### Elements of Fiction

**Character, characterization**

Character is essential to plot. In most pieces of literature, characters make the plot happen. What would *Moby-Dick* be without Ahab, Ishmael, the whale, and all the other characters? It would be nothing more than a report on whaling. Well-written characters can be good or evil, strong or weak, or anywhere in between. They make the reader care about what happens in the plot.

**Diction**

Word choice. Words are the writer’s most precious tools. As you read, assume that every word was chosen carefully. And always look up words you do not know.

* **Denotation:** A word’s literal meaning. (What are the denotations of the word “pig”?)
* **Connotation:** Hidden meanings, associations. (What are the connotations of “pig”?)
* **Ambiguity:** The use of language that allows two or more interpretations of a word, phrase, action, or situation, all of which can be supported in the context of the work. Deliberate ambiguity is a useful literary device; unintended ambiguity can cause confusion.

**Figures of speech**, **figurative language**

In the broadest terms, a figure of speech is a deviation from the literal; it is a way of saying one thing in terms of something else.

**Metaphors** (implicit comparisons of unlike things without using like or as: “It’s raining cats and dogs”).

**Similes** (explicit comparisons using like or as, or similar words: “It’s as sweet as honey”).

**Pun** (a play on words: “If you’ve seen one shopping center you’ve seen a mall”).

**Synecdoche** (a part of something is used to signify the whole: A gossipy neighbor is a “wagging tongue”).

**Metonymy** (something closely associated with a subject is substituted for it: Britain’s royalty is often referred to as “the crown”).

**Personification** (the attribution of human characteristics to non-human things: “Sunlight crept over the horizon”).

**Hyperbole** (intentional overstatement or exaggeration used for effect: “This book bag weighs a ton”).

**Understatement** (the opposite of hyperbole: saying “A bit hot out isn’t it?” when it is 110 degrees).

**Paradox** (a statement that on the surface seems to be contradictory but, on closer reading, may turn out to be true: “For when I am weak, then I am strong”).

**Oxymoron** (a condensed form of paradox when two contradictory words are used together: “deafening silence”).

**Images, imagery**

Language that speaks to the senses. Most often, literary images appeal to sight (by creating verbal pictures), but they can appeal to hearing, touch, smell, and taste, as well. They help readers experience the physical world in their imaginations.

**Irony**

A device that uses contradictory statements or situations to reveal a reality different from what appears to be true. There are different kinds of irony. Some examples:

* **Verbal irony**: When a person says one thing but means another. Sarcasm is an extreme form of verbal irony that often uses false praise to hurt someone (“Good job, genius”).
* **Situational irony**: The discrepancy between what appears to be true and what actually exists. Basically, when something unexpected surprises you.
* **Dramatic irony**: When a writer allows the reader to know more about a situation than a character does.
* **Cosmic irony**: When a writer uses God, destiny, or fate to dash the hopes of a character or humankind.

**Plot**

Many readers confuse plot and theme. Plot is the writer’s arrangement of events in the work. If you read something, for example, and I ask you to tell me *what happened*, your answer would be a summary of the plot. Writers use the plot to organize events in a story, and these events can be presented in a number of ways, including:

* Chronologically: The story follows the familiar “one upon a time” pattern, beginning with what happens first, then second, and so on. The story moves from beginning to middle to end.
* By starting *in medias res*: This is a Latin term for “in the middle of things,” and it means that the writer drops the reader into the plot at some point other than a traditional beginning. Much of Shakespeare starts *in medias res*, as do many movies (think of *Pulp Fiction* and *Go*, for example).
* By using flashback: Flashback lets the writer fill the reader in on events that have occurred before the story starts. Some stories are told entirely in flashback.

**Point of View**

When you think about point of view, focus on *who* is relating the events of the work (the narrator) and *how* it is being told (the author is not necessarily the narrator). The author’s decisions about point of view affect how we read the work. There are many ways to tell a story, and more than one point of view can be used. But there are generally two broad categories you should be aware of:

* Third-person narrator: This narrator uses *he*, *she*, and/or *they* to tell the story and does not participate in the action. The third-person narrator can be *omniscient* (all-knowing and able to take readers inside the minds of the characters) or *objective* (able to present the characters only from the outside; unable to tell readers what characters feel and think, only what they say and do).
* First-person narrator: The first-person narrator uses *I* and *we* to tell the story and can be a major or a minor character. As fair and complete as the first-person narrator seems to be, remember that he/she presents only one point of view.

**Satire**

The literary art of ridiculing people, ideas, institutions, and situations in an effort to expose it.

**Setting**

Setting is the context in which the plot of the piece occurs. The major elements of setting are the time, place, and social environment that frame the characters. The setting establishes the world in which the characters live and act.

**Symbol**

Something that represents something else. The meaning of symbols often is suggested by their context. The heart, for example, is a common symbol for love, just as night is for death.

**Theme**

Theme is what the piece of literature is about or what it means (not necessarily what happens). It is the central idea or meaning of a story, and it provides a unifying point around which all other elements (plot, character, setting, etc.) are organized. The theme often pulls everything in the story together. In some stories, the theme is clear; in others, finding the theme requires a little more effort on the part of the reader. See also **plot.**

**Tone**

The writer’s attitude as expressed in the work, and/or the mood the writer creates.