and you probably already have some skill at crafting an argument. The more you improve your skills in this area, the better you will be at thinking critically, reasoning, making choices, and weighing evidence. These are leadership skills that hone the mind and are highly sought after abilities, regardless of what field you choose to enter.

### Making a claim

What is an argument? In academic writing, an argument is usually a main idea, often called a “claim” or “thesis statement,” backed up with evidence that supports the idea. In a majority of college papers, you will need to make some sort of claim and use evidence to support it, and your ability to do this well will separate your papers from those of students who see assignments as mere accumulations of fact and detail. In other words, gone are the happy days of being given a “topic” about which you can write anything. It is time to stake out a position and prove why it is a good position for a thinking person to hold. See our handout on thesis statements.

Claims can be as simple as, “Protons are positively charged, and electrons are negatively charged,” with evidence such as, “In this experiment, protons and electrons acted in such and such a way.” Claims can also be as complex as “The end of the South African system of apartheid was inevitable,” using reasoning and evidence such as, “Every successful revolution in the modern era has come about after the government in power has given and then removed small concessions to the uprising group.” In either case, the rest of your paper will detail the reasoning and evidence that have led you to believe that your position is best.

When beginning to write a paper, ask yourself, “What is my point?” For example, the point of this handout is to help you become a better writer, and we are arguing that an important step in the process of writing effective arguments is understanding the concept of argumentation. If your papers do not have a main point, they cannot be arguing for anything. Asking yourself what your point is can help avoid a mere “information dump.” Consider this: your instructors probably know a lot more than you do about your

subject matter. Why, then, would you want to provide them with material they already know? **Instructors are usually looking for two things:**

1. Proof that you understand the material
2. A demonstration of your ability to use or apply materials in ways that go beyond what you have read or heard

This second part can be done in many ways: you can critique the material, apply it to something else, or even just explain it in a different way. In order to succeed at this second step, though, you must have a particular point to argue.

Arguments in academic writing are usually complex and take time to develop. Your argument will need to be more than a simple or obvious statement, such as "Frank Lloyd Wright was a great architect." Such a statement might capture your initial impressions of Wright as you have studied him in class; however, you need to look deeper and express specifically what caused that "greatness." Your instructor will probably expect something more complicated, such as "Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture combines elements of European modernism, Asian aesthetic form, and locally found materials to create a unique new style," or "There are many strong similarities between Wright's building designs and those of his mother, which suggests that he may have borrowed some of her ideas." To develop your argument, you would then define your terms and prove your claim with evidence from Wright's drawings and buildings and those of the other architects you mention.

## Evidence

Do not stop with having a point. You have to back up your point with evidence. The strength of your evidence, and your use of it, can make or break your argument. See our handout on evidence. You already have the natural inclination for this type of thinking, if not in an academic setting. Think about how you talked your parents into letting you borrow the family car. Did you present them with lots of instances of your past trustworthiness? Did you make them feel guilty because your friends' parents all let them drive? Did you whine until they just wanted you to shut up? Did you look up statistics on teen driving and use them to show how you didn't fit the dangerous-driver profile? These are all types of argumentation, and they exist in academia in similar forms.

Every field has slightly different requirements for acceptable evidence, so familiarize yourself with some arguments from within that field instead of just applying whatever evidence you like best. Pay attention to your textbooks and your instructor's lectures. What types of arguments and evidence are they using? The type of evidence that sways an English instructor may not work to convince a sociology instructor. Find out what counts as proof that something is true in that field. Is it statistics, a logical development of points, something from the object being discussed (artwork, text, culture, or atom), the way something works, or some combination of more than one of these things?

Be consistent with your evidence. Unlike negotiating for the use of your parents' car, a college paper is not the place for an all-out blitz of every type of argument. You can often use more than one type of evidence within a paper, but make sure that within each section, you are providing the reader with evidence appropriate to each claim. So, if you start a paragraph or section with a statement like, "Putting the student seating area closer to the basketball court will raise player performance," do not follow with your evidence on how much more money the university could raise by letting more students attend games for free. Information about how fan support raises player morale, which then results in better play, would be a better follow-up. Your next section could offer clear reasons why undergraduates have as much or more right to attend an undergraduate event as wealthy alumni—but this information would not go in the same section as the fan support stuff. You cannot convince a confused person, so keep things tidy and ordered.

## Counterargument

One way to strengthen your argument and show that you have a deep understanding of the issue you are discussing is to anticipate and address counterarguments or objections. By considering what someone who disagrees with your position might have to say about your argument, you show that you have thought things through, and you dispose of some of the reasons your audience might have for not accepting your argument. Recall our discussion of student seating in the Dean Dome. To make the most effective argument possible, you should consider not only what students would say about seating but also what alumni who have paid a lot to get good seats might say.

You can generate counterarguments by asking yourself how someone who disagrees with you might respond to each of the points you've made or your position as a whole. **If you can't immediately imagine another position, here are some strategies to try:**

- Do some research. It may seem to you that no one could possibly disagree with the position you are arguing, but someone probably has. For example, some people argue that the American Civil War never ended. If you are making an argument concerning, for example, the outcomes of the Civil War, you might wish to see what some of these people have to say.
- Talk with a friend or with your teacher. Another person may be able to imagine counterarguments that haven't occurred to you.
- Consider your conclusion or claim and the premises of your argument and imagine someone who denies each of them. For example, if you argued, "Cats make the best pets. This is because they are clean and independent," you might imagine someone saying, "Cats do not make the best pets. They are dirty and needy."

Once you have thought up some counterarguments, consider how you will respond to them—will you concede that your opponent has a point but explain why your audience should nonetheless accept your argument? Will you reject the counterargument and explain why it is mistaken? Either way, you will want to leave your reader with a sense that your argument is stronger than opposing arguments.

When you are summarizing opposing arguments, be charitable. Present each argument fairly and objectively, rather than trying to make it look foolish. You want to show that you have considered the many sides of the issue. If you simply attack or caricature your opponent (also referred to as presenting a "straw man"), you suggest that your argument is only capable of defeating an extremely weak adversary, which may undermine your argument rather than enhance it.

It is usually better to consider one or two serious counterarguments in some depth, rather than to give a long but superficial list of many different counterarguments and replies.

Be sure that your reply is consistent with your original argument. If considering a counterargument changes your position, you will need to go back and revise your original argument accordingly.

### Audience

Audience is a very important consideration in argument. Take a look at our handout on audience. A lifetime of dealing with your family members has helped you figure out which arguments work best to persuade each of them. Maybe whining works with one parent, but the other will only accept cold, hard statistics. Your kid brother may listen only to the sound of money in his palm. It's usually wise to think of your audience in an academic setting as someone who is perfectly smart but who doesn't necessarily agree with you. You are not just expressing your opinion in an argument ("It's true because I said so"), and in most cases, your audience will know something about the subject at hand—so you will need sturdy proof. At the same time, do not think of your audience as capable of reading your mind. You have to come out and state both your claim and your evidence clearly. Do not assume that because the instructor knows the material, he or she understands what part of it you are using, what you think about it, and why you have taken the position you've chosen.

### Critical reading

Critical reading is a big part of understanding argument. Although some of the material you read will be very persuasive, do not fall under the spell of the printed word as authority. Very few of your instructors think of the texts they assign as the last word on the subject. Remember that the author of every text has an agenda, something that he or she wants you to believe. This is OK—everything is written from someone's perspective—but it's a good thing to be aware of. For more information on objectivity and bias and on reading sources carefully, read our handouts on evaluating print sources and reading to write.

Take notes either in the margins of your source (if you are using a photocopy or your own book) or on a separate sheet as you read. Put away that highlighter! Simply highlighting a text is good for memorizing the main ideas in that text—it does not encourage critical reading. Part of your goal as a reader should be to put the author's ideas in your own words. Then you can stop thinking of these ideas as facts and start thinking of them as arguments.

When you read, ask yourself questions like, "What is the author trying to prove?" and, "What is the author assuming I will agree with?" Do you agree with the author? Does the author adequately defend her argument? What kind of proof does she use? Is there something she leaves out that you would put in? Does putting it in hurt her argument? As you get used to reading critically, you will start to see the sometimes hidden agendas of other writers, and you can use this skill to improve your own ability to craft effective arguments.

## Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial. We revise these tips periodically and welcome feedback.


Anson, Chris M., and Robert A. Schwegler. *The Longman Handbook for Writers and Readers.* 6th ed. New York: Longman, 2010.

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams, Joseph Bizup, and William T. FitzGerald. *The Craft of Research.* 4th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Ede, Lisa. *Work in Progress.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

Gage, John T. *The Shape of Reason: Argumentative Writing in College.* 4th ed. New York: Longman, 2005.

Lunsford, Andrea, and John Ruszkiewicz. *Everything's an Argument.* 7th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016.

Rosen, Leonard J., and Laurence Behrens. *The Allyn & Bacon Handbook.* 5th ed. New York: Longman, 2003.


---




This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 License.

You may reproduce it for non-commercial use if you use the entire handout and attribute the source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

---

This page titled 7.8: Essay as Argument is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.7: Essay as Argument** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap has no license indicated.

# 7.9: Summarizing vs. Analyzing Literary Works

**Page ID**
353526

## Summary: Using it Wisely

Knowing how to summarize something you have read, seen, or heard is a valuable skill, one you have probably used in many writing assignments. It is important, though, to recognize when you must go beyond describing, explaining, and restating texts and offer a more complex analysis. This handout will help you distinguish between summary and analysis and avoid inappropriate summary in your academic writing.

### Is summary a bad thing?

Not necessarily. But it's important that your keep your assignment and your audience in mind as you write. If your assignment requires an argument with a thesis statement and supporting evidence—as many academic writing assignments do—then you should limit the amount of summary in your paper. You might use summary to provide background, set the stage, or illustrate supporting evidence, but keep it very brief: a few sentences should do the trick. Most of your paper should focus on your argument. (Our handout on argument will help you construct a good one.)

Writing a summary of what you know about your topic before you start drafting your actual paper can sometimes be helpful. If you are unfamiliar with the material you're analyzing, you may need to summarize what you've read in order to understand your reading and get your thoughts in order. Once you figure out what you know about a subject, it's easier to decide what you want to argue.

You may also want to try some other pre-writing activities that can help you develop your own analysis. Outlining, freewriting, and mapping make it easier to get your thoughts on the page. (Check out our handout on brainstorming for some suggested techniques.)

### Why is it so tempting to stick with summary and skip analysis?

Many writers rely too heavily on summary because it is what they can most easily write. If you're stalled by a difficult writing prompt, summarizing the plot of The Great Gatsby may be more appealing than staring at the computer for three hours and wondering what to say about F. Scott Fitzgerald's use of color symbolism. After all, the plot is usually the easiest part of a work to understand. Something similar can happen even when what you are writing about has no plot: if you don't really understand an author's argument, it might seem easiest to just repeat what he or she said.

To write a more analytical paper, you may need to review the text or film you are writing about, with a focus on the elements that are relevant to your thesis. If possible, carefully consider your writing assignment before reading, viewing, or listening to the material about which you'll be writing so that your encounter with the material will be more purposeful. (We offer a handout on reading towards writing.)

### How do I know if I'm summarizing?

**As you read through your essay, ask yourself the following questions:**

- Am I stating something that would be obvious to a reader or viewer?
- Does my essay move through the plot, history, or author's argument in chronological order, or in the exact same order the author used?
- Am I simply describing what happens, where it happens, or to whom it happens?

A "yes" to any of these questions may be a sign that you are summarizing. **If you answer yes to the questions below, though, it is a sign that your paper may have more analysis (which is usually a good thing):**

- Am I making an original argument about the text?
- Have I arranged my evidence around my own points, rather than just following the author's or plot's order?
- Am I explaining why or how an aspect of the text is significant?

Certain phrases are warning signs of summary. **Keep an eye out for these:**

- "[This essay] is about…"
- "[This book] is the story of…"
- "[This author] writes about…"

- "[This movie] is set in…"

Here's an example of an introductory paragraph containing unnecessary summary. **Sentences that summarize are in italics:**

- The Great Gatsby *is the story of a mysterious millionaire, Jay Gatsby, who lives alone on an island in New York. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote the book, but the narrator is Nick Carraway. Nick is Gatsby's neighbor, and he chronicles the story of Gatsby and his circle of friends, beginning with his introduction to the strange man and ending with Gatsby's tragic death. In the story, Nick describes his environment through various colors, including green, white, and grey. Whereas white and grey symbolize false purity and decay, respectively, the color green offers a symbol of hope.*

**Here's how you might change the paragraph to make it a more effective introduction:**

- In The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald provides readers with detailed descriptions of the area surrounding East Egg, New York. In fact, Nick Carraway's narration describes the setting with as much detail as the characters in the book. Nick's description of the colors in his environment presents the book's themes, symbolizing significant aspects of the post-World War I era. Whereas white and grey symbolize the false purity and decay of the 1920s, the color green offers a symbol of hope.

This version of the paragraph mentions the book's title, author, setting, and narrator so that the reader is reminded of the text. And that sounds a lot like summary—but the paragraph quickly moves on to the writer's own main topic: the setting and its relationship to the main themes of the book. The paragraph then closes with the writer's specific thesis about the symbolism of white, grey, and green.

## How do I write more analytically?

Analysis requires breaking something—like a story, poem, play, theory, or argument—into parts so you can understand how those parts work together to make the whole. Ideally, you should begin to analyze a work as you read or view it instead of waiting until after you're done—it may help you to jot down some notes as you read. Your notes can be about major themes or ideas you notice, as well as anything that intrigues, puzzles, excites, or irritates you. Remember, analytic writing goes beyond the obvious to discuss questions of how and why—so ask yourself those questions as you read.

**The St. Martin's Handbook encourages readers to take the following steps in order to analyze a text:**

- Identify evidence that supports or illustrates the main point or theme as well as anything that seems to contradict it.
- Consider the relationship between the words and the visuals in the work. Are they well integrated, or are they sometimes at odds with one another? What functions do the visuals serve? To capture attention? To provide more detailed information or illustration? To appeal to readers' emotions?
- Decide whether the sources used are trustworthy.
- Identify the work's underlying assumptions about the subject, as well as any biases it reveals. (Lunsford 38)

Once you have written a draft, some questions you might want to ask yourself about your writing are, "What's my point?" or, "What am I arguing in this paper?" If you can't answer these questions, then you haven't gone beyond summarizing. You may also want to think about how much of your writing comes from your own ideas or arguments. If you're only reporting someone else's ideas, you probably aren't offering an analysis.

## What strategies can help me avoid excessive summary?

- Read the assignment (the prompt) as soon as you get it. Make sure to reread it before you start writing. Go back to your assignment often while you write. (Check out our handout on reading assignments).
- Formulate an argument (including a good thesis) and be sure that your final draft is structured around it, including aspects of the plot, story, history, background, etc. only as evidence for your argument. (You can refer to our handout on constructing thesis statements).
- Read critically—imagine having a dialogue with the work you are discussing. What parts do you agree with? What parts do you disagree with? What questions do you have about the work? Does it remind you of other works you've seen?
- Make sure you have clear topic sentences that make arguments in support of your thesis statement. (Read our handout on paragraph development if you want to work on writing strong paragraphs).
- Use two different highlighters to mark your paper. With one color, highlight areas of summary or description. With the other, highlight areas of analysis. For many college papers, it's a good idea to have lots of analysis and minimal summary/description.

- Ask yourself: What part of the essay would be obvious to a reader/viewer of the work being discussed? What parts (words, sentences, paragraphs) of the essay could be deleted without loss? In most cases, your paper should focus on points that are essential, and will be interesting to people who have already read or seen the work you are writing about.

### Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Barnet, Sylvan and William E. Cain. *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature.* 12th ed. New York: Pearson, 2011.

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing About Film.* 9th ed. New York: Pearson, 2014.

Lunsford, Andrea A. *The St. Martin's Handbook.* 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well.* 6th ed. New York: Quill, 2001.

## Contributors and Attributions

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 License.
You may reproduce it for non-commercial use if you use the entire handout and attribute the source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

---

This page titled 7.9: Summarizing vs. Analyzing Literary Works is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.8: Summarizing vs. Analyzing Literary Works** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap has no license indicated.

# 7.10: Writing a Literary Analysis Essay

## The Literary Analysis Essay

The literary analysis essay is the study of literature's meat and potatoes. Like the response essay, a literary analysis essay prompt asks students to examine one or more works of literature closely. The difference is that while a response essay is informal, a literary analysis essay is more formal. By more formal, I mean it abides by the following structural requirements:

- Clear, debatable thesis statement
- Clear introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion
- Quotations as evidence from the text to support the thesis

Let's take a deeper look into the literary analysis process, which focuses on the form of the text, also called **New Criticism.**

### New Criticism Practice

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, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173353.

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 Courtyard," Poetry Foundation, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173564.

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.'"*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "urn." 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.'

John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919; Bartleby.com, 1999), http://www.bartleby.com/101/625.html.

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) Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1956)—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 (or even in your daily lives through text messages, tweets, song lyrics, etc.). 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. But fear not! If you have ever read and reread emails/text messages/tweets/instagram posts from a friend or family member or whomever (trying to decipher the underlying meaning), if you've ever explored song lyrics and

discovered a deeper meaning or interpretation, you have these skills. And these skills are like any other, you need to practice and hone them.

**Your Process**

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" (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010). To the New Critics, as you can see, literature—in particular, the analysis of it—is 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. Consider the way you might pick apart, almost unconsciously, the elements of a song to determine its themes: beat, melody, tone, lyrics, rhythm, speed, key, etc. All these elements help a listener determine the themes of a song and there are countless varieties of combinations to express any number of ideas/feelings/stories (love song, breakup song, celebratory song, sad song, etc.). Have you ever wondered why a song might sound happy, but when you listen to the words, you realize it's a sad song? Why did the artist choose to create this dichotomy? What is accomplished by creating this tension between happy and sad? How does this add to the experience of the piece? These are the things New Critics explore. These are some of the tools used in literary analysis.

## 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 (form/organization/etc.) and theme (idea/subject/etc.) 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 (what the author intended doesn't really matter). 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 (separate the art from the artist).

## 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 ("I hate this!") and objective, critical statements ("This isn't effective because of reasons X, Y, and Z") 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 true 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.

**Your Process**

add here

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 of 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 on how *not* to read 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 further 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.

**Your Process**

add here

1. Read Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (http://www.bartleby.com/101/625.html).
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?
4. Read Cleanth Brooks's interpretation of the ending lines (www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html).
5. Then read the following overview.

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. You can access the essay at 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.

## Example Literary Analysis Assignment

Contributors: Adapted from material in "The Foundations of New Criticism: An Overview" by Ryan Cordell and John Pennington.

---

This page titled 7.10: Writing a Literary Analysis Essay is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.10: Essay Type - Literary Analysis** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 7.11: Sample Student Literary Analysis Essays

The following examples are essays where student writers focused on close-reading a literary work.

While reading these examples, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the essay's thesis statement, and how do you know it is the thesis statement?
2. What is the main idea or topic sentence of each body paragraph, and how does it relate back to the thesis statement?
3. Where and how does each essay use evidence (quotes or paraphrase from the literature)?
4. What are some of the literary devices or structures the essays analyze or discuss?
5. How does each author structure their conclusion, and how does their conclusion differ from their introduction?

## Example 1: Poetry

Victoria Morillo

Instructor Heather Ringo

ENGL 002

3 August 2022

How Nguyen’s Structure Solidifies the Impact of Sexual Violence in “The Study”

Stripped of innocence, your body taken from you. No matter how much you try to block out the instance in which these two things occurred, memories surface and come back to haunt you. How does a person, *a young boy*, cope with an event that forever changes his life? Hieu Minh Nguyen deconstructs this very way in which an act of sexual violence affects a survivor. In his poem, “The Study,” the poem's speaker recounts the year in which his molestation took place, describing how his memory filters in and out. Throughout the poem, Nguyen writes in free verse, permitting a structural liberation to become the foundation for his message to shine through. While he moves the readers with this poignant narrative, Nguyen effectively conveys the resulting internal struggles of feeling alone and unseen.

The speaker recalls his experience with such painful memory through the use of specific punctuation choices. Just by looking at the poem, we see that the first period doesn’t appear until line 14. It finally comes after the speaker reveals to his readers the possible, central purpose for writing this poem: the speaker's molestation. In the first half, the poem makes use of commas, em dashes, and colons, which lends itself to the idea of the speaker stringing along all of these details to make sense of this time in his life. If reading the poem following the conventions of punctuation, a sense of urgency is present here, as well. This is exemplified by the lack of periods to finalize a thought; and instead, Nguyen uses other punctuation marks to connect them. Serving as another connector of thoughts, the two em dashes give emphasis to the role memory plays when the speaker discusses how “no one [had] a face” during that time (Nguyen 9-11). He speaks in this urgent manner until the 14th line, and when he finally gets it off his chest, the pace of the poem changes, as does the more frequent use of the period. This stream-of-consciousness-like section when juxtaposed with the latter half of the poem, causes readers to slow down and pay attention to the details. It also splits the poem in two: a section that talks of the fogginess of memory then transitions into one that remembers it all.

In tandem with the fluctuating nature of memory, the utilization of line breaks and word choice help reflect the damage the molestation has had. Within the first couple of lines of the poem, the poem demands the readers’ attention when the line breaks from “floating” to “dead” as the speaker describes his memory of Little Billy (Nguyen 1-4). This line break averts the readers’ expectation of the direction of the narrative and immediately shifts the tone of the poem. The break also speaks to the effect his trauma has ingrained in him and how “[f]or the longest time,” his only memory of that year revolves around an image of a boy’s death. In a way, the speaker sees himself in Little Billy; or perhaps, he’s representative of the tragic death of his boyhood, how the speaker felt so “dead” after enduring such a traumatic experience, even referring to himself as a “ghost” that he tries to evict from his conscience (Nguyen 24). The feeling that a part of him has died is solidified at the very end of the poem when the speaker describes himself as a nine-year-old boy who’s been “fossilized,” forever changed by this act (Nguyen 29). By choosing words associated with permanence and death, the speaker tries to recreate the atmosphere (for which he felt trapped in) in order for readers to understand the loneliness that came as a result of his trauma. With the assistance of line breaks, more attention is drawn to the speaker's words, intensifying their importance, and demanding to be felt by the readers.

Most importantly, the speaker expresses eloquently, and so heartbreakingly, about the effect sexual violence has on a person. Perhaps what seems to be the most frustrating are the people who fail to believe survivors of these types of crimes. This is evident when he describes "how angry" the tenants were when they filled the pool with cement (Nguyen 4). They seem to represent how people in the speaker's life were dismissive of his assault and who viewed his tragedy as a nuisance of some sorts. This sentiment is bookended when he says, "They say, *give us details*, so I give them my body. / They say, *give us proof*, so I give them my body," (Nguyen 25-26). The repetition of these two lines reinforces the feeling many feel in these scenarios, as they're often left to deal with trying to make people believe them, or to even *see* them.

It's important to recognize how the structure of this poem gives the speaker space to express the pain he's had to carry for so long. As a characteristic of free verse, the poem doesn't follow any structured rhyme scheme or meter; which in turn, allows him to not have any constraints in telling his story the way he wants to. The speaker has the freedom to display his experience in a way that evades predictability and engenders authenticity of a story very personal to him. As readers, we abandon anticipating the next rhyme, and instead focus our attention to the other ways, like his punctuation or word choice, in which he effectively tells his story. The speaker recognizes that some part of him no longer belongs to himself, but by writing "The Study," he shows other survivors that they're not alone and encourages hope that eventually, they will be freed from the shackles of sexual violence.

Works Cited

Nguyen, Hieu Minh. "The Study" *Poets.Org*. Academy of American Poets, Coffee House Press, 2018, https://poets.org/poem/study-0.

## Example 2: Fiction

Todd Goodwin

Professor Stan Matyshak

Advanced Expository Writing

Sept. 17, 20—

Poe's "Usher": A Mirror of the Fall of the House of Humanity

Right from the outset of the grim story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," Edgar Allan Poe enmeshes us in a dark, gloomy, hopeless world, alienating his characters and the reader from any sort of physical or psychological norm where such values as hope and happiness could possibly exist. He fatalistically tells the story of how a man (the narrator) comes from the outside world of hope, religion, and everyday society and tries to bring some kind of redeeming happiness to his boyhood friend, Roderick Usher, who not only has physically and psychologically wasted away but is entrapped in a dilapidated house of ever-looming terror with an emaciated and deranged twin sister. Roderick Usher embodies the wasting away of what once was vibrant and alive, and his house of "insufferable gloom" (273), which contains his morbid sister, seems to mirror or reflect this fear of death and annihilation that he most horribly endures. A close reading of the story reveals that Poe uses mirror images, or reflections, to contribute to the fatalistic theme of "Usher": each reflection serves to intensify an already prevalent tone of hopelessness, darkness, and fatalism.

It could be argued that the house of Roderick Usher is a "house of mirrors," whose unpleasant and grim reflections create a dark and hopeless setting. For example, the narrator first approaches "the melancholy house of Usher on a dark and soundless day," and finds a building which causes him a "sense of insufferable gloom," which "pervades his spirit and causes an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart, an undiscerned dreariness of thought" (273). The narrator then optimistically states: "I reflected that a mere different arrangement of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression" (274). But the narrator then sees the reflection of the house in the tarn and experiences a "shudder even more thrilling than before" (274). Thus the reader begins to realize that the narrator cannot change or stop the impending doom that will befall the house of Usher, and maybe humanity. The story cleverly plays with the word *reflection*: the narrator sees a physical reflection that leads him to a mental reflection about Usher's surroundings.

The narrator's disillusionment by such grim reflection continues in the story. For example, he describes Roderick Usher's face as distinct with signs of old strength but lost vigor: the remains of what used to be. He describes the house as a once happy and vibrant place, which, like Roderick, lost its vitality. Also, the narrator describes Usher's hair as growing wild on his rather obtrusive head, which directly mirrors the eerie moss and straw covering the outside of the house. The narrator continually longs to see these

bleak reflections as a dream, for he states: “Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building” (276). He does not want to face the reality that Usher and his home are doomed to fall, regardless of what he does.

Although there are almost countless examples of these mirror images, two others stand out as important. First, Roderick and his sister, Madeline, are twins. The narrator aptly states just as he and Roderick are entombing Madeline that there is “a striking similitude between brother and sister” (288). Indeed, they are mirror images of each other. Madeline is fading away psychologically and physically, and Roderick is not too far behind! The reflection of “doom” that these two share helps intensify and symbolize the hopelessness of the entire situation; thus, they further develop the fatalistic theme. Second, in the climactic scene where Madeline has been mistakenly entombed alive, there is a pairing of images and sounds as the narrator tries to calm Roderick by reading him a romance story. Events in the story simultaneously unfold with events of the sister escaping her tomb. In the story, the hero breaks out of the coffin. Then, in the story, the dragon’s shriek as he is slain parallels Madeline’s shriek. Finally, the story tells of the clangor of a shield, matched by the sister’s clanging along a metal passageway. As the suspense reaches its climax, Roderick shrieks his last words to his “friend,” the narrator: “Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door” (296).

Roderick, who slowly falls into insanity, ironically calls the narrator the “Madman.” We are left to reflect on what Poe means by this ironic twist. Poe’s bleak and dark imagery, and his use of mirror reflections, seem only to intensify the hopelessness of “Usher.” We can plausibly conclude that, indeed, the narrator is the “Madman,” for he comes from everyday society, which is a place where hope and faith exist. Poe would probably argue that such a place is opposite to the world of Usher because a world where death is inevitable could not possibly hold such positive values. Therefore, just as Roderick mirrors his sister, the reflection in the tarn mirrors the dilapidation of the house, and the story mirrors the final actions before the death of Usher. “The Fall of the House of Usher” reflects Poe’s view that humanity is hopelessly doomed.

Work Cited

Poe, Edgar Allan. “The Fall of the House of Usher.” 1839. *Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library*. 1995. Web. 1 July 2012. <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/PoeFall.html>.

## Example 3: Poetry

Amy Chisnell

Professor Laura Neary

Writing and Literature

April 17, 20—

Don’t Listen to the Egg!: A Close Reading of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky”

“You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir,” said Alice. “Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called ‘Jabberwocky’?”

“Let’s hear it,” said Humpty Dumpty. “I can explain all the poems that ever were invented—and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet.” (Carroll 164)

In Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, Humpty Dumpty confidently translates (to a not so confident Alice) the complicated language of the poem “Jabberwocky.” The words of the poem, though nonsense, aptly tell the story of the slaying of the Jabberwock. Upon finding “Jabberwocky” on a table in the looking-glass room, Alice is confused by the strange words. She is quite certain that “*somebody* killed *something*,” but she does not understand much more than that. When later she encounters Humpty Dumpty, she seizes the opportunity at having the knowledgeable egg interpret—or translate—the poem. Since Humpty Dumpty professes to be able to “make a word work” for him, he is quick to agree. Thus he acts like a New Critic who interprets the poem by performing a close reading of it. Through Humpty’s interpretation of the first stanza, however, we see the poem’s deeper comment concerning the practice of interpreting poetry and literature in general—that strict analytical translation destroys the beauty of a poem. In fact, Humpty Dumpty commits the “heresy of paraphrase,” for he fails to understand that meaning cannot be separated from the form or structure of the literary work.

Of the 71 words found in “Jabberwocky,” 43 have no known meaning. They are simply nonsense. Yet through this nonsensical language, the poem manages not only to tell a story but also gives the reader a sense of setting and characterization. One feels, rather than concretely knows, that the setting is dark, wooded, and frightening. The characters, such as the Jubjub bird, the Bandersnatch, and the doomed Jabberwock, also appear in the reader’s head, even though they will not be found in the local zoo. Even though most of the words are not real, the reader is able to understand what goes on because he or she is given free license to imagine what the words denote and connote. Simply, the poem’s nonsense words *are* the meaning.

Therefore, when Humpty interprets “Jabberwocky” for Alice, he is not doing her any favors, for he actually misreads the poem. Although the poem in its original is constructed from nonsense words, by the time Humpty is done interpreting it, it truly does not make any sense. The first stanza of the original poem is as follows:

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;

All mimsy were the borogroves,

An the mome raths outgrabe. (Carroll 164)

If we replace, however, the nonsense words of “Jabberwocky” with Humpty’s translated words, the effect would be something like this:

’Twas four o’clock in the afternoon, and the lithe and slimy badger-lizard-corkscrew creatures

Did go round and round and make holes in the grass-plot round the sun-dial:

All flimsy and miserable were the shabby-looking birds

with mop feathers,

And the lost green pigs bellowed-sneezed-whistled.

By translating the poem in such a way, Humpty removes the charm or essence—and the beauty, grace, and rhythm—from the poem. The poetry is sacrificed for meaning. Humpty Dumpty commits the heresy of paraphrase. As Cleanth Brooks argues, “The structure of a poem resembles that of a ballet or musical composition. It is a pattern of resolutions and balances and harmonizations” (203). When the poem is left as nonsense, the reader can easily imagine what a “slithy tove” might be, but when Humpty tells us what it is, he takes that imaginative license away from the reader. The beauty (if that is the proper word) of “Jabberwocky” is in *not* knowing what the words mean, and yet understanding. By translating the poem, Humpty takes that privilege from the reader. In addition, Humpty fails to recognize that meaning cannot be separated from the structure itself: the nonsense poem reflects this literally—it means “nothing” and achieves this meaning by using “nonsense” words.

Furthermore, the nonsense words Carroll chooses to use in “Jabberwocky” have a magical effect upon the reader; the shadowy sound of the words create the atmosphere, which may be described as a trance-like mood. When Alice first reads the poem, she says it seems to fill her head “with ideas.” The strange-sounding words in the original poem *do* give one ideas. Why is this? Even though the reader has never heard these words before, he or she is instantly aware of the murky, mysterious mood they set. In other words, diction operates not on the denotative level (the dictionary meaning) but on the connotative level (the emotion(s) they evoke). Thus “Jabberwocky” creates a shadowy mood, and the nonsense words are instrumental in creating this mood. Carroll could not have simply used *any* nonsense words.

For example, let us change the “dark,” “ominous” words of the first stanza to “lighter,” more “comic” words:

’Twas mearly, and the churly pells

Did bimble and ringle in the tink;

All timpy were the brimbledimps,

And the bip plips outlink.

Shifting the sounds of the words from dark to light merely takes a shift in thought. To create a specific mood using nonsense words, one must create new words from old words that convey the desired mood. In “Jabberwocky,” Carroll mixes “slimy,” a grim idea, “lithe,” a pliable image, to get a new adjective: “slithy” (a portmanteau word). In this translation, brighter words were used to get a

lighter effect. “Mearly” is a combination of “morning” and “early,” and “ringle” is a blend of “ring” and "dingle." The point is that “Jabberwocky’s” nonsense words are created specifically to convey this shadowy or mysterious mood and are integral to the “meaning.”

Consequently, Humpty’s rendering of the poem leaves the reader with a completely different feeling than does the original poem, which provided us with a sense of ethereal mystery, of a dark and foreign land with exotic creatures and fantastic settings. The mysteriousness is destroyed by Humpty’s literal paraphrase of the creatures and the setting; by doing so, he has taken the beauty away from the poem in his attempt to understand it. He has committed the heresy of paraphrase: “If we allow ourselves to be misled by it [this heresy], we distort the relation of the poem to its ‘truth’… we split the poem between its ‘form’ and its ‘content’” (Brooks 201). Humpty Dumpty’s ultimate demise might be seen to symbolize the heretical split between form and content: as a literary creation, Humpty Dumpty is an egg, a well-wrought urn of nonsense. His fall from the wall cracks him and separates the contents from the container, and not even all the King’s men can put the scrambled egg back together again!

Through the odd characters of a little girl and a foolish egg, “Jabberwocky” suggests a bit of sage advice about reading poetry, advice that the New Critics built their theories on. The importance lies not solely within strict analytical translation or interpretation, but in the overall effect of the imagery and word choice that evokes a meaning inseparable from those literary devices. As Archibald MacLeish so aptly writes: “A poem should not mean / But be.” Sometimes it takes a little nonsense to show us the sense in something.

Works Cited

Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. 1942. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1956. Print.

Carroll, Lewis. *Through the Looking-Glass. Alice in Wonderland*. 2nd ed. Ed. Donald J. Gray. New York: Norton, 1992. Print.

MacLeish, Archibald. “Ars Poetica.” *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*. Ed. David Lehman. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. 385–86. Print.

## Example 4: Poetry

Firstname Lastname

Instructor Heather Ringo

English 2

21 March 2019

"golden daffodils" as Economics of Personification in Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud"

A **lyric poem** about an isolated **speaker** wandering lonely among flowers starts out sad but becomes joyful by the end. The **title** of this poem by William Wordsworth immediately gave me the sense it would be a sad poem since it included the word “lonely.” This word usually has negative connotations. The first two **lines** of the **stanza** confirmed my initial impressions in that it used **imagery** of a cloud floating “high” over an empty landscape (1-2). The **tone** is sad and moody. However, this loneliness is disrupted when the cloudlike **speaker** is joined by his new friends: **personified** daffodils (4). In this essay, I argue that through wealth **metaphor** and **anthropomorphism**, **the speaker** rejects the money economy to embrace an economy of plants, where daffodils are valuable friends in an otherwise lonely landscape.

Some might say describing flowers with human anatomy is creepy. The idea of flowers “tossing their heads” seems like a nightmare or bad drug trip at first (12). But on closer inspection, it's not just the daffodils. The entire landscape is alive. There is apparently a dance-off going on between the lake waves and the flowers (14). What started off as a lonely poem quickly grew into a kind of party. Through transforming what seems at first like an empty landscape into one that is populated, the narrator presents an unconventional approach to loneliness, where perhaps companionship includes nonhuman beings.

While being lonely often has negative **connotations,** there is a lot of **diction** choices that make it seem as if loneliness is valued by the speaker. The reason I say that is because the daffodils aren’t just **personified,** but they are also described as “golden” (4). They could have been described as yellow, lemon-colored, any number of **adjectives**. The association with a valuable metal seems

intentional, especially considering the speaker describes the “show” of the daffodil dance as “wealth” near the end of the poem (18). Most people would not immediately associate loneliness or common flowers with wealth.

Perhaps the true value of the daffodils is indicated in this final **stanza** emphasizing the value of daffodils in memory. Here the moment of observing the dancing daffodils again seems to be represented as a renewable gift that nature gave to the **speaker.** The **speaker sits** at home alone on his couch in a “pensive mood” (20). According to Webster's dictionary, "pensive" means a thoughtful state, with negative connotations of “thoughtful sadness” (“Pensive”). So the speaker is afflicted with sadness, and then the memory of the daffodils acts as a kind of cure, so the speaker’s “heart with pleasure fills” (23). While traditional gifts can be exhausted or used up, this source is renewable: he can think of the daffodils again and again to refill any emptiness he may feel. His heart functions as a kind of bank or wallet. This emptiness of his thoughts filled by the golden daffodil memory mirrors the original empty, lonely landscape at the beginning of the poem which was then populated by the daffodils.

Looking back, the poem tells a story about finding value in surprising **settings.** It might even be described as having a **plot l**ike a work of short fiction, perhaps classifying it as **narrative poetry**. While the “lonely” beginning of the poem and the “pensive” mood indicate loneliness as negative, the speaker in the poem traces a journey where he finds “the bliss of solitude” (22). This phrase is somewhat of an **oxymoron**: bliss and solitude are not usually used together. Many find that walks in nature help them feel better. Perhaps the speaker of the poem is speaking to a universal truth about the value of nature? Or about how we aren’t really ever alone? Or that maybe we should reconsider what we truly value, and what nature is worth? Certainly the poem makes an argument for relationship with the nonhuman world.

Through transforming daffodils into golden companions, and turning loneliness into blissful solitude, the poem exchanges one economy for another. The speaker gains a hoard of memories that they are able to look back upon and reconsider. This form of wealth is renewable. Perhaps this exploration of the botanical economy and its revaluation of loneliness can be applied to Wordsworth's other poems.

Works Cited

“Pensive.” *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster Inc., https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pensive Accessed 31 December 2019.

Wordsworth, William. *“I wandered lonely as a cloud.” 1807. Poetry Foundation.* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45521/i-wandered-lonely-as-a-cloud Accessed 21 October 2019.

## Attribution

- Sample Essay 1 received permission from Victoria Morillo to publish, licensed Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)
- Sample Essays 2 and 3 adapted from Cordell, Ryan and John Pennington. "2.5: Student Sample Papers" from *Creating Literary Analysis.* 2012. Licensed Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0)

---

This page titled 7.11: Sample Student Literary Analysis Essays is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.14: Sample Student Literary Analysis Essays** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 7.12: Essays on Comparing and Contrasting Literature

## Compare and Contrast Essay Basics

The Compare and Contrast Essay is a literary analysis essay, but, instead of examining one work, it examines two or more works. These works must be united by a common theme or thesis statement. For example, while a literary analysis essay might explore the significance of ghosts in William Shakespeare's Hamlet, a compare/contrast essay might explore the significance of the supernatural in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

### Literary Analysis Thesis Statement:

While Horatio seems to think the ghost of Old Hamlet is a demon trying to lead Hamlet to death, and Gertrude and Claudius think it is a figment of Hamlet's insanity, Hamlet's status as an unreliable narrator and the ghost actually symbolizes the oppression of Catholics during Shakespeare's time period.

### Compare and Contrast Thesis Statement:

The unreliable narrators paired with the ghosts in both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* symbolize the oppression of Catholics in Shakespeare's time period.

### Essay Genre Expectations

- **Tone:** formal, scholarly
  - Use first-person pronouns sparingly (you, me, we, our)
  - Avoid colloquialisms
  - Spell out contractions
  - Use subject-specific terminology, such as naming literary devices
- **Texts:** two or more
- **Avoid summary.** Aim for analysis and interpretation
- **MLA formatting and citations**

## Organization

While the literary analysis essay follows a fairly simple argumentative essay structure, the compare and contrast essay is slightly more complicated. It might be arranged by:

- Literary Work
- Alternating literary works
- Topic/subtopics

In general, ensure each paragraph works to support the thesis statement, and that both works receive equal attention.

### One Option for Organization

1. Introduction
   1. Background of topic
   2. Background of works related to topic
   3. Thesis Statement
2. Body paragraph 1
   1. Topic sentence
   2. Summary of Text 1
   3. Summary of Text 2
   4. Explanation of unifying theme for both texts
3. Body paragraphs
   1. Topic sentence
   2. Introduction of evidence
   3. Evidence
   4. Explanation of evidence
   5. Analysis of evidence
4. Conclusion
   1. Restatement of thesis in new words
   2. Summary of essay arguments
   3. Take-away

---

This page titled 7.12: Essays on Comparing and Contrasting Literature is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.11: Essay Type - Comparing and Contrasting Literature** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 7.13: Writing About Drama

## HOW TO REVIEW A PLAY

### PREPARING TO WRITE A PLAY REVIEW

Below are some tips to help you prepare to write a play review:

### THE NATURE OF THE ASSIGNMENT

Because the performance of any play is such an ephemeral experience, writing a play review can be an exciting, though difficult, task. You have to be both spectator taking in and enjoying the performance and critical analyst of the production itself. You have to be able to provide a very brief summary of the play, a close objective analysis of the performance you attend, and an interpretation and evaluation of the entire ensemble of staging, acting, directing, and so on.

The review assignment asks you to analyze in an objective manner the relative success or failure of a given production. Note that you are not asked simply to summarize the plot or give an opinion regarding the text of the play being mounted; your review must be grounded in the production itself. Your job is to describe the production accurately, and then to render a value judgment of it based upon what you have seen and what you expected. The assignment will test your skill as a reader of the play and as an observer and critic of the production.

In addition to grounding your review on the production you witness, you must be careful to limit your review to a few essential observations in support of your thesis (which will be discussed below). You must concentrate on a few important ideas and aspects of the production and focus your attention on only what you consider the most significant parts of the production itself. Unlike a newspaper review, which can be loosely structured and superficial, your assignment is quite definite. You are not asked to cover a wide variety of production elements (i.e. performance of every actor, every costume change, every set change, every directorial decision, and so on); instead, the assignment demands that you develop a few key ideas in thoughtful detail.

Remember, too, that your stance is to be objective and critical, not impressionistic and merely nasty. A critic is not someone who simply “criticizes,” but a person who studies, analyzes, and then renders a rational judgment of what he/she has seen. Your tone will be very important in making your review reliable and intelligent.

### BEFORE YOU ATTEND THE PRODUCTION

Read the play before going to the production. (It is important to be prepared for the production you plan to attend; otherwise, you run the risk of having to see it several times.)

- In your mind, have a good sense of how a “standard” production might look, complete with a sense of what the characters might look like, the type of costuming that might be used, a suitable set design, and an appropriate rendering of the theme and tone of the work.
- Pick out, as you read, several critical or problematic points within the play that may be of particular interest to watch for in the production you are about to attend. If your instructor has asked you to pay particular attention to certain elements, make sure that you are prepared to recognize them in performance.

### ATTENDING THE PRODUCTION

**Attend** the play with an open mind, a willingness to accept the play as the director has presented it in production.

- Note any deviations from your concept of a “standard” production and try to find a good explanation for that deviation. (Is the director trying to “say” something new or different? Was your sense of the play somehow inaccurate, or were you shown new insights by the director’s production?)
- You may want to consider some of the following:
  - Why the choice of costumes, and why the set design?
  - How did the actors deliver their lines (seriously, comically, realistically, formally)? Were there any significant actions or gestures that contributed to the play’s meaning?
  - Were any “special effects” utilized (consider lighting, sound, audience participation, machinery)?
  - Were any significant cuts made in the script?

After the performance, jot down the details you recall and talk about the performance with friends. You'll need these details for your paper in order to substantiate your argument.

**Evaluate** the performance.

- Did the director miss any important opportunities to convey something you were able to see in your reading of the play?
- Would you have liked to have seen more attention paid to what you perceived as critical passages, passages the director seemed less interested in?
- Why would you have preferred this attention, and why do you think the director avoided giving the passage such attention?

**Consider** the following practical aspects:

- What kind of stage does the director have at his disposal? What kinds of restrictions does the stage impose on the director concerning movement and set design?
- Are the actors professionals, amateurs, or students? What restrictions does this impose on the director? Are the actors capable of dealing with the script's requirements? (Be fair to the actors in your assessment of their talents and the level of their "craftsmanship.")

## WRITING THE REVIEW

Below are some tips for writing play reviews:

## WRITING THE INTRODUCTION

The introduction should include the following:

- The title of the play, the name of the playwright, and any pertinent historical information regarding them (other similar works from this period? by this writer?).
- The name of the director, the place and date of the production you attended, and the name of the production company (again, do you know of any previous work by this company? this director?).
- The thesis of your review, which should include (possibly in more than a single statement) the following:
  - A general impression of the relative success or failure of the production, based on what you actually saw and on your initial impression of how the play should have been performed.
    - (Note that even if the production did not exactly coincide with your own conception of the play, you should not feel obliged to condemn the performance outright. Be open-minded and willing to weigh pros and cons.)
  - Examples: Papp's production of Lear captured all the horror of a world where love can't be counted on and where life is nasty, brutish, and appallingly short.
    - (Note that this thesis asserts that Papp captured the essence of what is in the text itself — the expectations set up by the thesis are that the reviewer will then analyze the methods by which the director achieved this effect.)
  - Examples: Smith's You Can't Take It With You made me sympathize with the notion that freedom must permit eccentricity and even, to a point, endorse it. Without that sympathy, the play would have been reduced to pure chaos and would have failed to portray an American ideal of freedom.
    - (This thesis suggests that "sympathy" was the director's intention. Note also that the reviewer gives a strong indication of what he/she expected to find in the production.)
  - Since you will not be expected to discuss all aspects of the production, focus your thesis on one or two major concerns that the performance has or has not addressed. Read your assignment carefully to find out which aspects of the performance are to be emphasized in your review.
    - Example: In You Can't Take It With You, the acting by the family members on the open, exposed stage displayed an innocent and vigorous freedom, as well as a proud independence in their confrontation with accepted norms of behavior.

## WRITING THE STATEMENT AND SUMMARY

Include a brief thematic summary (but not a plot summary) of the play, and support that summary with concrete evidence from the text.

You can include this summary in the introduction; or, if you wish to expand the summary, include it in a separate paragraph following the introduction.

## WRITING THE BODY OF THE PAPER: THE REVIEW

Remember that in the body of the paper you are obliged to deal specifically with each element of the production that you mentioned in the introduction and thesis.

In order to give your review a tight internal logic and cohesiveness, you should also discuss these elements in the order that you outlined in the introduction. Such points of discussion might include the non-technical (acting, directing) and/or the technical (lighting, scenery, costumes) aspects of the production.

For each element that you discuss:

- **Describe:** In as brief and precise a manner as possible, describe in detail the physical aspects of what you saw performed. Keep in mind at all times that whatever you include must in some way contribute to the assertion you made in your introduction and thesis. Focus on particular scenes or performances that will provide the evidence for your final evaluation of the play.
  - Example: The tempest scene in Lear utilized a particularly hostile set in order to universalize the suffering depicted throughout the play. The lights were dimmed and the backdrop was flat black. Against this backdrop were propped, in no particular order, seven skulls that looked out over the events to come.
    - (Note the vivid description of what was seen, and the use of detail to convey that vividness. The passage will work nicely as evidence for an overall, positive evaluation of the production.)
- **Interpret, Analyze, Evaluate**: This part of the paper requires the most thought and organization and consequently receives the most attention from your reader. After you have finished describing important elements of the production, proceed to evaluate them.

For example, you would need to answer the following questions regarding the last description of *Lear*:

- Why were the lights dimmed at the beginning of the scene? (shock effect? slow unfolding of horror?)
- Why was the backdrop painted black? (contrast? mood?)
- Why was there no order to the skulls? Why seven? (emblem of disorder or chaos? significance in number?)

In other words, assume that everything used in production has significance, but don't panic if you cannot find "answers" for all the questions raised by what you see in the production.

In the evaluation, you are given the opportunity to attack as well as commend the performance; if the production fails to answer questions that you feel need answers, then say so. If the question or problems are relatively minor, ignore them. Don't quibble at the expense of missing the more important concerns.

## WRITING THE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Your conclusion should not merely recapitulate your thesis in a mechanical way.

Rather, you should try to show why your response to the play is valid and significant, based on what you have described in the body of the paper.

Do not add any significant new material, but don't be afraid to leave your reader with something to think about.




This page titled 7.13: Writing About Drama is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.19: Writing About Drama** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 7.14: Literary Research Essays

## The Research Essay

The research essay is basically a literary analysis essay supported by research. Usually, this research takes the form of literary criticism. For more on literary criticism, check out the literary criticism chapter.

### Finding a Topic

Often times, instructors will assign a research topic. Be sure to consult with your instructor and/or the assignment prompt given by the instructor. If, however, the assignment is open-ended, then that is exciting news! You can write an essay about your interests in literature. It is like an adventure! However, too much choice can be debilitating. You want an essay that is large enough in scope that you can write an entire essay about it, but you don't want too large of a topic as you may not be able to feasibly cover it in the short amount of time you have. Therefore, a good way to find a "Goldilocks" topic—not too big and not too small—is to start with a simple formula and adjust as you go.

1. Find the literary text you want to write about. For example, "Bajadas" by Francisco Cantu or *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare.
2. Find an aspect or angle about that text which interests you. For example, when writing about "Bajadas," you might want to write about the ecology of the border desert, the use of animal symbolism, or the history of border politics and how it may have informed the story. When writing about *Hamlet*, you might be interested in the way female characters like Ophelia and Gertrude are treated, about the symbolism behind Ophelia's flowers, or about espionage on the part of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

**Finding a topic formula**

Topic = angle + text

**Example:**

Topic = Espionage + *Hamlet*

Working thesis statement: In this essay, I will be exploring espionage in *Hamlet*

### Brainstorming

Once you come up with a topic, start brainstorming. Yes, brainstorm before you perform research. The reason for this is because your instructor is interested in your original ideas about the text, not the ideas of scholars. **Secondary sources should only be used to support your own original ideas.** If you start with research, it is much more difficult to come up with your own ideas, because all of your ideas are going to sound a lot like the articles you read. So start with your initial impressions of your topic.

### Brainstorming Example:

Espionage in Hamlet is interesting to me because it seems like everyone in Elsinore is spying on each other. For example, Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Ophelia to spy on Hamlet. Polonius dies because he is spying on Hamlet. In turn, Hamlet spies on Claudius during the play within the play. Spying seems to play a huge part in the play, and I wonder why. Was there espionage in Shakespeare's London? Might it have influenced or inspired his writing?

### Outlining

Once you get some of your basic ideas down, you might start outlining the "big ideas" of your essay. This will help when it comes to writing the essay and organizing your ideas. It will also help you when it comes time to research.

### Outlining Example

1. Background of espionage in Hamlet
2. Espionage in Shakespeare's Time
3. Analysis of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Spying scene
4. Analysis of Ophelia spying scene
5. Analysis of Polonius spying scene
6. Analysis of Claudius/Hamlet spying scene
7. Analysis of Hamlet conducting counter-espionage against Claudius
8. How might these scenes have been influenced by espionage in Shakespeare's time?
9. Conclusion

### Writing

Before you begin researching, write what you can on your own. For example, write a literary analysis essay where you simply examine and analyze the literature without input from outside sources. This will allow you to solidify your ideas. It will also make it easier to find search terms when you are ready to research.

### Researching

Once you have a solid topic and writing, it's time to research your essay topic. Starting with some questions about your topic is a great way to start. See the chapter on navigating scholarly sources for a more detailed look at how to find research material.

## Annotated Bibliography

As you read, keep track of your sources using an Annotated Bibliography or Research Log. Basically, an Annotated Bibliography is just like a regular Works Cited page, except every source is summarized after the bibliographical entry. Because you will be reading a lot of different sources, some 20+ pages in length, it can be difficult to keep track of the ideas of each source. An Annotated Bibliography is a tool to help you keep track of your research. This also can help you avoid plagiarism! When taking notes on your sources, be sure to clearly mark summary, paraphrase, and quotation so that you ethically attribute words and ideas to their author.

## Annotated Bibliography Example

Lastname 1

Student first name Last name

Professor Soandso

English 2

30 March 2019

Annotated Bibliography: Espionage in Hamlet

**Working title:** Elizabethan Spy Culture Reflected in Hamlet

**Working thesis**: for this essay I will explore how Elizabethan spy culture might have influenced Hamlet. For example, I will look at how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are used to spy on Hamlet, and how it seems like everyone is watching everyone in Elsinore: perhaps Claudius is a stand-in for the English monarchy, a critique of its corruption?

Honan, Park. *Christopher Marlowe: Poet & Spy.* OUP Oxford, 2005. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.solano.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.as...&site=eds-live.

Christopher Marlowe was a contemporary of Shakespeare. He was also his competitor as a fellow playwright and poet. This text is a scholarly biography of Marlowe's life as a spy and poet. This source gives a picture of the cultural context of Shakespeare: of particular relevance to my research is the chapter describing Marlowe and Shakespeare's relationship (187-196). Though this gives interesting background information, it might solely be useful to note that Shakespeare regularly rubbed elbows with a spy, Marlowe, so he was at least somewhat familiar with Elizabethan spy culture, though how much he knew is a mystery. Otherwise, this text may not be very useful because it only briefly mentions Shakespeare.

## Sample Student Research Essay

Text: "The Hunting of the Hare" by Margaret Cavendish

Topic: Symbol & Theme: Humanity's Attraction to Destruction and Violence

Rebekah's research essay on Margaret Cavendish's poem "The Hunting of the Hare" illustrates several of the principles discussed in this chapter:

- How to integrate scholarly secondary sources without relinquishing control of the argument
- How to make it clear whose ideas are whose through use of tag words and phrases
- How to employ parenthetical in-text citations according to MLA guidelines
- How to construct a Works Cited page according to MLA guidelines

The parts where the author engages with scholarly criticism are **in bold.** Pay close attention to how and where student Rebekah Fish incorporates primary and secondary sources.

Rebekah Fish

English 3460

Human Nature in Margaret Cavendish's "The Hunting of the Hare"

Margaret Cavendish's 1653 poem "The Hunting of the Hare" relates the cruel fate of a hare that has fallen prey to a group of hunters. A study of this poem suggests that Cavendish can be viewed as one of the first supporters for animal rights as she criticizes the cruelty of men who kill animals for sport. On a more personal level, Cavendish could have closely identified with the hare, which is ostensibly humanlike, and also with its fear. She might have even intended to parallel her critics to the dogs and the hunters within the poem. On a grander scale, Cavendish might be making the critical judgment that humankind seeks enjoyment through violent competition with others. Through a study of the many different thematic levels of the poem, Margaret Cavendish's "The Hunting of the Hare" seems to have an overarching theme of humanity's destructive attraction to violence in order to achieve supremacy.

It is evident through the poet's portrayal of the hare that it is meant to be seen as a significant and even a symbolic figure, beginning in the first line of the poem where the hare is granted the name "Wat." He is humanlike, "glaring" across the landscape as his "Haires blew up behind" him in the wind instead of his fur (4 and 6). The hare is also described as "wise" instead of merely being a sentient creature, and Cavendish makes its humanlike features even more evident as the hare "walks about" rather than hopping or crawling (Cavendish 7 and 11). Another way the rabbit is seemingly anthropomorphized is through the continual use of the personal pronoun "him" in the poem, which is used instead of "it." To indicate her disapproval

of the unethical treatment of all animals, near the very end of the poem Cavendish grants all creatures the same humanlike quality as the hare by saying that creatures are being "murdered" (100) by men instead of "killed." The word "murder" connotes unlawfulness and makes a connection between that illicitness and the killing of animals, indicating that all sentient life, that of humans and animals, is important and worthy of being preserved. Some may even argue that Cavendish was trying to make a point that humankind should not express dominant authority over other creatures through the use of violence, because, within the last lines of the poem, man is portrayed not only as murderous but also as an oppressive tyrant that rules over all other living creatures.

Cavendish's humanlike portrayal of the hare might raise concerns for some readers. **Bruce Thomas Boehrer discusses some critics' objection to an author's anthropomorphizing nonhuman characters. To anthropomorphize is to project one's own tendencies and traits onto another species. Some critics argue that this act ignores a nonhuman species' real behaviors and traits and illustrates humans' feeling of dominance over nature. However, as Boehrer explains, many animal characters in literature "challenge the human-animal divide" (5) and force people to examine their values, especially those related to nature. Donna Landry supports the view that "The Hunting of the Hare" raises these issues. She argues that in Cavendish's work, she promotes the "democratizing of relations between humans and other species" (471). Rather than emphasizing the superiority of human emotions by anthropomorphizing the hare, Cavendish humanizes him in order to bridge the gap between the reader and the hare. Paul Salzman states that Cavendish's main goal as a writer was "to enter into an empathetic relationship with the world around her" (142). In "The Hunting of the Hare," Cavendish portrays the hare with empathy in order to persuade the reader that committing unnecessary violence on animals is cruel and terrible.**

In addition, the description of the hare is used to form and emphasize the strong connection between the hare and Cavendish, who was similarly being pursued by her critics as a female writer. **This criticism is clearly shown through the description of Cavendish by Mary Evelyn, who portrayed her as extravagant and vain and said that her discourse was "as airy, empty, whimsical, and rambling as her books" (Qtd. in Damrosch and Dettmar 2058-9).** Many people of Cavendish's time viewed her as outrageous, partly because publicly recognized women writers were rare during the seventeenth century. **Although scholars seriously study Cavendish's work now, Emma L.E. Rees says that because of the harsh critics of her time, "The impression which lasted for many years was of an eccentric, disturbed and arrogant woman" (11). "The Hunting of the Hare" could be interpreted as a response to this criticism.** Her critics, paralleled by both the "cruel dogs" (16) and the men in the poem, are often referred to as merciless. The critics are described as nosy through common references to the dogs and how they always "thrust [their] snuffling nose[s]" into things (64). They are also described as loudmouths through the image of dogs who cry out with their "wide mouths" (19). While at times, Cavendish seems to be uncaring as to what the critics say about her, at other times, she seems terrified of the public's opinion of her life and writing, much like the hare's terror of being pursued. She suggests that, in public, she hides her fear of the critics, similarly to the hare when, "Licking his feet, he wiped his ears so clean / That none could tell that Wat had hunted been" (41-2). Although critics continued to pursue her, Cavendish emphasizes through the poem that she will continue to maintain her composure until the very end, like the hare does until his death. Yet, this continual pursuing and killing of hares, which parallels Cavendish's experience, critiques human nature's desire for supremacy over all living things—even each other.

Not only can Cavendish's poem be seen as a response to animal cruelty and the cruelty of critics, but it can also be seen as an assessment of how humankind treats its brethren. In the poem, the men are portrayed as bloodthirsty monsters that thrive off cruelty to others. The men in Cavendish's poem, who "destroy those lives that God did make" (98) solely for "sport or recreation's sake" (97), seek to kill the rabbit, the symbol, through heavy personification, of a fellow human (Cavendish 2062).

Margaret Cavendish's "The Hunting of the Hare" is a comment on human nature and the desire for obtaining dominion over others by any means necessary. Through her extensive use of pathos throughout the poem, her audience at the time was meant to feel a sense of culpability and a desire to change. Despite her portrayal of human nature as inherently evil, the guilt the audience is supposed to feel offers a sense of hope, as it indicates that human nature is capable of being altered and even changed.

Works Cited

Boehrer, Bruce Thomas. Animal Characters: Nonhuman Beings in Early Modern Literature, U of Pennsylvania P, 2010.

Cavendish, Margaret. "The Hunting of the Hare." 1653. UC Press E-books Collection, publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=kt7q2nc9xn&chunk.

id=ss1.55&toc.depth=100&toc.id=ch09&brand=eschol. Accessed 3 October 2013.

Damrosch, David and Kevin J. H. Dettmar. “Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle.” The Longman Anthology: British Literature, edited by David Damrosch and Kevin J. H. Dettmar, Longman, 2010, pp. 2060-63.

Landry, Donna. “Green Languages? Women Poets as Naturalists in 1653 and 1807.” Huntington Library Quarterly, vol. 63, no.4, 2000, pp. 467-89. JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/3817613. Accessed 2 Oct. 2013.

Rees, Emma L.E. Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile. Manchester UP, 2003. EBSCOHost, libproxy. ung.edu/login?url=search.ebscohost.com/login. aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2004581244&site=e ds-live&scope=site. Accessed 8 Nov. 2013.

Salzman, Paul. Reading Early Modern Women’s Writing. Oxford UP, 2006.

## Contributors and Attributions

- Sample Student Essay reproduced from Writing and Literature: Composition as Inquiry, Learning, Thinking, and Communication by Tanya Long Bennett Professor (English) at University of North Georgia, Sourced from GALILEO Open Learning Materials, CC BY-SA

This page titled 7.14: Literary Research Essays is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.12: Essay Type - Literary Research** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 7.15: How to Perform Literary Research

## Finding Literary Criticism

Have you ever looked up the lyrics of a song you loved? Perhaps you went to Genius or azlyrics.com or another lyrics website. Perhaps you went on Reddit to see what other people have said about the meaning of the song lyrics. In each of these cases, you performed an informal version of literary research! That is, you tried to find out more about a work of literature (song lyrics) by researching what other listeners have said about the topic. When performing research for formal literature essays, the concept is the same, but there expectations are higher in the sense that you are tasked with finding what *experts* have said about a work of literature. In the field of literary studies, these experts are called **literary critics.** The articles they write are called **literary criticism.**

Finding Literary Criticism is similar to doing a Google search. The difference is that, instead of Google, you use your school's library databases specific to the study of literature. Just as you would not go to McDonald's to buy sushi, so too must you consider the places you go to find criticism specific to your research needs. To that end, there are several resources geared towards the study of literature where students can find literary criticism. Each database presents its own benefits and challenges.

### Physical Books



"Books and bookshelves" by Jorge Royan (2009) is licensed CC BY-SA 3.0

### Campus Library

If you are a student with access to a college campus library, ask the librarian for help finding literary criticism. Generally, college libraries will have access to these kinds of materials. If the material you are looking for is not available at your campus, your librarian may be able to request it through a process called Inter-library Loan (ILL). Talk to your librarian about your options. Be sure to block out enough time to access and read these articles, which often takes longer than students anticipate.

### City Library or Library for the General Public

While city libraries or libraries for the general public may not have as much literary criticism as a college library, they do usually have some of the more famous examples. For example, Harold Bloom's *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (2003) is available at most libraries. Again, librarians are your friends in the research process: ask your librarian for help finding materials to support your individual research needs. Increasingly, libraries have access to massive amounts of digital material even if they don't have physical copies.

### Online Databases



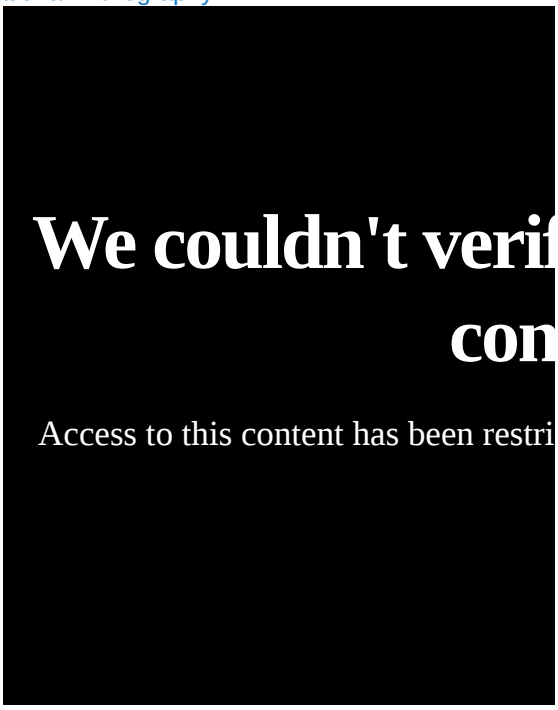

"JSTOR Icon" by Gwillhickers (2018) is licensed CC BY-SA 4.0

If your campus or local library subscribes to databases, the following databases are the most relevant to the study of literature.

### Literary Reference Center Plus

This database is probably the most easily accessible and user-friendly database for literary research. It contains primary sources (classic texts), and secondary sources (biographies and literary criticism). It is completely focused on literature, so this database means you do not have to worry about finding material from other disciplines. However, this database is also not as comprehensive as other databases.

### MLA International Bibliography




The MLA International Bibliography is an online database containing over 2.8 million articles in over 60 languages from all

over the world (MLA). New articles are added every year. This is probably the best place to find the most relevant and current literary criticism. Warning: be careful to avoid Book Reviews which are not considered literary criticism! If you have the ability to filter your search, click "Scholarly" or "Peer Reviewed" to increase likelihood you will find relevant articles.

### JSTOR

JSTOR is another large database but is less literature and language-specific as it also contains articles in subjects such as history and psychology. It can be an effective tool for finding older literary criticism and primary source documents. It also provides a free research course to aid students in using databases. However, watch out, because it is such a massive database it also contains a lot of book reviews (which are not literary criticism) and a lot of really, really old literary criticism that may no longer be relevant to the discipline.

### Oxford English Dictionary

This is the go-to dictionary for literary critics. It is better for the study of literature than Google or Merriam-Webster because it provides the historical context (etymology) of terms in addition to their current usage, an important consideration for older works such as *Hamlet*, where word meanings have changed significantly over time. When reading a work of literature, have the Oxford English Dictionary open in a separate window so that you can look up words as you read.

## General Tips for Using Databases

### On Navigating Databases

#### Search Terms

Before jumping into the databases, be sure to have, at least, a topic you are interested in researching. A topic should include a work of literature and an aspect of that work of literature. For example:

- Work of Literature: Hamlet
- Aspect: Prison/Incarceration

So my research topic might be: "Prison in Hamlet" or "Incarceration in Hamlet"

Once you have this main topic, brainstorm a list of search terms that might generate results. Because the searching mechanism is an algorithm, you may need to experiment with different search terms, as computers have a difficult time recognizing synonyms.

Example of Terms Related to Topic

- Hamlet prison
- Incarceration Hamlet
- Panopticon Hamlet
- Jail Hamlet
- All of Denmark is a prison
- Elsinore prison
- Elsinore incarceration
- Elsinore jail

Now that I have some search terms, I will try using them in each database.

After performing my searches, the following results popped up, each in a different database:

Ahnert, Ruth. “The Prison in Early Modern Drama.” *Literature Compass*, vol. 9, no. 1, Jan. 2012, pp. 34–47. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00860.x.

Hopkins, Lisa. “‘Denmark’s a Prison’: Hamlet and the Earl of Bothwell.” *Hamlet Studies: An International Journal of Research on The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*,

> vol. 19, no. 1–2, 1997, pp. 93–96. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cpid,uid&custid=s4302453&db=mlf&AN=1997065700&site=ehost-live.

Kozusko, Matt. “Monstrous!: Actors, Audiences, Inmates, and the Politics of Reading Shakespeare.” *Shakespeare Bulletin: A Journal of Performance Criticism and Scholarship*,

> vol. 28, no. 2, 2010, pp. 235–251. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cpid,uid&custid=s4302453&db=mlf&AN=2010582294&site=ehost-live.

Steggle, Matthew. “CRITICAL READINGS: What Kinds of Prison Are in Hamlet?” *Critical Insights: Hamlet*, Jan. 2019, pp. 134–148. *EBSCOhost*,

> search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=137041969&site=lrc-plus.

I can now begin to read my sources and learn more about my research topic.

### Research Log

While researching, you will likely encounter many, many, many different sources. Because there are so many sources, it is easy to lose track of them unless you organize your search process. Otherwise, at best, you might miss out on including a source that is helpful. At worst, you might unintentionally plagiarize and receive a 0 on the assignment.

Thus, to help combat the potential for disorganization during the research process, keep a research log. A research log—or, more formally, an Annotated Bibliography—is basically a document where you keep track of information, such as:

- Search terms used
- Databases explored
- Citations for articles/resources found
- Annotations of these sources

Keeping a research log may seem like extra work, but, in the long run, it is actually more efficient. It helps you keep track of the sources you have already explored so that you do not waste time re-reading articles and performing research steps you already completed. It also makes it easier to pull information when writing the essay and aids you in avoiding plagiarism. Depending on your class, you may be asked to perform a more formal research log called an **Annotated Bibliography.** More on that in the next section.

So what are you waiting for? Enjoy the process of research!

---

This page titled 7.15: How to Perform Literary Research is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **12.13: How to Perform Literary Research (Navigating Secondary Sources and Library Databases)** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

## 8: MLA Format and Citations


8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution

8.2: What is MLA?

8.3: Formatting a Literature Essay

8.4: MLA Works Cited Page

8.5: MLA In-Text Citations

8.6: Quotation, Paraphrase, and Summary


---


8: MLA Format and Citations is shared under a CC BY-NC license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

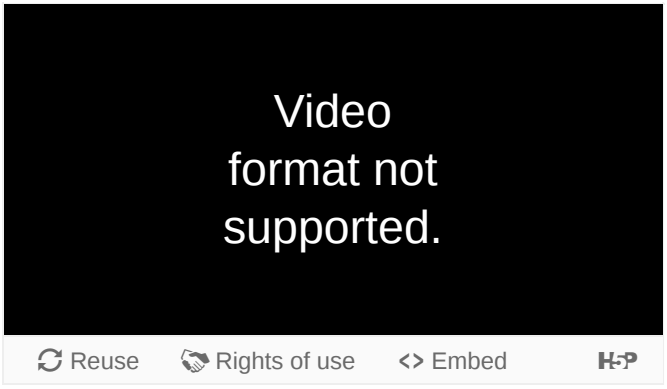
# 8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution

## What is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism is using another thinker's words or ideas without giving them credit. In most essays, this means you use someone else's words or ideas without citing them. Other examples of plagiarism include:

- Submitting an essay written by someone else, in whole or in part
- Copying and pasting from another source without citing them
- Attempting to cite sources, but doing so incorrectly or in a way where it is unclear which ideas came from your mind and which came from other sources
- Correctly citing all sources, but most of your essay is made up of the words and ideas of others with very little of your own original ideas
- Re-using an essay you wrote in a previous class without instructor permission

**Video: What is Plagiarism? by Excelsior OWL**




*Video Transcript*

## What are the Consequences of Plagiarism?

Most academics consider plagiarism a serious violation of academic honesty. Basically, by plagiarizing, you are betraying the trust of your instructor, peers, and institution. Consequences for plagiarism can include:

- Having to rewrite an assignment
- Receiving an F on the assignment
- Receiving an F in the class
- Being kicked out of the class
- Being kicked out of school
- Having a permanent mark on your transcript
- Being stripped of your degree
- Public admonishment
- Being sued for copyright infringement, which, in extreme cases, can cost millions of dollars (!!!). For example, Marvin Gaye's family was able to win over 5 million dollars when singers Pharrell Williams and Robin Thicke plagiarized one of Marvin Gaye's songs!

In most cases, copyright holders will not go after students because students tend not to have a lot of money laying around. That being said, plagiarism can still have serious consequences. Students should avoid plagiarism at all costs.

The consequences of plagiarism depend on many factors, including:

- The severity of the plagiarism
- Repeated plagiarism behavior
- Your instructor
- The course syllabus, which often describes the class policies and consequences for plagiarism
- Your college
- Your college's student handbook, which often describes the campus policies and consequences for plagiarism

Be sure to consult with your instructor and college about their policies on plagiarism.

## How Can Students Avoid Plagiarism?

There are many different tactics for avoiding plagiarism.

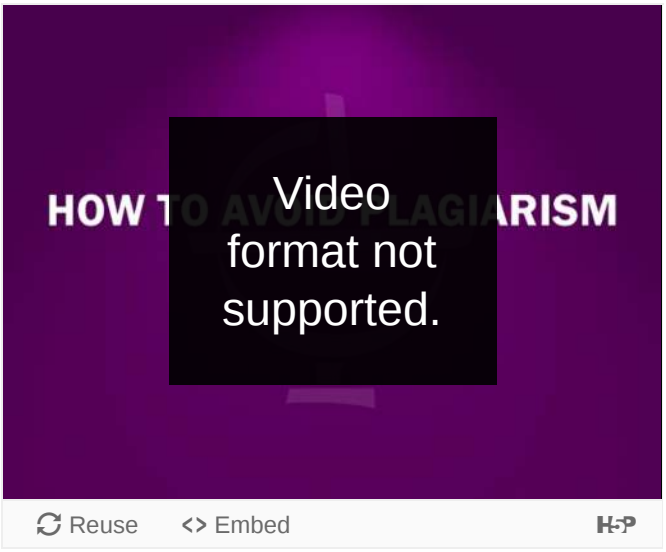
1. **Do your own work specifically for the class or context you're writing for.** Your instructor wants to read your ideas. They want to see you engaging with the course materials. The writing you produce for a given class should reflect your learning in that class.
2. **Ask for help and use your resources.** A lot of times students plagiarize because they are stressed/running short

on time/have a legitimate extenuating life circumstance that got in the way of their writing process/left an assignment to the last minute due to procrastination. They might plagiarize out of desperation. In situations like these, it is better to email your professor and explain the situation and/or ask for an extension than to plagiarize. If you're struggling on an assignment, visit your instructor's office hours or your campus writing center to get support.

3. **Use secondary sources to support your argument, not comprise it.** A lot of students new to a given writing context feel imposter syndrome. They do not feel confident in themselves or their knowledge, so they defer to experts like scholars who wrote on the topic. Unfortunately, this often means the student's smart ideas and writing voice can get smothered by secondary sources! Your instructor doesn't want to read what Famous Scholar X wrote on a topic. If they wanted to read that, they could go read that scholar's work themselves. Rather, they want to read how YOU engaged with the topic! While the expected ratio of your words to other sources will vary depending on the context of your writing situation, usually aim for 80-90% your original ideas, arguments, analysis, and explanation and 10-20% summary, quotation, and paraphrase from sources.
4. **Use Summary, Quotation, and Paraphrase with intention.** Summary generally works to show engagement with main ideas in a given discourse. Quotation is usually used to show specific wording or concepts for deeper analysis. Paraphrase works to convey basic facts or data that you put into your own words. For all three types of engagement with secondary sources, be sure to include in-text citations! It should always be clear which ideas are yours and which belong to your sources.
    1. See Summary, Quotation, and Paraphrase resource for more on this topic!
5. **Practice Ethical Attribution** by citing all sources both in-text AND on the Works Cited page
    1. **Caveat:** You don't have to cite common knowledge. Common knowledge is usually comprised of obvious or general information that your audience is likely to know already. For example, you probably wouldn't need to cite that the President of the United States is Joe Biden [or whoever the current President is as you are reading this], since most people in your audience (depending on the context) probably know this information. But you would likely have to cite statistics about his approval rating, since most of your audience probably doesn't know this information off the top of their heads. What an audience knows or doesn't know depends on the audience and context, so you'll have to think critically about your audience.

## How to Avoid Plagiarism

*Video by Excelsior OWL*




*Video Transcript*

## What is Ethical Attribution?

Ethical attribution is giving credit to those whose words and ideas you use in your essays. In most MLA-style essays, ethical attribution has three parts: attributive tags, in-text parenthetical citations, and a Works Cited page to give credit. (In other disciplines' citations and formatting styles, the Works Cited page might be called a References page or Bibliography).

### Attributive Tags

**Attributive Tags** signal to the reader that material from a source is about to appear in the essay.

Example: According to literary critic Harold Bloom....

### In-Text Citations

In-Text Parenthetical Citations tell the reader that the words or ideas from the source have ended. It also tells the reader where to find the original source information on the Works Cited page so they can see the original source themselves

Example: According to the literary critic Harold Bloom, "we are certain from the start that he is indeed King Hamlet's spirit," and not a demon as Horatio seems to suggest (Bloom 4).

### Works Cited page

The Works Cited page gives more in-depth bibliographical information so that readers can find the original source. It appears at the end of the essay, on the last page. It should include all sources referenced in the essay.

Example:

Works Cited

Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited.* New York: Riverhead, 2003.

## Why Use Ethical Attribution?

There are several reasons to use ethical attribution

- **Builds Ethos.** By citing sources, you build credibility and trust with your audience. Readers are able to find the sources you cite. You also improve your essay's scholarly tone by using the formal conventions used by literary scholars, which include in-text and Works Cited citations.
- **Helps You Refine Your Own Ideas.** By clearly defining which ideas are your original ideas and which belong to other authors, you are better able to refine your ideas.
- **Helps You Avoid Plagiarism.** By citing sources correctly, you avoid plagiarism and its consequences.

## Activity: Check Your Understanding of Plagiarism

Quiz from *Excelsior OWL*

## Attribution

- Videos and Quizzes from adapted "Types of Plagiarism," "How to Avoid Plagiarism" and "Check Your Understanding of Plagiarism" from Excelsior Online Writing Lab (OWL). Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-4.0 International License.

This page titled 8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **13.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 8.2: What is MLA?

## Formatting and Citation Conventions for Literature Essays

Every academic discipline abides by a certain set of norms for essay format and citation. Why are there such norms for writing? It might help to think of formatting and citation guides like work uniforms. Just like a member of the United States Marine Corps, a McDonald's Employee, or a Cheerleading Team might wear a uniform to convey a belonging to a professional group, so too do formatting and citation guidelines help writers convey their belonging in a given discipline. But the purpose is not simply aesthetic: using the appropriate citation and formatting style ensures that other writers and readers in your field will better understand your message, make finding and keeping track of sources more efficient, and your essay will appear more polished and professional. Along these lines, each discipline or profession abides by its own expectations for formatting and citations.

### Citation Styles and Academic Disciplines

| Discipline | Formatting & Style Guide |
|---|---|
| Science | APA (American Psychological Association) |
| History, Law | Chicago / Turabian |
| Humanities | MLA (Modern Language Association) |
| Journalism | AP (Associated Press) |
| Medicine | AMA (American Medical Association) |

Since Literature falls under the Humanities umbrella, when writing about literature, scholars usually abide by the MLA (Modern Language Association) guidelines. The Modern Language Association was founded in 1883 "to strengthen the study and teaching of languages and literatures" ("About The MLA"). It is an international professional organization with over 25,000 members and it produces some of the most cutting-edge scholarship in the Humanities ("About the MLA"). They also publish the MLA Style Guide to help writers of all skill levels produce high-quality writing.

This page titled 8.2: What is MLA? is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **13.2: What is MLA?** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 8.3: Formatting a Literature Essay

## Formatting Your Essay

The first step towards starting your essay, or putting on the finishing touch, is formatting. This helps give your essay a professional appearance. It also serves a practical purpose: instructors are better able to keep track of student essays with clear identifying information.

There are several ways to achieve the MLA essay format.

1. The simplest way is to use an MLA template provided by your Word processor. For example, Google docs, Pages, and Microsoft Word all have preset templates for MLA Essays. Use the search bar in the program to find "MLA" templates.
2. If your Word processor does not have an MLA template, or the MLA template is out of date, or you already wrote your essay, use the following parameters to manually format your essay.

### Formatting Requirements

- 8 1/2 x 11" white paper (standard printer paper)
- 1-inch margins (most word processors do this automatically)
- 12 font Times New Roman (or any legible font -- no comic sans or symbols!)
- Left-aligned header including, on four separate lines, your
  - First name and last name
  - Professor name (i.e. Professor Juanita Robledo)
  - Class name (i.e. ENGL 1)
  - Date of writing (i.e. 22 September 2019)
  - Centered title

### Formatting Your Essay Slideshow

## MLA Essay Formatting Template

Studentfirstname Studentlastname

Professor Firstname Lastname

Class Title (i.e. English 110)

Day Month Year

Title of Essay

This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the

essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.This is the body of the essay.

Works Cited

Authorlastname, Firstname. "Title of Poem or Short Work." *Container Title.* Date published.

Authorlastname, Firstname. *Book Title. C*ity of publication: Publisher, Date published.

## Sample MLA Formatted Essay

Goodwin 1

Todd Goodwin

Professor Stan Matyshak

English 110

17 September 2019

Poe's "Usher": A Mirror of the Fall of the House of Humanity

Right from the outset of the grim story "The Fall of the House of Usher," Edgar Allan Poe enmeshes us in a dark, gloomy, hopeless world, alienating his characters and the reader from any sort of physical or psychological norm where such values as hope and happiness could possibly exist. He fatalistically tells the story of how a man (the narrator) comes from the outside world of hope, religion, and everyday society and tries to bring some kind of redeeming happiness to his boyhood friend, Roderick Usher, who not only has physically and psychologically wasted away, but is entrapped in a dilapidated house of ever-looming terror with an emaciated and deranged twin sister. Roderick Usher embodies the wasting away of what once was vibrant and alive, and his house of "insufferable gloom" (273), which contains his morbid sister, seems to mirror or reflect this fear of death and annihilation that he most horribly endures. A close reading of the story reveals that Poe uses mirror images, or reflections, to contribute to the fatalistic theme of "Usher": each reflection serves to intensify an already prevalent tone of hopelessness, darkness, and fatalism. It could be argued that the house of Roderick Usher is a "house of mirrors," whose unpleasant and grim reflections create a dark and hopeless setting. For example, the narrator first approaches "the melancholy house of Usher on a dark and soundless day," and finds a building which causes him a "sense of insufferable gloom" which "pervades his spirit and causes an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart, an undiscerned dreariness of thought" (273). The narrator then optimistically states: "I reflected that a mere different arrangement of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression" (274). But the narrator then sees the reflection of the house in the tarn and experiences a "shudder even more thrilling than before" (274). Thus the reader begins to realize that the narrator cannot change or stop the impending doom that will befall the house of Usher, and maybe humanity. The story cleverly plays with the word *reflection*: the narrator sees a physical reflection that leads him to a mental reflection about Usher's surroundings.

The narrator's disillusionment by such grim reflection continues in the story. For example, he describes Roderick Usher's face as distinct with signs of old strength but lost vigor: the remains of what used to be. He describes the house as a once happy and vibrant place which, like Roderick, lost its vitality. Also, the narrator describes Usher's hair as growing wild on his rather obtrusive head, which directly mirrors the eerie moss and straw which cover the outside of the house. The narrator continually longs to see these bleak reflections as a dream, for he states: "Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building" (276, emphasis in original). He does not want to face the reality that Usher and his home are doomed to fall, regardless of what he does.

Although there are almost countless examples of these mirror images, two others stand out as important. First, Roderick and his sister, Madeline, are twins. The narrator aptly states just as he and Roderick are entombing Madeline that there is "a striking similitude between brother and sister" (288). Indeed, they are mirror images of each other. Madeline is fading away psychologically and physically, and Roderick is not too far behind! The reflection of "doom" that these two share helps intensify and symbolize the hopelessness of the entire situation; thus, they further develop the fatalistic theme. Second, in the climactic scene where Madeline has been mistakenly entombed alive, there is a pairing of images and sounds as the narrator tries to calm Roderick by reading him a romance story. Events in the story simultaneously unfold with events of the sister escaping her tomb. In the story, the hero breaks out of the coffin. Then in the story, the dragon's shriek as he is slain parallels Madeline's shriek. Finally, the story tells of the clangor of a shield, matched by the sister's clanging along a metal passageway. As the suspense reaches its climax, Roderick shrieks his last words to his "friend" the narrator: "Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door" (296).

Roderick, who slowly falls into insanity, ironically calls the narrator the “Madman.” We are left to reflect on what Poe means by this ironic twist. Poe’s bleak and dark imagery, and his use of mirror reflections, seem only to intensify the hopelessness of “Usher.” We can plausibly conclude that indeed the narrator is the “Madman,” for he comes from everyday society, which is a place where hope and faith exist. Poe would probably argue that such a place is opposite to the world of Usher because a world where death is inevitable could not possibly hold such positive values. Therefore, just as Roderick mirrors his sister, the reflection in the tarn mirrors the dilapidation of the house, and the story mirrors the final actions before the death of Usher. “The Fall of the House of Usher” reflects Poe’s view that humanity is hopelessly doomed.

Work Cited

Poe, Edgar Allan. “The Fall of the House of Usher.” 1839. *Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library*. 1995. Web. 1 July 2012. <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/PoeFall.html>.

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from "Student Sample Papers..." *Creating Literary Analysis* by Ryan Cordell and John Pennington CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
- "MLA Formatting Guide" *Excelsior Online Writing Lab* CC BY 4.0

This page titled 8.3: Formatting a Literature Essay is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **13.3: Formatting a Literature Essay (MLA)** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

# 8.4: MLA Works Cited Page

## Works Cited for Literature Essays

Every literature essay must have a Works Cited page as the last page(s) of the essay. On this page should appear any sources used during the writing process. If you are examining a work of literature, the citation for that work of literature should appear on the Works Cited page (primary source). There are not really any meaningful differences between Works Cited pages for regular MLA-style essays and literature essays. The one aspect slightly unique in literature essays is the difference between primary and secondary sources. The primary source in literature is going to be the work of literature itself which the essay focuses upon: for example, if a student is writing about "Bajadas" by Francisco Cantu, they will need to cite that as a primary source.

Example Works Cited entry for a Primary Source:

> Cantú, Francisco. "Bajadas." *Ploughshares*, 2015. Reprinted in *Writing and Critical Thinking Through Literature*, eds. Heather Ringo and Athena Kashyap. *Libretexts*, 2019.

A secondary source is any literary criticism written about the primary source. So, for example, the following would be an example of a secondary source (literary criticism) about "Sonny's Blues."

Example Citation for a Secondary Source:

> Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited.* New York: Riverhead, 2003.

### How to create a Works Cited entry for a text which appears in this anthology

For students using the online version of this textbook:

> Authorlastname, Authorfirstname. "Title." Original date of publication. *Writing and Critical Thinking Through Literature*, edited by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap, 2019. <URL of specific text> Accessed (Date Accessed).

For students using the print version of this textbook:

> Authorlastname, Authorfirstname. "Title." Original date of publication. *Writing and Critical Thinking Through Literature* edited by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap, 2019.

Basic Format for Works Cited Entries -- Shorter Works

> Author Last Name, Author First Name. "Title of Short Work Such as Poem or Short Story." *Publication (Anthology or Longer Work)*. Publisher Name, Publication Date.

Basic Format for Works Cited Entries -- Longer Works

> Author Last Name, Author First Name. *Title of Long Work (Novel, Play, Book-length manuscript).* Publisher Name, Publication Date.

Pro-tip: if retrieving Literary Criticism from an online archive, look for the "Cite" button, which should automatically generate a citation which students can copy and paste into their Works Cited page. There are also online citation tools available like Easybib, Noodletools, or CiteKnight. Whatever citation tool students use, they should make sure to double-check the citations against the information above, as often times the citations generated have errors. It is the student's responsibility to ensure citations adhere to MLA requirements and specific to their reference work. Students may wish to consult the MLA official style guide.

## Example of a Works Cited Page for a Literature Essay

Works Cited


Boehrer, Bruce Thomas. *Animal Characters: Nonhuman Beings in Early Modern Literature*, U of Pennsylvania P, 2010.

Cavendish, Margaret. "The Hunting of the Hare." 1653. UC Press E-books Collection, publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=kt7q2nc9xn&chunk.id=ss1.55&toc.depth=100&toc.id=ch09&brand=eschol. Accessed 3 October 2013.

Damrosch, David and Kevin J. H. Dettmar. "Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle." The Longman Anthology: British Literature, edited by David Damrosch and Kevin J. H. Dettmar, Longman, 2010, pp. 2060-63.

Landry, Donna. "Green Languages? Women Poets as Naturalists in 1653 and 1807." Huntington Library Quarterly, vol. 63, no.4, 2000, pp. 467-89. JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/3817613. Accessed 2 Oct. 2013.

Rees, Emma L.E. *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile*. Manchester UP, 2003. EBSCOHost, libproxy.ung.edu/login?url=search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2004581244&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 8 Nov. 2013.

Salzman, Paul. *Reading Early Modern Women's Writing.* Oxford UP, 2006.



This page titled 8.4: MLA Works Cited Page is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **13.4: MLA Works Cited page** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations

## In-Text Citations for Literature Essays

In order to effectively use in-text citations in essays, it is important to understand the purpose of in-text citations. In-text citations are a required part of ethical citation and attribution in MLA-style essays. Ideally, the in-text citation should, as briefly and unobtrusively as possible, point essay readers to the more detailed citation information listed on the Works Cited page (hence we described the Works Cited page first: it arguably easier and more efficient to create the Works Cited page first). In-text citations should appear at the end of the quoted or paraphrased material. What goes in the in-text citation? The first listed information in the Works Cited entry, which is usually the author's last name (Lastname). If there is no listed author, then an abbreviated version of the work's title goes in the parentheses in quotation marks ("Abbreviated Title"). After the author's last name should appear the paragraph, page, or line number where this material appeared in the original source (Smith 21) or ("Abbreiviated Title" 21). This should enable readers to find and review the original source material. It also gives credit to the original author, which is not only ethical, but also legally required as a means to avoid copyright infringement. Basically, Works Cited and in-text citations combined function as a map to help readers

1. differentiate between the writer's words and ideas and their sources' words and ideas
2. find original source material.

Pro-tip: every in-text, parenthetical citation should point readers towards a more detailed Works Cited page entry. Inversely, every Works Cited page entry should match at least one in-text, parenthetical citation. Otherwise, if one or the other is missing, this is a form of plagiarism. Why? Because if a student is missing a Works Cited entry, there is no way for readers to find the original information. It is like a broken link on the internet. And everyone knows broken links are super sketch.

Inversely, if a student is missing an in-text citation, readers are unable to differentiate the student's words and ideas from the words and ideas of their sources.

Either way, there is ambiguity about source material. Ambiguity in essays should be avoided at all costs for the sake of academic integrity. To put it simply: readers should be able to

1. clearly recognize which words and ideas belong to the student and which words and ideas belong to other sources
2. locate those other sources

## In-Text Citation Quick Reference Guide by Genre

| Genre | Parenthetical | In-Text Citation |
|---|---|---|
| Poem | (Line#)<br>or<br>(Author Last Name Line #) | In Wordsworth's<br>daffodils tossed '<br>in sprightly dar<br>The daffodils ar<br>example<br>anthropomorph<br>described as tos<br>heads in sprigh<br>(Wordswor |
| Short Story | (page#) or (par. #)<br>Or<br>(Author Last Name Page #) | Baldwin free<br>emphasizes c<br>descriptor, such<br>describes Sonn<br>"copper"<br>Descriptions of<br>are frequently e<br>in the story, such<br>skin as "coppe<br>unnamed heroi<br>lurking outside th<br>"dark brown" (E<br>18). |
| Creative Nonfiction | (page#) or (par. #) | The story fre<br>switches betwe<br>and English, suc<br>Cantu tells de L<br>*te invito*" |
| Novel | (page#) or (paragraph #) | (231)<br>(Wilde 2 |
| Drama (Play) | (Act.Scene.Line#)<br>Or<br>(Author Last Name<br>Act.Scene.Line#) | (1.2.42-( |
| Literary Criticism | (page#)<br>Or<br>(Author Last Name Page#) | (54)<br>Or<br>(Bloom |
| Internet Source (from a web page without page numbers) | ("Abbreviated Title" paragraph #)<br>OR<br>(Author Last Name)<br>OR<br>(“Abbreviated Title”) | ("The History" p<br>OR<br>(Smith par. 6)<br>OR<br>("The History") |

## Titles

In general, titles of long works are italicized while shorter works are placed in quotation marks.

## Page, paragraph, or line numbers

In general, prose uses either paragraph numbers (par. 3) or page numbers (245). Drama uses act.scene.line (2.3.4). Poetry uses just line numbers (3). Try to use whatever measurement makes the most sense for the work referenced, keeping in mind the purpose is to help the reader find the information. For example, for a page on a website that does not otherwise have page numbers, including paragraph number would help readers find the information.

That being said, because of the CTRL + F feature, really the minimum requirement for internet web pages and websites is to place an in-text, parenthetical citation with either the author's last name (if available) or an abbreviated title of the work (if no author information is available).

For example:

## Author Name Available

If there is an author name available, use that.

**Example:** Some scholars argue Hamlet's hamartia, or fatal flaw, is his indecisiveness (Greene).

## Author Name Not Available

If there is not an author name available, use a condensed version of the text title in quotation marks.

**Example:** Other scholars argue Hamlet's caution is justifiable, as a potentially demonic ghost of one's dead father is arguably not a reliable source upon which to base the decision to murder ("Hamlet Criticism Summary").

*While both of the above examples may be acceptable for some professors, students should consult with their professors. It is almost always better to include paragraph or page numbers if possible. And, if the source is an online scholarly article, check for page numbers, as most reputable scholarly articles will have page numbers.*

## Length of Quotation

Students often want to cut and paste entire passages from literature. While this method, called a block quotation, can be useful in certain contexts, it is almost always better to only take the necessary quotes and phrasing necessary to support the thesis or main idea of the paragraph.

## Block Quotation

Block quotations should be used sparingly: only when you plan to quote three or more lines or sentences, and only when you plan to spend an extended amount of space in your essay examining the details of a literary excerpt. There isn't necessarily a rule of thumb, but probably for an essay that is less than eight pages you wouldn't want to use more than two. To format a block quotation, you can justify the text and indent 1/2". You do not need to use quotations because it will be clear it is a block quotation in that it is set aside from the rest of the text. After the block quotation, include an in-text citation. Example below

> In my imagination, Abuelito's version of history wrestles Didion's. The white literary establishment handed her California but I propose we wrest it away from her. The Mexican presence haunting her work could do so if those of us living outside Didion's prose lend a hand to the diaspora trapped inside of it. (Gurba par. 7)

In the example above, I am quoting from an online article called "It's Time to Take California Back From Joan Didion" by scholar and critic Myriam Gurba. If I were writing an essay, I would probably spend a great deal of this paragraph analyzing the language choices here; that is, performing a close reading.

## Laser-Focused Quotation

In literary studies, we really want to focus upon and emphasize language choices. While sometimes this can be done with a block quotation, most of the time the quotations you choose should be laser-focused to support the claim you are making in the paragraph. For example, let's say I want to emphasize the extended metaphor of the hand in the above block quotation through the lens of post-colonial criticism. I might examine how Abuelito's version of history is personified as in opposition to Joan Didion's, which was "handed" to her by the "white literacy establishment," and how the literary landscape of California becomes a property over which to "wrestle" (Gurba par. 7).

## Integrating Evidence & Avoiding Floating Quotations

**Example Paragraph 1:**

Students first learning how to effectively quote source material often simply plop a quotation into their body paragraphs. "I wandered lonely as a cloud" (Wordsworth 1). The previous sentence is an example of a floating quotation. A floating quotation is when a quotation is plopped into a paragraph without being smoothly integrated into the surrounding text. What effect does this have? It can be disorienting to the reader, who has no idea how to interpret the information. Compare this random plopping of a quotation above to the integrated version below.

## Example of Effective Quotation Integration

**Example Paragraph 2:**

While most people value humans over plants and other inanimate objects in nature, in "I wandered lonely as a cloud," Wordsworth frequently gives nature human characteristics (anthropomorphism) and gives human characteristics of the natural world (chremamorphism). When the speaker of the poem describes themselves as wandering "lonely as a cloud," this gives the sense he is dehumanized, more cloud than person (1). Conversely, the natural environment is made more human when daffodils are personified as "[t]ossing their heads in sprightly dance," and even the waves are also described as dancing (12-13). Even the verb choice for each indicates the speaker may be less human, in that an animal or human can wander, but, generally, plants and animals lack the consciousness or intentionality implicit in dancing. By blurring the line between human and nature, and imbuing the daffodils and waves with seemingly more agency than the human speaker, the poem implies nature is just as valuable as humans, if not more so.

What do you notice about the difference between the way quotations are integrated in the first and second paragraph examples?

In the second example, the quotations are smoothly integrated with the

author’s words while maintaining the grammatical structure of each sentence. Rather than plopping an entire sentence or line, the writer chose the most important quotations which illustrate the point they are attempting to make. Finally, it is clear where the writer’s words end and Wordsworth's begin, and where Wordsworth's words begin and the writer's end.

## Works Cited

Gurba, Myriam. "It's Time to Take California Back from Joan Didion." *Electric Literature*, 12 May 2020. Accessed 13 July 2022.

This page titled 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **13.5: MLA In-Text Citations** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# 8.6: Quotation, Paraphrase, and Summary

## Using Information From Sources

There are several ways to effectively incorporate information from sources in essays. Which type of source integration you use will depend on the purpose of the material. Every literary essay should strike a balance between quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing—and articulating your own perspective. Whether summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting, you need to include both in-text and Works Cited citations for every source. It is also very important to not pass off quotation as paraphrase: this could be considered plagiarism.

### Summary

Summarizing refers to the action of boiling down an author's ideas into a shorter version in your own words. Summary demonstrates your understanding of a text, but it also can be useful in giving background information or making a complex idea more accessible. In a literature essay, you might briefly summarize the plot of a text through the perspective of your topic before diving deeply into the analysis portion of the essay.

### Paraphrase

When we paraphrase, we are processing information or ideas from another person's text and putting it in our own words. The main difference between paraphrase and summary is scope: if summarizing means rewording and condensing, then paraphrasing means rewording without drastically altering length. However, paraphrasing is also generally more faithful to the spirit of the original; whereas a summary requires you to boil down a large piece of text into a sentence or two, thereby losing some nuance, a paraphrase ought to mirror back the original idea using your own language. Paraphrasing is helpful for establishing background knowledge or general consensus, simplifying a complicated idea, or reminding your reader of a certain part of another text. It is also valuable when relaying statistics or historical information, both of which are usually more fluidly woven into your writing when spoken with your own voice.

### Quotation

A direct quote uses quotation marks (" ") to indicate where you're borrowing an author's words verbatim in your own writing. Use a direct quote if someone else wrote or said something in a distinctive or particular way and you want to capture their words exactly. Direct quotes are good for establishing ethos and providing evidence. In a research essay, you will be expected to use some direct quotes; however, too many direct quotes can overwhelm your thesis and actually undermine your sense of ethos.

For literature, quotation is most effective when attempting to analyze literary devices such as tone, character, metaphor, and so forth.

## Examples

Below, you can see three examples of these tools. Consider how the direct quote, the paraphrase, and the summary each could be used to achieve different purposes.

### Original Passage

> *It has been suggested (again rather anecdotally) that giraffes do communicate using infrasonic vocalizations (the signals are verbally described to be similar—in structure and function—to the low-frequency, infrasonic "rumbles" of elephants). It was further speculated that the extensive frontal sinus of giraffes acts as a resonance chamber for infrasound production. Moreover, particular neck movements (e.g. the neck stretch) are suggested to be associated with the production of infrasonic vocalizations.*

### Summary

Baotic et al. conducted a study on giraffe hums in response to speculation that these noises are used deliberately for communication.

### Paraphrase

Giraffes emit a low-pitch noise; some scientists believe that this hum can be used for communication with other members of the social group, but others are skeptical because of the dearth of research on giraffe noises. According to Baotic et al., the anatomy of the animal suggests that they may be making deliberate and specific noises (3).

### Quotation

Some zoological experts have pointed out that the evidence for giraffe hums has been "rather anecdotally" reported (Baotic et

al. 3). However, some scientists have “speculated that the extensive frontal sinus of giraffes acts as a resonance chamber for infrasound production” (Ibid. 3).

## Important Reminder!

Whether summary, paraphrase, or quotation, you need to use an in-text citation! For every in-text citation, ensure there is a matching entry on the Works Cited page! Also, remember to use information from sources only to support your own argument. For a research essay, a healthy ratio is generally no more than 10% to 20% material from sources to 80% your own original ideas, argument, interpretation, analysis, and explanation. This is not a rule as much as a reminder to think critically about how much your writing relies on the ideas of others: unless the assignment is a summary or literature review, the emphasis should be on your ideas!

## Contributors and Attributions

- Adapted from "Research and Argumentation" *EmpoWord: A Student-Centered Anthology & Handbook for College Writers* by Shane Abrams of the Portland State University, 2018 CC BY-NC 4.0

This page titled 8.6: Quotation, Paraphrase, and Summary is shared under a CC BY-NC 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap (ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative) .

- **13.6: Quotation, Paraphrase, and Summary** by Heather Ringo & Athena Kashyap is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.

# Index


## A

academic honesty
- 8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution

annotate
- 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays

annotated bibliography
- 7.14: Literary Research Essays

annotating
- 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays

annotation
- 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays

attribution
- 8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution
- 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations

avoiding plagiarism
- 8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution
- 8.6: Quotation, Paraphrase, and Summary

## C

citation
- 8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution

citations
- 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations

connotation
- 3.14: Word Choice, Tone, Voice, and Style

Creating Literary Analysis
- 7.3: The Writing Process for Literary Essays

## D

denotation
- 3.14: Word Choice, Tone, Voice, and Style

Drama
- 5.1: What is Drama?

## E

ecocriticism
- 4.7: Ecocriticism

## F

fiction
- 4.8: "On the Gull's Road" by Willa Cather (1908)

format
- 8.3: Formatting a Literature Essay

formatting
- 8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution
- 8.3: Formatting a Literature Essay
- 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations

## L

literary
- 7.14: Literary Research Essays

literary analysis
- 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays

literary thesis statement
- 7.7: Literary Thesis Statements

literature
- 5.1: What is Drama?
- 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays
- 7.14: Literary Research Essays
- 8.2: What is MLA?
- 8.3: Formatting a Literature Essay
- 8.4: MLA Works Cited Page
- 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations

## M

meme
- 1.1: What is Literature?

MLA
- 8.2: What is MLA?
- 8.3: Formatting a Literature Essay
- 8.4: MLA Works Cited Page
- 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations

MLA formatting
- 8.3: Formatting a Literature Essay

modern language association
- 8.2: What is MLA?
- 8.4: MLA Works Cited Page
- 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations

## N

New Historicism
- 4.5: New Historicism

## P

paraphrase
- 8.6: Quotation, Paraphrase, and Summary

parenthetical
- 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations

plagiarism
- 8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution

poetry
- 6.1: What is Poetry?

prewriting
- 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays

## Q

quotation
- 8.6: Quotation, Paraphrase, and Summary

## R

references
- 8.4: MLA Works Cited Page

research
- 7.14: Literary Research Essays

## S

Shakespeare
- 5.1: What is Drama?

short story
- 4.8: "On the Gull's Road" by Willa Cather (1908)

stanza
- 6.11: Form in Poetry

summary
- 8.6: Quotation, Paraphrase, and Summary

syntax
- 3.14: Word Choice, Tone, Voice, and Style

## T

thesis statement
- 7.7: Literary Thesis Statements

## V

voice
- 6.9: Voice

## W

Women's Literature
- 4.8: "On the Gull's Road" by Willa Cather (1908)

works cited
- 8.4: MLA Works Cited Page

writing process
- 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays

writing skills
- 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays

# Glossary

**Sample Word 1** | Sample Definition 1

# Detailed Licensing

## Overview

**Title:** Living Literature: A Journey Through Stories, Drama, and Poetry (ENGWR 301)

**Webpages:** 93

**Applicable Restrictions:** Noncommercial, No Derivatives

**All licenses found:**

- CC BY-NC 4.0: 82.8% (77 pages)
- CC BY-NC-SA 4.0: 8.6% (8 pages)
- Undeclared: 4.3% (4 pages)
- CC BY-SA 4.0: 2.2% (2 pages)
- CC BY 4.0: 1.1% (1 page)
- CC BY-NC-ND 4.0: 1.1% (1 page)

## By Page


- Living Literature: A Journey Through Stories, Drama, and Poetry (ENGWR 301) - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
  - Front Matter - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - TitlePage - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - InfoPage - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - Table of Contents - *Undeclared*
    - Licensing - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
  - 1: What Is Literature, and How Do We Interact with It? - *Undeclared*
    - 1.1: What is Literature? - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 1.2: Why Read and Write About Literature? - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 1.3: Tips for Reading Online - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 1.4: The Literary Landscape- Four Major Genres - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 2: Creative Nonfiction - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 2.1: What is Creative Nonfiction? - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 2.2: Elements of Creative Nonfiction - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 2.3: "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 2.4: Discussion Questions on "The Danger of a Single Story" - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.5: "The Blue" by Anne-Marie Oomen (2018) - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 2.6: Discussion Questions on "The Blue" - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 3: Fiction - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.1: What is Fiction? - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.2: Short Stories versus the Novel - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.3: How to Read Fiction - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.4: Elements of Fiction - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.5: "The Rocking Horse Winner" by D.H. Lawrence - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.6: Discussion Questions on "The Rocking Horse Winner" - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 3.7: Characterization - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.8: Plot - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.9: Setting - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.10: Narration (Point of View) - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.11: Discussion Questions on "The Shawl" by Louise Erdrich - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 3.12: Theme - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.13: Rhetorical and Literary Devices - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.14: Word Choice, Tone, Voice, and Style - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 3.15: Taking Notes on a Novel - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 4: Literary Theory and Criticism - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 4.1: What is Literary Criticism? - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 4.2: Formalism - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 4.3: Psychoanalytic Criticism - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 4.4: Gender Criticism - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 4.5: New Historicism - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 4.6: Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 4.7: Ecocriticism - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 4.8: "On the Gull's Road" by Willa Cather (1908) - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 4.9: Literary Concept Map Group Assignment - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 5: Drama - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 5.1: What is Drama? - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
    - 5.2: Elements of Drama - *CC BY-NC 4.0*

- 5.3: Reading and Responding to Drama - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 5.4: Trifles by Susan Glaspell (1916) - *CC BY-NC 4.0*

6: Poetry - *CC BY-NC 4.0*

- 6.1: What is Poetry? - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.2: Music and Poetry - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.3: Reading Poetry - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.4: Close Reading of a Poem - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.5: Why Analyze Poetry? - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.6: Imagery - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.7: The Line in Poetry - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.8: Word Choice, Word Order, and Tone - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.9: Voice - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.10: Figurative Language - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.11: Form in Poetry - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.12: Meter - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.13: Alliteration, Consonance, Assonance - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.14: Rhyme - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.15: Video- Why Shakespeare Loved Iambic Pentameter - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 6.16: Poetry Canvas Page and Video Group Assignment - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

7: Writing about Literature - *CC BY-NC 4.0*

- 7.1: What Does My Professor Want? - *Undeclared*
- 7.2: Literary Response Paper - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.3: The Writing Process for Literary Essays - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.4: Prewriting for Literature Essays - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.5: Brainstorming - *CC BY-NC-ND 4.0*
- 7.6: Writing About Fiction and Creative Nonfiction - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.7: Literary Thesis Statements - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.8: Essay as Argument - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.9: Summarizing vs. Analyzing Literary Works - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.10: Writing a Literary Analysis Essay - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.11: Sample Student Literary Analysis Essays - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.12: Essays on Comparing and Contrasting Literature - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.13: Writing About Drama - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.14: Literary Research Essays - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 7.15: How to Perform Literary Research - *CC BY-NC 4.0*

8: MLA Format and Citations - *CC BY-NC 4.0*

- 8.1: Avoiding Plagiarism Through Ethical Attribution - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 8.2: What is MLA? - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 8.3: Formatting a Literature Essay - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 8.4: MLA Works Cited Page - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 8.5: MLA In-Text Citations - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- 8.6: Quotation, Paraphrase, and Summary - *CC BY-NC 4.0*

Back Matter - *CC BY-NC 4.0*

- Index - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- Glossary - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
- Detailed Licensing - *Undeclared*