

Read the Books. See the Movies. Join the Discussions.



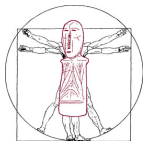
Perspectives on Literature and Film

A year-long series that explores the relationship between literature and film, focusing on the artistic elements and techniques used to tell a story.

VOCABULARY

Mise-en-scene

The arrangement of visual weights and movements within a given space. In theatre, it is defined by the stage; in film, it is defined by the frame that encloses the images. Cinematic *mise-en-scene* encompasses both the staging of the action and the way it is photographed.



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BASIC ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVE

When scholars talk about narrative, they are talking about story-making. How are stories made? What elements and structural patterns can we recognize from one story to another? As readers and movie-goers, it's helpful to be aware of these principles and to understand that they are similar and consistent throughout all cultures and historical periods.

Knowing these elements and structural patterns can assist you in identifying the ideas and themes of a work, the writer and filmmaker's purpose, and the effect the work has on an audience. It also offers a way to discuss the work with other people. For example, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is told from the point of view of a young girl. Why would this be important to how the story affects and creates meaning for the audience?

POINT OF VIEW

Who is telling the story?

First Person (I)

Is the story being told from the first person? What do we know about that person? Is the storyteller reliable? Do we trust his/her perceptions?

Third Person

Omniscient (all knowing)—the writer is free to move from character to character and event to event, exploring the motivations, thoughts, and feelings of the characters, as well as introducing information to the reader at any point.

Selective Omniscient or sometimes referred to as *Central Consciousness*—in this case, the writer selects one character to act as the storyteller. It restricts the story to a single field of vision and range of knowledge available only to that character.

Objective—stories told in this manner act more like a reporter, providing an “objective” or dispassionate eye and ear, never entering the mind or motivations of the characters, and producing an effect that is more like a play.

SETTING (SETS AND MISE-EN-SCENE)

The time and place of the story, situation, event, action. Settings can have realistic, cultural, historical and symbolic meanings. Sometimes the setting can act much like a character. In the recent mystery novels of Alexander McCall Smith, Botswana acts as much like a character as the amateur detective Precious Ramotswe. *Sets* are all the props, backdrops, and construction used in theatrical productions. In film, sets and setting are part of the *mise-en-scene*, which also includes all the other theatrical and stage materials put before the camera, everything from props and lighting

IN ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS*, HE IDENTIFIED SIX ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

- Plot
- Theme
- Character
- Language/Diction/Dialogue
- Music/Rhythm
- Spectacle
(visual elements such as costumes, scenery, lighting)

to the costuming and the actors themselves. Does one character always enter from the left side of the frame? If so, what does it signify?

CHARACTER

Like setting, characters perform different roles in relation to the plot. How characters are depicted help to contribute to the themes and meaning of the work. Often characters are categorized as major and minor and protagonist and antagonist.

Protagonist—A central character whose actions and personality are the focus of the plot. This character can usually be identified by their importance to the plot and by the fact that they usually change in some way by the end of the story. The character matures, learns something important about life, discovers a truth, loses innocence, gives up some kind of illusion. This character usually is presented with a conflict to resolve.

Antagonist(s)—the forces presented against the protagonist, whether persons, objects, social/cultural pressures/traditions, or character traits.

Cause and Effect—Character is often involved in causality of some kind. Things happen, at least partly because people have certain personalities or characteristics, and respond plausibly to other personalities and situations. As we get to know the characters, their drives and goals, we enjoy seeing them develop and become credible depictions of human beings acting in the world. In this view, plot and character are inseparable; plot is not simply a series of happenings, but happenings that come out of character, that reveal character and influence that character

PLOT

The events or happenings as they are selected, arranged and related by the writer/filmmaker. Most often the plot is broken down into the following categories:

Exposition: The aspects of the story that provide the necessary information to setting the story, introducing characters, and so on.

Complication: The beginning of the conflict.

Conflict: The action that takes place between the protagonist and antagonist. This is usually the central focus of the plot. Identifying the conflict helps lead to an understanding of the purpose and theme.

Climax: The point of the greatest tension in the conflict.

Resolution or Denouement (literally, "unknotting"): The outcome, resolution, solving of the conflict. Sometimes the conflict cannot be resolved, and that has meaning also.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

There are a variety of ways in which plots can be structured. How a narrative is structured is directly related to the writer/filmmaker's purpose and to providing a deeper, more satisfying experience for the audience. For example, in Harold Pinter's play and film *Betrayal*, he tells the story of an extra-marital affair backwards, that is, he begins at the end of the affair, showing the denouement first.

Some structural techniques are:

- flashbacks
- dream sequences
- repetition
- shifting among different points of view
- multiple plot lines converging at the end
- flash forwards
- different time frames
- pre-figuring of events that have not yet taken place
- circular plotting where we are led back to the beginning
- backwards story telling, where the denouement is shown first and explained through the plot

THEME

The central idea/point of the story. Most stories have more than one theme. A theme is usually larger than the characters and events in the story. It usually involves universal experiences or says something about humanity. For example, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is more than just a story of a lawyer defending a black man for rape. It's showing us something about how prejudice affects lives.

A good way to identify the theme is to ask certain questions about the work:

- What human experience is the story examining or defining?
- What kinds of attitudes are the writer/filmmaker revealing about this experience?
- Is the writer/filmmaker expressing a “view of life” or defining some basic truth of human experience? Is a moral/ethical judgment about the character and events being presented?

SYMBOL

On the most literal level, a symbol is something which is itself and yet stands for or suggests or means something more than itself. For example, language is symbolic. The letters A P P L E create a word which represents a particular object in the world. A flag is just pieces of cloth yet people use it to represent, symbolize a nation.

In narrative, a symbol may be a physical object (a cane, an egg, wallpaper), a person, a situation, an action, or some other item, which has a literal meaning in the story but suggests or represents other meanings as well.

VOCABULARY

Archetype

An original model or pattern from which other later copies are made, especially a character, an action, or situation that seems to represent common patterns of human life generally. Often, archetypes include a symbol, a theme, a setting, or a character that some scholars think have a common meaning in an entire culture, or universally. Archetypes recur in different times and places in myth, literature, folklore, dreams, art and rituals. The psychologist Carl Jung believed that the archetype originates in the collective unconscious of humanity in shared experiences of a race, such as birth, death, love, family life, struggles--all of which would be expressed in the subconscious of an individual who would recreate them in myths, dreams, and narratives. The study of these archetypes in narrative is known as archetypal criticism or mythic criticism. Archetypes are also called universal symbols.

For example, in the story *The Sword in the Stone*, the sword takes on a number of symbolic meanings. But how do we recognize symbols?

Repetition and Emphasis

The object or person keeps reappearing in the story (often for no seeming realistic reason) and much attention is paid to it. For example, in the story *Whale Rider*, the whale works on a literal level but also suggests other meanings—a bringer of enlightenment, a restorer of order, a healing of the community, and so on.

Association

A person, object or situation is associated with something in human history or universal experience. For instance the protagonist of *Moby Dick* by Hermann Melville is Ishmael, whose name makes us think of the Biblical Ishmael who was cast out in the desert and wandered for years seeking meaning in his life. Melville's Ishmael similarly wanders on a journey across the ocean, searching for a white whale—and symbolically, seeking the same things that the first Ishmael did. It's good to pay attention to names, it's often significant to the larger idea the character represents. Also, there are many universal or archetypal symbols of association: white is associated with innocence and purity as well as death and ghosts; black with evil or danger; green with spring, rebirth, growth; water with rebirth and fertility as well as danger and death; cold and dryness with sterility, and so on.

Comparison/Contrast

Often writers/filmmakers create symbols that are used in contrasting pairs. For example, a black hat of a wife's old dying husband may be used in contrast to the purple hat with a green feather of her young lover; a tree that's portrayed as dying as opposed to a tree full of new growth. Often characters are used in contrast to suggest something about the moral/ethical import of the situation.

Symbols are a powerful element of narrative when used imaginatively. The poet and literature scholar John Ciardi says that a symbol is like a pebble thrown in a pool—it makes many ripples, and you can never really see where the ripples stop. Human beings are symbol makers and they use them to carry great emotional power since they work on our unconscious as well as conscious mind.