

Terms for Analysis of Fiction

Action: The main series of events in a work of fiction; essentially the unfolding of character and plot.

Aesthetic Distance: The attitude of a reader (critic) toward a work of art. The reader may dislike the work for subjective reasons but this should not impair the reader's objective appreciation. It is possible to separate ("distance") life and art, many critics believe.

Allegory: A narrative in which abstractions such as greed, love, hate, and evil are personified. Allegory can be read on two levels, the "surface" level of the characters, action, and setting and the "underlying" level of general or moral significance.

Ambiguity: The quality in some literary language of suggesting more than one meaning, or multiple levels of significance. This in turn can generate doubt or uncertainty in the reader's mind.

Antagonist: A character who sometimes emerges in literature in real or imagined opposition to the *protagonist* of the work.

Antihero: The *protagonist* of a modern novel or play who displays very different qualities from those usually expected of a hero or heroine. Often the antihero is petty, ineffectual, sometimes dishonest. (See *hero*.)

Archetype: A term discussed by Plato and Jung (among others) describing a basic model from which copies are made. Fictional "archetypes" follow patterns of action that reflect fundamental human experiences: birth, death, conflict between parents and children, sibling rivalry for example. Literary themes too can be archetypal (the arduous quest, the pursuit of vengeance), as can characters or personalities (the hero, the rebel, the traitor).

Atmosphere: The prevailing tone or mood of a literary work, particularly when that mood is established by the description of setting.

Catastrophe: A term originally applied to the conclusion of a classical tragedy, and sometimes applied to a tragic or disastrous *denouement* in fiction.

Character: Any person playing a part (major or minor) in a work of fiction. Characters are often labelled "flat" (simple, unsurprising, static) or "round" (complex, often contradictory, dynamic). See also *protagonist* and *antagonist*.

Climax: The highest point of interest in a narrative; the turning point or crux where the most important action occurs. The climax is preceded by the rising action and followed by the falling action and *denouement* (or "resolution").

Conflict: The tension that grows between two or more characters in a piece of fiction: Frankenstein rejects the "monster" he creates and so this troubled creature torments him. Conflict may also be internal: Hamlet wishes to avenge his father yet knows not how or when to do it. As well, conflict can occur between a character and society, or a character and the natural environment.

Convention: A principle of form and/or content which, through frequent use, has become a recognized, "agreed-upon" element of literary technique: for instance conventionally a novelist will introduce *flashbacks* to reveal character and develop plot; an epic conventionally begins in the middle of the action (*in medias res*). Of course a writer can generate effect by subverting convention.

Denouement: The final "unknotting" or unravelling of plot; the resolution of the conflict.

Diction: The writer's choice and arrangement of words. Diction is often described in terms of levels of usage (formal, informal, colloquial), but can be characterized in many ways: for example as abrasive street slang or opaque academic jargon.

Empathy: The act of identifying oneself with an object or person, often used to describe the creative artist's ability to project herself imaginatively into the minds of her characters, or to the reader's imaginative sharing of a character's experience. Empathy differs from sympathy, which denotes a fellow-feeling rather than an imaginative projection.

Epiphany: Literally, a manifestation or showing-forth; the Christian festival of Epiphany commemorates the manifestation of Christ to the Magi or "Wise Men." James Joyce applied the term to literature, to denote a sudden revelation of inner meaning, or a momentary perception of the essence of a character or situation.

Fable: A story that carries a moral lesson. A fable in which the characters are animals is called a "beast fable" and is commonly employed to satirize human foibles.

Figurative Language: Special devices of language not found in literal, denotative language. "Figures of speech" include metaphor, simile, hyperbole, irony, personification, paradox, and symbol.

Flashback: An interruption in the narrative to present an event that occurred at a previous time. Flashbacks enable the writer to present exposition dramatically, and can be used to create a sense of the interweaving of past and present.

Foreshadowing: A hint or suggestion of events to come, used to prepare the reader, to heighten the suspense, or to create a sense of inevitability.

Hero or Heroine: The central character or *protagonist* in a literary work, the focal point of the reader's interest. This figure need not embody virtue, honour, nobility and resourcefulness although traditionally the hero or heroine is associated with some or all of these qualities. See *antihero*.

Imagery: Language that creates word pictures, helping us to "see," "hear," "feel," "taste," or "smell" the object described. Imagery can be a literal, concrete description of character and setting. It can also be a figurative description of an object or sensation, conjured using metaphor and simile.

Irony: A literary device based on the disparity between reality and appearance: irony can chide, refine, deflate and scorn. It is, therefore, one of the most precious weapons of the satirist. There are perhaps two basic kinds: first, verbal irony which at its simplest involves a character speaking tongue in cheek; second, dramatic irony created when the audience or reader understands the true implications of a situation while the characters in the text do not. In all cases there may be an element of the absurd or paradoxical.

Motivation: The presentation of the reasons and explanations for the actions of a character; the qualities, needs or drives that lead a character to act and speak as he does.

Omniscient Narrator: See *point of view*.

Pathos: The quality in art or literature that evokes pity, tenderness or sorrow in the viewer or reader. This in turn can lead to catharsis (a term used by Aristotle in his definition of tragedy) to denote a therapeutic release of tension. Excessive pathos becomes sentimentality.

Plot: Traditionally a series of causally related events involving some conflict or tension, leading to a climax and ending (possibly) in a resolution. Following Aristotle, plot is

analyzed according to the stages of exposition, complication, rising action, climax, falling action, and *denouement*.

Point of View: The vantage point from which the author presents the action. Four common labels for fictional points of view are as follows: first-person, in which the narrator refers to himself as "I"; omniscient, where the narrator sees and knows everything, and can comment at will; limited omniscient such as when the story is told in the third person but is limited to what a single character feels, thinks, sees, and hears; and dramatic or objective, in which the narrator "reports" actions and dialogue, leaving interpretation up to the reader.

Protagonist: the main character in a work of literature.

Recognition: A revelatory discovery, usually at the end of a story; commonly, a character's sudden insight into his own identity. See *epiphany*.

Satire: A literary criticism of society, often employing humour, ridicule, and irony to expose and discourage human vices or follies.

Setting: The time and place in which the action occurs. In a broader sense, the environment of the characters, including location, scenery, and social and cultural conditions.

Structure: The internal plan of a literary work, or the architecture of a piece of fiction. A short story's power can lie in the density of its structure with every word contributing to a single final impression; a novel's power can lie in its scope.

Style: A writer's characteristic mode of expression. This can be analyzed by studying the words he or she uses, literary devices employed, sentence and paragraph structure. See *diction*.

Suspense: The poised anticipation of the reader about the outcome of the action, often based on a tension between expectation and uncertainty.

Symbol: An image which evokes an objective, concrete reality and makes that reality suggest another level of meaning, usually on a universal or abstract level.

Theme: The central or dominating idea in a literary work. Theme may be explicitly stated, but in complex stories theme is more often implicitly presented and open to the reader's interpretation.

Tone: The quality of voice that conveys the writer's attitude towards subject and audience. Tone may be solemn, playful, formal, casual, serious, comic, ironic .. . whatever the creative artist chooses.

Paraphrased from Ann Charters. *The Story and Its Writer*; J. A. Cuddon. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*; Jack Hodgins. *A Passion For Narrative*; C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*, 4th edition, and Emil Hurst and Robert Yarber, eds., *An Introduction to Short Fiction and Criticism*.