

LITERATURE CRITICISM

English for Degree Entrance (EDE) compiled by Carrie Molinski & Sue Slessor.

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Introduction

The word “literature” often evokes a picture of old, outdated plays and dusty tomes referencing long-dead authors, but in reality, literature encompasses many different elements, features and forms, both classical and modern. Authors communicate feelings, ideas and themes using the art form of literature, which may involve poetry, drama, songs, plays, videos and stories told in different formats. Literary authors, influenced by their environments, the time and age they lived and personal circumstances, convey a vast range of messages about the human condition. As readers and consumers of literature, you will bring your own experiences and “lens” when reading, listening or viewing literature. It is important to understand the way in which people communicate through this art form in order to be a more effective communicator in all aspects of life including the college and work environment.

Learning Objectives

- Learn how elements, features and form of literary texts communicate meaning.
- Examine a variety of literary works using reading and listening strategies to build and understanding of society.

To Do List

- Read the content on Literature and Literary Criticism.
- Watch the video on Literary Lenses.

- Read the information on analyzing stories.
- Read the short story, “The Story of an Hour.”
- Complete the literary analysis assignment for the short story “A Story in an Hour” in Blackboard.

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LITERATURE

When is the last time you read a book for fun? If you were to classify that book, would you call it fiction or literature? This is an interesting separation, with many possible reasons for it. One is that “fiction” and “literature” are regarded as quite different things. “Fiction,” for example, is what people read for enjoyment. “Literature” is what they read for school. Or “fiction” is what living people write and is about the present. “Literature” was written by people (often white males) who have since died and is about times and places that have nothing to do with us. Or “fiction” offers everyday pleasures, but “literature” is to be honored and respected, even though it is boring. Of course, when we put anything on a pedestal, we remove it from everyday life, so the corollary is that literature is to be honored and respected, but it is not to be read, certainly not by any normal person with normal interests.

Sadly, it is the guardians of literature, that is, of the classics, who have done so much to take the life out of literature, to put it on a pedestal and thereby to make it an irrelevant aspect of North American life. People study literature because they love literature. They certainly don’t do it for the money. But what happens too often, especially in colleges, is that teachers forget what it was that first interested them in the study of literature. They forget the joy that they first felt (and perhaps still feel) as they read a new novel or a poem or as they reread a work and saw something new in it. Instead, they erect formidable walls around these literary works, giving the impression that the only access to a work is through deep learning and years of study. Such study is clearly important for scholars, but this kind of scholarship is not the only way, or even necessarily the best way, for most people to approach literature. Instead it makes the literature seem inaccessible. It makes the literature seem like the province of scholars. “Oh, you have to be smart to read that,” as though Shakespeare or Dickens or Woolf wrote only for English teachers, not for general readers.

What is Literature?

In short, literature evokes imaginative worlds through the conscious arrangement of words that tell a story. These stories are told through different genres, or types of literature, like novels, short stories, poetry, drama and the essay. Each genre is associated with certain conventions. In this text, we will study poetry, short fiction, drama and even personal narratives.

Some Misconceptions About Literature

Of course, there are a number of misconceptions about literature that have to be gotten out of the way before

anyone can enjoy it. One misconception is that literature is full of **hidden meanings**. There are certainly occasional works that contain hidden meanings. The biblical book of *Revelation*, for example, was written in a kind of code, using images that had specific meanings for its early audience but that we can only recover with a great deal of difficulty. Most literary works, however, are not at all like that. Perhaps an analogy will illustrate this point. When I take my car to my mechanic because something is not working properly, he opens the hood and we both stand there looking at the engine. But after we have looked for a few minutes, he is likely to have seen what the problem is, while I could look for hours and never see it. We are looking at the same thing. The problem is not hidden, nor is it in some secret code. It is right there in the open, accessible to anyone who knows how to “read” it, which my mechanic does and I do not. He has been taught how to “read” automobile engines and he has practiced “reading” them. He is a good “close reader,” which is why I continue to take my car to him.

The same thing is true for readers of literature. Generally authors want to communicate with their readers, so they are not likely to hide or disguise what they are saying, but reading literature also requires some training and some practice. Good writers use language very carefully, and readers must learn how to be sensitive to that language, just as the mechanic must learn to be sensitive to the appearances and sounds of the engine. Everything that the writer wants to say, and much that the writer may not be aware of, is there in the words. We simply have to learn how to read them.

Another popular misconception is that a literary work has a **single “meaning”** (and that only English teachers know how to find that meaning). There is an easy way to dispel this misconception. Just go to a college library and find the section that holds books on Shakespeare. Choose one play, *Hamlet*, for example, and see how many books there are about it, all by scholars who are educated, perceptive readers. Can it be the case that one of these books is correct and all the others are mistaken? And if the correct one has already been written, why would anyone need to write another book about the play? The answer is that there is no single correct way to read a good piece of literature.

Again, let me use an analogy to illustrate this point. Suppose that everyone at a meeting were asked to describe a person who was standing in the middle of the room. Imagine how many different descriptions there would be, depending on where the viewer sat in relation to the person. Furthermore, an optometrist in the crowd might focus on the person’s glasses; a hair stylist might focus on the person’s haircut; someone who sells clothing might focus on the style of dress; a podiatrist might focus on the person’s feet. Would any of these descriptions be incorrect? Not necessarily, but they would be determined by the viewers’ perspectives. They might also be determined by such factors as the viewers’ ages, genders or ability to move around the person being viewed, or by their previous acquaintance with the subject. So whose descriptions would be correct? Conceivably all of them, and if we put all of these correct descriptions together, we would be closer to having a full description of the person.

This is most emphatically not to say, however, that all descriptions are correct simply because each person is entitled to his or her opinion. If the podiatrist is of the opinion that the person is five feet, nine inches tall, the podiatrist could be mistaken. And even if the podiatrist actually measures the person, the measurement could

be mistaken. Everyone who describes this person, therefore, must offer not only an opinion but also a basis for that opinion. “My feeling is that this person is a teacher” is not enough. “My feeling is that this person is a teacher because the person’s clothing is covered with chalk dust and because the person is carrying a stack of papers that look like they need grading” is far better, though even that statement might be mistaken.

So it is with literature. As we read, as we try to understand and interpret, we must deal with the text that is in front of us; but we must also recognize both that language is slippery and that each of us individually deals with it from a different set of perspectives. Not all of these perspectives are necessarily legitimate, and we are always liable to be misreading or misinterpreting what we see. Furthermore, it is possible that contradictory readings of a single work will both be legitimate, because literary works can be as complex and multi-faceted as human beings. It is vital, therefore, that in reading literature we abandon both the idea that any individual’s reading of a work is the “correct” one and the idea that there is one simple way to read any work. Our interpretations may, and probably should, change according to the way we approach the work. If we read *War and Peace* as teenagers, then in middle age, and then in old age, we might be said to have read three different books. Thus, multiple interpretations, even contradictory interpretations, can work together to give us a better understanding of a work.

Why Reading Literature is Important

Reading literature can teach us new ways to read, think, imagine, feel, and make sense of our own experiences. Literature forces readers to confront the complexities of the world, to confront what it means to be a human being in this difficult and uncertain world, to confront other people who may be unlike them, and ultimately to confront themselves.

The relationship between the reader and the world of a work of literature is complex and fascinating. Frequently when we read a work, we become so involved in it that we may feel that we have become part of it. “I was really into that novel,” we might say, and in one sense that statement can be accurate. But in another sense it is clearly inaccurate, for actually we do not enter the book so much as the book enters us; the words enter our eyes in the form of squiggles on a page which are transformed into words, sentences, paragraphs, and meaningful concepts in our brains, in our imaginations, where scenes and characters are given “a local habitation and a name.” Thus, when we “get into” a book, we are actually “getting into” our own mental conceptions that have been produced by the book, which, incidentally, explains why so often readers are dissatisfied with cinematic or television adaptations of literary works.

In fact, though it may seem a trite thing to say, writers are close observers of the world who are capable of communicating their visions, and the more perspectives we have to draw on, the better able we should be to make sense of our lives. In these terms, it makes no difference whether we are reading a Homeric poem, a twelfth-century Japanese novel like *The Tale of Genji*, or a novel by Dickens. The more different perspectives we get, the better. And it must be emphasized that we read such works not only to be well-rounded (whatever that means) or to be “educated” or for antiquarian interest. We read them because they have something to do

with us, with our lives. Whatever culture produced them, whatever the gender or race or religion of their authors, they relate to us as human beings; and all of us can use as many insights into being human as we can get. Reading is itself a kind of experience, and while we may not have the time or the opportunity or it may be physically impossible for us to experience certain things in the world, we can experience them through sensitive reading. So literature allows us to broaden our experiences.

Reading also forces us to focus our thoughts. The world around us is so full of stimuli that we are easily distracted. Unless we are involved in a crisis that demands our full attention, we flit from subject to subject. But when we read a book, even a book that has a large number of characters and covers many years, the story and the writing help us to focus, to think about what they show us in a concentrated manner. When I hold a book, I often feel that I have in my hand another world that I can enter and that will help me to understand the everyday world that I inhabit. Though it may sound funny, some of my best friends live in books, and no matter how frequently I visit them, each time I learn more about them and about myself.

Literature invites us to meet interesting characters and to visit interesting places, to use our imagination and to think about things that might otherwise escape our notice, to see the world from perspectives that we would otherwise not have.

Watch this video for a lively overview of how and why we read literature. (*Please note that we will not be reading the texts the speaker mentions in the video in this course.*)

Watch it: How and Why we Read

Watch How and why we read: Crash Course English literature #1 (7 minutes) on YouTube

(<https://youtu.be/MSYw502dJNY>)

How to Read Literature

1. Read with a pen in hand! Jot down questions, highlight things you find significant, mark confusing passages, look up unfamiliar words/references, and record first impressions.
2. Think critically to form a response.
 - The more you know about a story, the more pleasure your reading will provide as you uncover the hidden elements that create the theme of the piece.

- Address your own biases and compare your own experiences with those expressed in the piece.
- Test your positions and thoughts about the piece with what others think by doing research.

While you will have your own individual connection to a piece based on your life experiences, interpreting literature is not a willy nilly process. Each piece has an author who had a purpose in writing the piece—you want to uncover that purpose. As the speaker in the video you watched about how to read literature notes, you, as a reader, also have a role to play. Sometimes you may see something in the text that speaks to you—whether or not the author intended that piece to be there, it still matters to you. However, when writing about literature, it's important that our observations can be supported by the text itself. Make sure you aren't reading into the text something that isn't there. Value the author for who they are and appreciate their experiences, while attempting to create a connection with yourself and your experiences.

Attribution & References

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APPROACHES TO LITERARY CRITICISM

One useful way to think about the different approaches or schools of literary criticism is to regard them as different methodologies. We defined a methodology as a “a system of methods that an academic discipline uses to carry out its research and pursue the answers to its questions, combined with an overarching philosophical attitude and interpretive framework for applying those methods.” That’s a good guide to understanding the nature of the different literary critical theories/methodologies. There’s a whole host of different interpretive methodologies for approaching works of literature. You’ll learn more about these in the next section. Collectively, these individual methodologies or theories add up, more or less, to the larger realm of literary theory as a whole.

Schools of Literary Criticism

To put meat on these bones, here are brief descriptions of some of the most prominent schools of literary criticism. (Bear in mind that this is hardly a comprehensive list!) When you research the available scholarly writings on a given work of literature, you may come across essays and articles that use one or more of these approaches. We’ve grouped them into four categories—author-focused, text-focused, reader-focused and context-focused—each with its own central approach and central question about literary works and effective ways to understand them.

Author-Focused: How can we understand literary works by understanding their authors?

Biographical criticism focuses on the author’s life. It tries to gain a better understanding of the literary work by understanding the person who wrote it. Typical questions involved in this approach include the following:

- What aspects of the author’s life are relevant to understanding the work?
- How are the author’s personal beliefs encoded into the work?
- Does the work reflect the writer’s personal experiences and concerns? How or how not?

Reader-Focused: How can we understand literary works by understanding the subjective experience of reading them?

Reader-response criticism emphasizes the reader as much as the text. It seeks to understand how a given

reader comes together with a given literary work to produce a unique reading. This school of criticism rests on the assumption that literary works don't contain or embody a stable, fixed meaning but can have many meanings—in fact, as many meanings as there are readers, since each reader will engage with the text differently. In the words of literature scholar Tyson (2006), “reader-response theorists share two beliefs: (1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and (2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature” (p. 170). Typical questions involved in this approach include the following:

- Who is the reader? Also, who is the implied reader (the one “posited” by the text)?
- What kinds of memories, knowledge, and thoughts does the text evoke from the reader?
- How exactly does the interaction between the reader and the text create meaning on both the text side and the reader side? How does this meaning change from person to person, or if the same person rereads it?

Context-Focused: How can we understand literary works by understanding the contextual circumstances—historical, societal, cultural, political, economic—out of which they emerged?

Historical criticism focuses on the historical and social circumstances that surrounded the writing of a text. It may examine biographical facts about the author's life (which can therefore connect this approach with biographical criticism) as well as the influence of social, political, national, and international events. It may also consider the influence of other literary works. New Historicism, a particular type of historical criticism, focuses not so much on the role of historical facts and events as on the ways these things are remembered and interpreted, and the way this interpreted historical memory contributes to the interpretation of literature. Typical questions involved in historical criticism include the following:

- How (and how accurately) does the work reflect the historical period in which it was written?
- What specific historical events influenced the author?
- How important is the work's historical context to understanding it?
- How does the work represent an interpretation of its time and culture? (New Historicism)

Useful Metaphors: Literary Critical Methods as Toolboxes and Lenses

Two useful metaphors for understanding what literary critical theories do and how they're intended to work are the metaphor of the **toolbox** and the metaphor of the **lens**.

The **toolbox** is the older metaphor. It was more popular before the turn of the twenty-first century, and it says that each critical/theoretical approach provides a set of tools, in the form of specialized concepts and vocabulary, for thinking and talking meaningfully about literature. As this metaphor would have it, once you've learned the right concepts and terminology, you're better equipped with the tools to think and talk about literature in a rich and deep way.

Beginning roughly around the turn of the century, the **lens** began to supplant the toolbox as the preferred metaphor. Tyson (2006) explains it well: "Think of each theory as a new pair of eyeglasses through which certain elements of our world are brought into focus while others . . . fade into the background" (p. 170). In other words, the lens metaphor characterizes each critical/theoretical approach as a different way of seeing the text, with the different lenses rendering different aspects of the text more prominent or less prominent, more visible or less visible, resulting in the possibility of substantially and even fundamentally different overall readings of the same text depending on which lens is used.

For example, consider the case of Homer's *Iliad* as it might appear through several of the different lenses described above.

- Biographical criticism would highlight the influence of Homer himself—his biographical facts and major life experiences—on the text.
- Reader-response criticism would consider the relationship between the individual reader and the text. Since the *Iliad* is more than two thousand years old, one possible reader-response approach (but only one among any) might be to consider how the modern reader's experience and understanding of this work harmonizes or clashes with the implied/intended reader of a poem that was written down in vastly different cultural circumstances some 2,800 years ago, and that was composed even earlier than that.
- Historical criticism would try to understand the *Iliad* by understanding the historical, cultural, and literary contexts out of which it emerged in ancient Greece, and of which it is at least partly a reflection.

It's also important to recognize that not all literary works are equally amenable to being examined through all critical/theoretical lenses. When it comes to the *Iliad*, for example, post-colonial critics have found relatively little to "work with" and respond to. However, it's a different story with Homer's *Odyssey*, where the post-colonial lens has produced readings of the text that highlight Odysseus' role as a colonizer, even as the same lens has also produced readings that highlight Odysseus' role as a wretched refugee (Greenwood, 2020, pp. 532-535).

Watch it: An Introduction to Literary Theory

Watch Methodology: An introduction to literary theory (17 minutes) on YouTube

(<https://youtu.be/hXLm3zZYhc0>)

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this section is adapted from “[Approaches to Literary Criticism](https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-englishcomp2/chapter/approaches-to-literary-criticism/)” (<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-englishcomp2/chapter/approaches-to-literary-criticism/>) In *English Composition II* (<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-englishcomp2/>) by Lumen Learning, licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). / Adaptations include removal of feminist and Marxism critical theory sections.

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INTRODUCTION TO SHORT FICTION

A short story is a work of short, narrative prose that is usually centered around one single event. It is limited in scope and has an introduction, body and conclusion. Although a short story has much in common with a novel, it is written with much greater precision.

In this unit, you will work toward writing an analysis of a short story using a critical lens. You will be analyzing “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin which appears in the next chapter. You’ll want to read the story carefully.

How to Read and Analyze Short Fiction

It is impossible to be a good writer without being a good reader first. But what do we mean by ‘good’? Writers go to books for various reasons, whether for guidance and inspiration, or to understand something better about writing, life or both. Perhaps the key to ‘reading as a writer’—in other words, reading with a writerly eye—is being able to understand a text as its constituent parts while still appreciating it as a whole.

Reading the work of a variety of different authors is invaluable for expanding your awareness of what a text can be and do. Reading provides not only inspiration and useful examples of methods, subjects and styles, but also a context within which to develop your own voice and individuality as a writer. The more you learn about how texts operate, the better equipped you’ll be as a writer.

Reading as a writer, also known as ‘critical reading’ or ‘close reading’, involves analyzing how a piece works and how an author achieves particular effects. When reading a short story, readers should consider how the writer uses elements like point of view, tone and structure to generate tension or create a compelling ending.

Think about why the author made certain choices in their piece, and what the outcomes of those choices are. Remember: texts are not simply given. They are the result of countless decisions on the writer’s part. Some of them might be instinctual and might not seem like conscious decision-making to the writer, but a great deal of them will also be the result of painstaking deliberation. We might not be able to know an author’s personal intention, but we can analyze what effect their choices have on us.

Tips for Reading

1. As in poetry, read the short story for enjoyment first. Make sure you understand what is happening in the story. If you have questions about the basic story line, you can read the story again, find a *YouTube* video of someone reading the story out loud, watch a movie of the story or use an online source like *SparkNotes* to give you a summary and basic background about the story.

2. Next, read the story with a pen in hand, annotating as you read. Underline lines you find important, take notes. Circle words you don't know and look up definitions. In this step, you are trying to uncover more meaning.
3. Finally, think about the theme of the story. What lesson does the main character learn? What can we learn about life from reading the story?

After reading a work carefully, annotating it and reacting to it, the next step is to determine how it fits into your perspective on the world. Forming your own conclusions about a literary work, or a topic of any kind, is the first step to shaping an argument and, ultimately, making a case for your perspective through a persuasive essay.

Elements of Fiction

Once you feel you understand the basic story, it's time to think about the elements of fiction. Just as understanding the elements of poetry helps readers better appreciate the artistry of the poet, understanding the elements of fiction helps readers better appreciate and understand the authors of short fiction and their work. Remember that, while the elements are important, they are used by an author to support the theme or main idea of the text—to highlight certain things they want the reader to understand about the characters and the theme.

Theme

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.

Though theme is similar to message or argument, it is not necessarily an assertion like the other two terms are. In connecting to a work's meaning, a theme can refer to key topics of a work. Thus, while we might say "Ode on a Grecian Urn" argues that the state of desire should be appreciated beyond the moment of satisfaction, we might state that the themes of the poem are *becoming* versus *being*, the role of timeless art in a time-dependent world, and the relationship between beauty and truth. The theme of a story is the universal lesson about life that readers can draw from the story. Theme might incorporate broad ideas, such as life/death, madness/sanity, love/hate, society/individual, known/unknown. Theme might also be focused more on the individual, for example the theme could be midlife crisis or growing up.

This video focuses on theme from a film perspective, but it is an interesting discussion that is also applicable to the short story.

Watch It: How to Find a Theme

Watch How to find a theme (6 minutes) on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/rLuKNVny9cM>)

Characterization

The characters are the people in a story. The narrator is the voice telling the story, but the narrator may or may not be a character in the story. The *protagonist* is the central character. The *antagonist* is the force or character that opposes the main character. Characters might be *static* (remain the same) or *dynamic* (change through the course of the story). The way an author creates a character is called characterization.

Characterization includes the physical traits of characters, their personalities and the way they speak. Authors might make judgments, either explicit (stated plainly) or implicit (allowing the reader to judge), about the characters in a story.

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.

Here are some questions to consider about characterization:

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

Watch It: Characterization and Archetypes in Literature

Watch Power in literature, short stories part 5: Characterization and archetype (3 minutes) on YouTube (https://youtu.be/j_mdG6azrMA)

Plot & Structure

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.

Rather than tell everything that might possibly happen to a character in certain circumstances, the writer carefully selects the details that will develop the plot, the characters and the story's themes and messages. The writer engages in character development in order to develop the plot and the meaning of the story, paying special attention to the protagonist, or main character. In a conventional story, the protagonist grows and/or changes as a result of having to negotiate the story's central conflict. A character might be developed through exposition, in which the narrator simply tells us about this person. But more often, the character is developed through dialogue, point of view and description of this person's expressions and actions.

In essence, the plot is the action of the story. Most short fiction follows the traditional pattern of Greek drama, with an introduction, rising action involving a conflict, the climax in which a crisis occurs (the turning point) and a resolution (how the conflict is resolved).

Here are some questions to consider about plot:

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

Here's another great video from Shmoop describing plot.

Watch It: Plot in Literature

Watch Power in literature, short stories part 4: Plot (4 minutes) on YouTube

(<https://youtu.be/SvFB6XVbSAY>)

The structure is the design or form of the story. The structure can provide clues to character and action and can mirror the author's intentions. Look for repeated elements in action, gestures, dialogue, description and shifts.

Setting

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.

Setting doesn't have to just include the physical elements of time and place. Setting can also refer to a story's social and cultural context. There are two questions to consider when dealing with this kind of setting: "What is the cultural and social setting of the story?" and "What was the author's cultural and social setting when the story was written?" The first question will help you analyze why characters make certain choices and act in certain manners. The second question will allow you to analyze why the author chose to have the characters act in this way.

Setting is created with elements such as geography, weather, time of day, social conditions etc. Think about what role setting plays 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?

The time period of the story is also a part of setting. Think about the following questions:

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

Watch It: Setting in Literature

Watch Power in literature, short stories part 2: Setting (5 minutes) on YouTube

(https://youtu.be/rYQOql_Gm88)

Point of View

By point of view, we mean from whose eyes the story is being told. Short stories tend to be told through one character’s point of view. Sometimes a short story is told by a narrator who might be a character in the story or a person completely outside of the events of the story. A text can be written from first person (I/me), second person (you), or third person (he/she/it) point of view.

Here are some questions to consider about point of view:

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

Watch It: What is Point of View?

Watch “What is point of view?”: A literary guide for English students and teachers (6 minutes) on YouTube (https://youtu.be/acURL_KBiRI)

Language & Style

Language and style are how the author presents the story to the reader. These elements are used to create the mood and tone of the story. In particular, look for diction, symbols and irony.

- **Diction:** As in poetry, fiction often utilizes diction and figurative language to convey important ideas. In the short story, “The Story of an Hour,” the words “aquiver,” “spring,” “delicious breath” and “twittering” suggest a kind of rebirth occurring for Mrs. Mallard.
- **Symbolism:** As in poetry, authors of short stories often use symbols to add depth to the story. A symbol represents something larger than itself. Common examples of symbols include a country’s flag, which represents the country, and a heart, which represents love. Each symbol has suggestive meaning—the

flag, for example, brings up thoughts of patriotism, a unified country. What is the value of using symbols in a literary text? Symbols in literature allow a writer to express more in a condensed manner. The meaning of a symbol is connotative or suggestive, rather than definitive, which allows for multiple interpretations.

- **Irony:** Irony is the contrast between appearance/expectation and reality. Irony can be verbal (spoken), situational (something is supposed to happen but doesn't), or dramatic (difference between what the characters know and what the audience knows).

Watch It: Irony

Watch Alanis Morissette updates 'ironic' lyrics (3 minutes) on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/6GVJpOmaDyU>) to learn more about irony.

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this section is adapted from “[45 Introduction to Short Fiction](https://oer.pressbooks.pub/theworryfreewriter/chapter/introduction-to-short-fiction/) (<https://oer.pressbooks.pub/theworryfreewriter/chapter/introduction-to-short-fiction/>)” In *The Worry Free Writer* by Dr. Karen Palmer, licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). /Adaptations include removal of writing activities and H5Ps, Kurt Vonnegut and Point of View Youtube videos and the addition of Point of View YouTube video.

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KATE CHOPIN

Read the biography of the author Kate Chopin below. She wrote the following story, “The Story of an Hour,” which you will analyze as your assignment in this module. Try to consider the time and circumstances of the author when you read and think about the story.

Biography

Katherine O’Flaherty was born in 1850 in St. Louis, Missouri, to an affluent family. She was formally educated in a Catholic school for girls. At age twenty, she married Oscar Chopin and moved with him to New Orleans. In 1879, the couple relocated to Cloutierville, an area where many members of the Creole community lived. The Chopins lived, worked and raised their six children together until Oscar died unexpectedly in 1882, leaving his wife in serious debt. Chopin worked and sold the family business to pay off the debt, eventually moving back to St. Louis to be near her mother, who died soon after Chopin returned.

After experiencing these losses, Chopin turned to reading and writing to deal with her grief. Her experiences in New Orleans and Cloutierville provided rich writing material, and during the 1890s, she enjoyed success as a writer, publishing a number of stories in the local colour tradition. By 1899, her style had evolved, and her important work *The Awakening*, published that year, shocked the Victorian audience of the time in its frank depiction of a woman’s sexuality. Unprepared for the negative critical reception that ensued, Chopin retreated from the publishing world.

She died unexpectedly a few years later in 1904 from a brain hemorrhage.

In her lifetime, Chopin was known primarily as a regional writer who produced a number of important short stories, many of which were collected in *Bayou Folk* in 1894. Her groundbreaking novel *The Awakening* (1899) was ahead of its time in the examination of the rigid cultural and legal boundaries placed on women, which limited or prevented them from living authentic, fully self-directed lives.

The Story of an Hour

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

Published 1894

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the colour that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. When she abandoned herself a little, whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial. She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind,

tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. “Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven’s sake open the door.”

“Go away. I am not making myself ill.” No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister’s importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister’s waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of the accident and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine’s piercing cry; at Richards’ quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of the joy that kills.

Summary

In this module, you read about the importance and significance of literature as well as the concept

of reading and listening with a “literary lens.” In the following folders, you will focus on the reader’s response and historical or biographical lens when experiencing and analyzing different forms of literature.

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this section is adapted from “[28 Kate Chopin \(1850–1904\)](https://opentextbc.ca/provincialenglish/chapter/kate-chopin/) (<https://opentextbc.ca/provincialenglish/chapter/kate-chopin/>)” In *Composition and Literature* (<https://opentextbc.ca/provincialenglish/>) by James Sexton and Derek Soles, licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/). / Adaptations include the removal the short story “Desiree’s Baby” and corresponding assignments.