

**LITERARY THEORY**

**3e A**

**SEMESTER 1**

**BASIC CONCEPTS**

**APPROACHES TO LITERATURE**

## I. Genre

### *What type of book is it?*

Genre refers to specific types of literature such as, comedy, tragedy, epic poetry or science fiction.

### *Examples:*

*Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare is a tragedy.  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare is a comedy.  
*Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury is a science fiction novel.  
*Paradise Lost* by John Milton is epic poetry.

### *Some definitions:*

**tragedy:** branch of drama that treats in a serious and dignified style the sorrowful or terrible events encountered or caused by a heroic individual

**comedy:** type of drama or other art form the chief object of which, according to modern notions, is to amuse

### *Activities / genre:*

Find definitions for the following genres and give examples:

- *fable*
- *satire*
- *noir*
- *fairy tale*

## II. Setting

### *When does the story take place? Where? What is/was it like then and there?*

The physical and social context in which the action of a story occurs is called "setting".

In other words: the time, the place and the social environment that frame the characters.

Setting often evokes a mood, an atmosphere and it embeds the action in a very specific zeitgeist.

In order to grasp the deeper meaning of a novel, do some research about its setting. You need to try and understand the social forces that influence the reality of the novel.

### *Examples:*

<i>The Crucible</i> by Arthur Miller		<b>Research</b>
1692, New England, Massachusetts, Salem	=>	Where is that?
in a Puritan community	=>	Who were the Puritans? Lifestyle? Beliefs?
time of the witch hunts	=>	Witch hunts? Who is hunted? Why? ...
<i>The Great Gatsby</i> by Scott F. Fitzgerald		<b>Research</b>
1922, NY, Long Island, roaring twenties	=>	What were the roaring twenties like?
The Jazz Age	=>	What was the Jazz Age?
The Prohibition	=>	What was the Prohibition?

*Activities / research about the setting:*

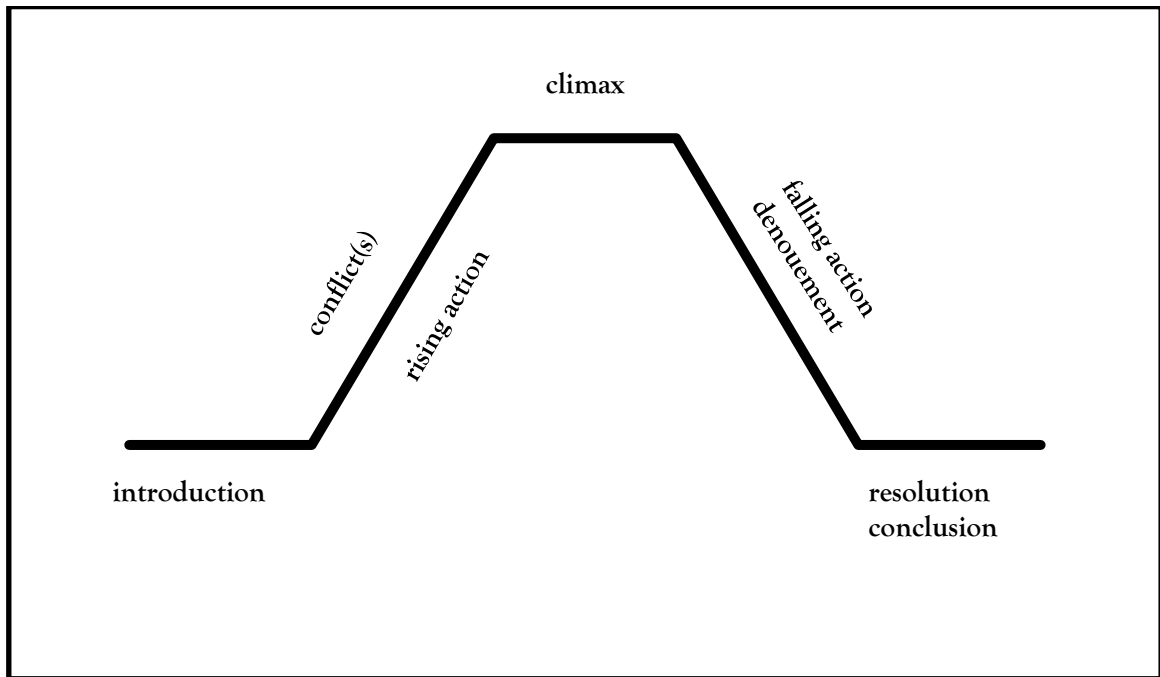
- a) List 7 characteristics of the Puritan lifestyle that are vital to the understanding of their society. There are more, but you have to make a choice.
- b) Write a short paragraph that captures the essence of the roaring twenties or the Jazz Age. Strict word limit: 120 words.

**III. Plot**

*What is the story about?*

The plot is the author's arrangement and selection of incidents in a story.

- 1) *rising action*: complications begin - conflicts arise - problems occur
- 2) *climax*: the moment of greatest emotional tension
- 3) *falling action*: tensions diminish - truths are uncovered - motives exposed
- 4) *resolution*: the end of the conflict - lessons learned - answers



*Activities /plot:*

Plotting a story. Answer the questions below. The answers should give you the backbone of a good story.

1. What is the heroine's or hero's initial situation? Where? When? Who? What?
2. When do complications begin or conflicts arise? Why? With whom? About what?
3. How does the problem grow worse? Why?
4. Describe the black moment at which it seems impossible the problem can ever be solved.
5. Describe the moment of the greatest emotional tension.
6. How is the problem finally resolved?
7. What are the consequences? For whom?
8. How does the story end? Happy ending? Gloomy ending?

#### IV. Point of view

*Who tells the story? How is it told?*

1) *First-person point of view*

The narrator is a character in the story.

The narrator uses "I" when he speaks and thinks.

The reader is restricted to the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of the narrator.

*Example:*

As I walked up the hill, I realized that the atmosphere was just too quiet. There was no sound from the cardinal who was nearly always singing from the top of the maple tree. I thought I saw a shadow move high up on the slope, but when I looked again it was gone. Still, I shuddered as I felt a silent threat pass over me like a cloud over the sun.

*Note:* Make sure you do not confuse the author with the narrator.

Narrator = the storyteller

Author = the inventor of the story

2) *Second-person point of view (rare)*

The reader is pushed into the story or even turned into a character of the story.

*Example:*

As you walk up the hill, you realize that the atmosphere's just too quiet. There's no sound from the cardinal you know is almost always singing from the top of the maple tree. You think you see a shadow move high up on the slope, but when you look again it's gone. You shudder as you feel a silent threat pass over you. You feel cold, like a cloud just passed over the sun.

3) *Third-person point of view*

The narrator is somebody outside the story.

The narrator refers to all the characters by name or as "he", "she" and "they".

*a) omniscient narrator*

- knows everything that needs to be known about the characters and the events
- is not a character in the story
- can move from place to place and pass back and fourth through time
- may slip into and out of characters
- is able to report the thoughts/feelings of the characters, as well as their words/actions

*b) intrusive narrator*

- is like an omniscient narrator
- freely comments on his characters, evaluating and judging their actions or motives
- does not shy away from including his own views about life in general

*c) objective narrator*

- does not have access to the inner feelings and motives of the characters

***Activities / point of view in action / writing skills:***

Your challenge as you write about two characters with opposing opinions is to put aside your own feelings and figure out at how people who are very different from you would look at this situation. The natural inclination is to make one side of the equation—the side most like your natural opinions—stronger. To do so, however, makes the character with the opposing stance appear to be stupid or stubborn. Think of yourself as a debater who is researching the subject so you can effectively argue either side of a proposition. Choose the event that interests you the most.

***Event A:***

A policeman who has been charged with assault—using unnecessary force to subdue a prisoner—stands trial, is acquitted of the charge by a jury, and is free to leave the courthouse.

What is the cop thinking, feeling, seeing, and sensing?

What is the mother of the prisoner thinking, feeling, seeing, and sensing?

***Event B:***

A boss calls an employee into his office to give him/her a termination notice.

What is the boss thinking, feeling, seeing, and sensing?

What is the employee thinking, feeling, seeing, and sensing?

***Event C:***

An ex-husband and ex-wife encounter each other for the first time in years at their daughter's wedding.

What is the ex-husband thinking, feeling, seeing, and sensing?

What is the ex-wife thinking, feeling, seeing, and sensing?

**V. Other narrative techniques**

***How does the narrator speak? How do other characters speak?***

- a) direct speech
- b) indirect speech
- c) interior monologue
- d) stream of consciousness

***How are the events in the story arranged?***

- a) chronological order: A, then B, then C, then D - normal sequence of events
- b) anachrony: the narrator uses flashbacks and/or flashforwards

***Activities / narrative techniques:***

- a) Find out more about the "stream of consciousness" technique. Discuss your findings in class.
- b) Check the following link to learn more about how to use the flashback technique.

<http://home.mchsi.com/~leighmichaels/flashback-the-rules.htm>

## VI. Characterization

*Who is who in the story? => What are they like? => Do they change? => How? => Why?*

Characterization is the process by which a writer attempts to make a character seem real to the reader.

- the protagonist* - the main character(s) of a story
- the antagonist* - the character(s) that stand directly opposed to the protagonist  
the character(s) that give rise to the conflict of the story

### **Example:**

In the movie *The Dark Knight*, Batman is the protagonist and *The Joker* is the antagonist.

- a static character* - a character that remains the same throughout the story
- a dynamic character* - a character that experiences change because of the plot

### **Examples:**

Sherlock Holmes is a static character.  
pipe-smoking, bipolar, neurotic and brilliant - always

Homer Simpson is a static character.  
bald, slow-witted, beer-loving, good-hearted - always

Bilbo Baggins is a dynamic character.  
From an unknown hobbit to an adventurous brave hero

Batman is a dynamic character.  
From orphaned billionaire to merciless dark knight

### **Activities / characterization in action:**

#### **a) static characters**

Characterize 1 of the following people - write between 150 and 200 words.

What is he/she like? What are their virtues and vices?

What do/did they do that makes them what/who they are?

- a wimp
- a righteous CEO
- a crooked policeman
- a dishonest politician

#### **b) dynamic characters**

Stick with the person you chose above and turn it into a dynamic character.

Write about their transformation.

How did their character change and why? What events led to their transformation?

Write between 150 and 250 words.

- a wimp who becomes a hero
- a righteous CEO who becomes dishonorable
- a crooked policeman who is no longer corrupt
- a dishonest politician who becomes upright and respectable

*c) vocabulary file*

Make a list with virtues and vices of people to boost your vocabulary. Include other relevant words that describe someone's character.

**VII. Tone**

*What is the writer's attitude toward the events he describes in his work?*

Tone is how the author deals with the people, places and elements he describes.

The author's style usually reveals the author's tone.

<i>diction:</i>	here: the choice of words
<i>point of view:</i>	see IV
<i>syntax:</i>	combination of words, phrases, clauses and sentences
<i>formality/register:</i>	informal language, slang, formal language language for the right purpose, occasion or audience
<i>verbal irony:</i>	using words to convey a meaning that is opposite of its literal meaning
<i>Example:</i>	Eve: "I dropped out of school at the age of 16 to become a supermodel." Adam: "That was a very smart thing to do."
<i>dramatic irony:</i>	the reader's knowledge of events surpasses that of the characters
<i>Example:</i>	Romeo finds Juliet in a drugged state and he thinks she is dead. He kills himself. When Juliet wakes up she finds Romeo dead and kills herself.
<i>situational irony:</i>	the outcome of a situation is different from what was expected
<i>Example:</i>	A man takes a step aside in order to avoid getting sprinkled by a wet dog and falls into a swimming pool.
<i>sarcasm:</i>	"Irony attends the wounded, but sarcasm, as they say, is biting." Sarcasm is more disrespectful and bitter than irony. Sarcasm is often meant to hurt or offend someone emotionally.
<i>Examples:</i>	"I didn't attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it." <i>Mark Twain</i>  "I feel so miserable without you, it's almost like having you here." <i>Stephen Bishop</i>  "Some cause happiness wherever they go; others whenever they go." <i>Oscar Wilde</i>  "I never forget a face, but in your case I'll be glad to make an exception." <i>Groucho Marx</i>

## VIII. Symbolism

*What does an object, an image or a word symbolize?*

Symbolism is the use of one thing to represent or suggest something else.

A word or an object may evoke or trigger a range of additional meanings beyond its literal significance.

**Example:** a red rose: a symbol for love

**Activities / symbolism:**

Look at the words below. What additional meanings do they trigger beyond their literal significance?

- an apple
- a white horse
- the ocean
- a wave
- a black cat

## IX. Metaphor / Simile

*Can you create meaning through comparisons?*

Metaphors and similes are figures of speech in which two fundamentally unlike things are compared. The purpose of them is to amplify meaning and to create powerful reactions in the reader.

**Difference between a metaphor and a simile:**

Both compare two things, but a metaphor does not use the word "like" or "as".

**Metaphor:** My father is a grumpy bear in the morning.  
Time is a thief.

**Simile:** My father grumbles like a bear in the morning.  
Time is like a thief.

**Activities / metaphors and similes:**

Certain metaphors and similes have become a cliché over time and are considered too obvious or kitschy. Replace the metaphors and similes below with a more creative one. Be fresh!

- You are like a rough diamond.
- You are the light of the world.
- You are the sun in my sky.
- You are strong as an ox.
- Life is a rollercoaster ride.

X. Themes

*What is the central idea of the literary work?*

A theme is an idea or a concept around which the plot, the characters, the setting, the symbols and other elements are organized. A theme refers to abstract concepts that are made clear through the images, symbolism, action and characterization of the text.

*Activities /themes:*

What do you think are the main themes of the following works of literature?

- *Frankenstein*
- *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*
- *The Beach*
- *Dracula*
- *About a Boy*
- *Stone Cold*
- *The Wave*

**STUDY CHECK:**

**WRITING ACTIVITIES:**

- 1) You have plotted a story in chapter III. Now write your first short story. Try and make use of the concepts you have just learned. Create lively and interesting characters. Use adequate vocabulary. Write between 1000 -1500 words.
- 2) Write a short scene about a character who sees something, feels something or smells something that reminds him of something in his past. The first paragraph should set the mood and prepare the reader for the flashback. The second paragraph should be the flashback. The third paragraph brings the character's state of mind back to the present moment.
- 3) Write a poem. Use free verse or a rhyming scheme of your choosing. Try and include metaphors and similes that are fresh and powerful.
- 4) Make a list of the most common themes in literature.
- 5) Invent a new superhero with a new superpower. Write a short biography for your hero and give him or her a catchy name. Make sure you tell your reader how it all happened and what your hero stands for or fights for. (300 - 400 words)

Then invent your superhero's greatest enemy. Write a short biography for him or her and make sure you explain how they became foes. (300 - 400 words)

## I. Approaches to literature - a method

### Introduction:

In order to fully understand any piece of literature you need to look at it from 4 different perspectives. Each perspective will give you valuable information about the literary work. A student with a literary mind should be able to filter, connect, and assimilate all these findings in order to form a proper and educated opinion on a text.

### 1. The 4 perspectives

#### a) The historian - exploring the setting

- being aware of the socio-political forces at work during the work's production

- When was the literary work written? Setting?
- What was the zeitgeist of that time?
- What about the political system / moral values / traditions / customs...?

#### b) The witness - displaying detailed knowledge of the plot and the characters

- having a thorough knowledge regarding the content of the literary work

- What? Who? When? Where? How? How many? How much?
- Development of the story - plot
- Development of the characters - comparison - characterization
- Claims / arguments of the author - evidence

#### c) The psychiatrist - looking for themes, motifs, symbols and messages

- reading between the lines and scratching the surface

- Why? Dig deeper - look into their souls - their psyche - their past
- Speculate / hypothesize / analyze / connect / explain...
- Symbolism - metaphors - similes - themes - traumas - fears - conflicts

#### d) You - linking it all to your own reality and identity

- relating input to your own experience / putting yourself in their position

- What does it all mean to you right now?
- Sympathize / empathize / understand / agree / disagree / judge / differ...



2. *Activity:* *Read the following extract.*  
*Bear in mind the 4 perspectives.*  
*Put down the most important findings for each perspective.*

*Then form an educated opinion regarding the following question:*  
*Explain the behaviour of Harold Krebs.*

**ERNEST HEMINGWAY**  
**SOLDIER'S HOME**

**PLOT:**

In 1919 Harold Krebs came back from his World War I experience in Europe to his home town in Oklahoma. The following extract deals with Krebs's return to his family.

**EXTRACT:**

"Your father is worried, too," Krebs's mother went on. "He thinks you have lost your ambition, that you haven't got a definite aim in life. Charley Simmons, who is just your age, has a good job and is going to be married. The boys are all settling down; they're all determined to get somewhere; you can see that boys like Charley Simmons are on their way to being really a credit to the community."

Krebs said nothing.

"Don't look that way, Harold," his mother said. "You know we love you and I want to tell you for your own good how matters stand. Your father does not want to hamper your freedom. He thinks you should be allowed to drive the car. If you want to take some of the nice girls out riding with you, we are only too pleased. We want you to enjoy yourself. But you are going to have to settle down to work, Harold. Your father doesn't care what you start in at. All work is honorable as he says. But you've got to make a start at something. He asked me to speak to you this morning and then you can stop in and see him at his office."

"Is that all?" Krebs said.

"Yes. Don't you love your mother dear boy?"

"No," Krebs said.

His mother looked at him across the table. Her eyes were shiny. She started crying.

"I don't love anybody," Krebs said.

It wasn't any good. He couldn't tell her, he couldn't make her see it. It was silly to have said it. He had only hurt her. He went over and took hold of her arm. She was crying with her head in her hands.

"I didn't mean it," he said. "I was just angry at something. I didn't mean I didn't love you."

His mother went on crying. Krebs put his arm on her shoulder.

"Can't you believe me, mother?"

His mother shook her head.

"Please, please, mother. Please believe me."

"All right," his mother said chokily. She looked up at him. "I believe you, Harold."

Krebs kissed her hair. She put her face up to him.

"I'm your mother," she said. "I held you next to my heart when you were a tiny baby."

Krebs felt sick and vaguely nauseated.

"I know, Mummy," he said. "I'll try and be a good boy for you."

"Would you kneel and pray with me, Harold?" his mother asked.

They knelt down beside the dining-room table and Krebs's mother prayed.

"Now, you pray, Harold," she said.

"I can't," Krebs said.

"Try, Harold."

"I can't."

"Do you want me to pray for you?"

"Yes."

3. **Activity:** *Interpretation of dreams*  
*Imagine you are a psychiatrist and one of your patients tells you about the following dreams. How would you interpret them?*

***Dream 1:***

I am in a car. I am driving not driving. I am only a passenger. I can't see the face of the person who is driving. We are on a road in the desert. We are approaching a cliff, but we can't stop because the brakes don't work. Just before the car is about to jump over the cliff I wake up.

***Dream 2:***

I am at a party. I need to go to the toilet. When I wash my hands I quickly glimpse into the mirror. I open my mouth and then I notice that my teeth begin to fall out. The teeth look decayed and they simply fall into the lavatory until they are all gone.

***Dream 3:***

I am sitting on the beach. The sun is shining and there are lots of people. Suddenly I see this huge tidal wave on the horizon. It is enormous and it is slowly coming closer. All the other people seem to ignore it, or they don't see it. I quickly get up and run as far from the beach as possible.

4. *Activity: Interpretation of lyrics*  
*One of the best things about music is interpreting lyrics and coming up with your own personal interpretation. Try and interpret the lyrics of the following song. What is its meaning? What is it about?*  
*Then, watch the music clip and see if you change your mind or come up with a different interpretation.*

*The Killers - When you were young*

You sit there in your heartache  
 Waiting on some beautiful boy to  
 To save you from your old ways  
 You play forgiveness  
 Watch it now, here he comes

He doesn't look a thing like Jesus  
 But he talks like a gentlemen  
 Like you imagined when you were young

Can we climb this mountain  
 I don't know  
 Higher now than ever before  
 I know we can make it if we take it slow  
 Let's take it easy  
 Easy now, watch it go

We're burning down the highway skyline  
 On the back of a hurricane that started turning  
 When you were young  
 When you were young

And sometimes you close your eyes  
 And see the place where you Used to live  
 When you were young

They say the devil's water - it ain't so sweet  
 You don't have to drink right now  
 But you can dip your feet  
 Every once in a little while

You sit there in your heartache  
 Waiting on some beautiful boy to  
 To save you from your old ways  
 You play forgiveness  
 Watch it now, here he comes

I said he doesn't look a thing like Jesus  
 He doesn't look a thing like Jesus  
 But more than you'll ever know