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Introduction: Reading, Responding, and Writing about Literature

TERMS TO STUDY

Imaginative Literature	Convention	Central Idea
Genres	Essay	Thesis Sentence
Prose Fiction	Process	Body
Poetry	Invention	Outline
Drama	Prewriting	Audience
Active Reading	Brainstorming	Insight

SUMMARY OF TERMS

Imaginative literature

“Imaginative Literature” (usually called simply “literature”) differs from most of the factual writing we read or write, such as grocery lists, newspaper reports, and history, because imaginative literature presents truths of human nature rather than objective “facts.”

Genres

“Genres” (“classes”) distinguish between major forms, patterns, and purposes of literature. The main genres are prose fiction, poetry, and drama.

Prose fiction

“Prose Fiction” (“narrative fiction” or just “fiction”) tells a story in wording which is usually close to ordinary patterns of speech. It includes novels, short stories, fairy tales, mythology, romance, and epic. The focus in fiction is usually on one or a few characters who change or grow due to the people they confront and/or the problems they deal with. Fiction is written to be read by a single reader (though sometimes it may be read aloud to an audience).

Poetry

“Poetry” differs from prose in being more economical (using fewer words) and depending more heavily on imagery, figurative language, rhythm, and sound effects (such as rhyme and alliteration). While poetry is often read by a single reader to himself, poetry works best when read aloud, and is therefore often read to an audience.

Drama

“Drama” (or “plays”) is designed to be performed by actors. Like fiction, it may focus on a single character or a small number of characters, but it presents its story as if it were happening in the present and is written to be performed before an audience. Some drama uses the same stylistic elements as poetry: imagery, rhythm, and sound effects.

Active reading

“Active Reading” involves a concentrated response by the reader. An example of this process is found on pages 3–11 in the marginal reactions to Maupassant’s “The Necklace.”

Convention

“Convention” (a literary device) is any feature of a work of literature which is standard for that genre (and at times a specific period of time or place) and therefore expected by the reader. E.g., a moral in a fable.

Essay

“Essay” is a fully developed set of paragraphs that grow systematically out of a central idea.

Process

“Process” refers to consciously using and logically working with the following steps in writing: discovery of an idea, finding support and developing the idea, writing the idea and support clearly, and editing and rewriting to make the finished essay clear, interesting, and forceful.

Invention

“Invention” (the “planning stage”) refers to the uncovering, discovering, and reacting needed before you begin writing.

Prewriting

“Prewriting” (the “thinking out stage”) refers to the studying, thinking, raising and answering questions, and planning and developing ideas as one writes and edits drafts.

Brainstorming

“Brainstorming” is a “free play of mind concentrated to fit details from the work to the subject of the developing essay.” From your notes on the story, select those which relate clearly to the subject you’ve chosen to write on (such as the character of Mathilde in “The Necklace”), and expand each note to relate specifically to your topic. When you’ve finished, decide which ideas to use and develop the selected sentences into paragraphs (see the examples on pages 20–21); you can then determine your central idea.

Central Idea

The “central idea” is “the common thread or term” which ties together your notes and paragraphs. “Because... [it] is so vital in shaping an essay, you should formulate it as a complete sentence.” (See pp. 21–22.)

Thesis Sentence

The “thesis sentence” is a detailed sentence “plan or groundwork for [the] essay; it connects the central idea and the list of topics in the order of presentation.” (See pp. 23–24.)

Body

The “body” of the essay is where you fit together the materials you have been working up in your prewriting (the “topics” of the essay) in order to support the idea of your thesis sentence. It consists of the details needed to prove the accuracy of your thesis statement.

Outline

The whole structure which you develop in prewriting to shape and organize the essay can be called the “outline” of the essay. Outlining helps you create a plan that guarantees a tight, logical structure for your finished essay. One form of outline is the analytical sentence outline (see p. 25).

Audience

“Audience” refers to all those who will read your essay. Imagine an audience of fellow students, faculty members, and others who have read the story, poem, or play and are interested in your interpretations. NEVER think of the teacher as your only reader. Since your readers have read the work, refer to specifics in the story only to support your developing argument and to make your readers think more about details they already know. (See the examples on pp. 32–33.)

Insight

“Insight” comes from letting your central idea expand (“grow”) as you develop your essay. To gain insights, be open to discoveries (see p. 36), and look beyond the obvious to find more interesting, deeper thoughts. (Why Mathilde brings about the hardships she and her husband suffer is more interesting than just what they suffer.) Develop from lesser points up to the idea you consider most forceful, most important.

2

The Elements of Fiction

TERMS TO STUDY

Fiction	Character	Third Person
Narration	Plot	Limited
Epic	Structure	Omniscient
Fables	Action, Incident	Dramatic
Parables	Organic Unity	Description
Modern Fiction	Conflict	Commentary
Romance	Protagonist	Tone
Novel	Antagonist	Irony
Short Story	Theme (Central Idea)	Situational
Realism	Narration	Dramatic
Verisimilitude	Style and Mood	Verbal
Fantasy	Point of View	Symbol
Art of Imitation	Speaker	Allegory
Postulate	Persona	Precis
Premise, <u>Donnée</u>	First Person	

SUMMARY OF TERMS

Fiction

“Fiction” as a literary term means a story based on imagination rather than fact. Its primary mode of presentation is narration, though current fiction uses dialogue heavily, creating a more dramatic effect. Fiction includes such sub-genres as epic, fable, parable, romance, novel, and short story.

Epic

“Epic” is a long narrative, usually in poetic form, originally recited before an audience.

Fable

A “fable” is a brief narrative, often involving animal characters, ending in a clearly stated moral.

Parable

A “parable” is a brief narrative utilizing common events and situations, told to illustrate a complex point or lesson.

Modern Fiction

“Modern fiction” began with the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when writers began accepting that all human situations and conditions might be dealt with in fiction.

Romance

“Romances” were tales of adventure, travel, and love, first written by Marie de France in the 12th century and mastered by such writers as Boccaccio and Chaucer.

Novel

The “novel” was the form first written in the 17th and 18th centuries, a combination of elements of romance with the ideas of modern fiction.

Short Story

“Short stories” originated with Edgar Allen Poe’s idea that a brief tale best sustained a reader’s concentrated attention.

Realism

“Realism” refers to the deliberate attempt in fiction to adhere to patterns of action and characterization which seem “real” in the light of actual human experience. Also known as “verisimilitude.”

Fantasy

“Fantasy” refers to fiction (or elements in fiction) which clearly deviate from what we know of as “real.” Keep in mind that within fantasy one can still find characters and situations which are realistic.

Art of Imitation

The “art of imitation” refers to the writer’s ability to create fictional characters and situations which imitate what actually has happened or might happen and which therefore reflect verisimilitude.

Postulate or Donnée

A “postulate” or donnée is the premise on which a given story is built. While this premise may be fantastic, if the characters and situations within that donnée are realistic, the story will be effective.

Character

“Character” is the term for a person, animal, or any other personified actor in a story. “Characterization” refers to the cause and effect development of a character’s personality through the actions and conflicts of the story.

Plot

“Plot” is the interweaving of actions and character in a unified pattern of cause and effect.

Structure

“Structure” is the way a plot is put together. It may be virtually the same as plot IF the story is arranged in straightforward narrative; but many stories are narrated in terms of memories, letters, conversations, and such, where structure diverges markedly from plot. “Structure” may also refer to a small part of the arrangement of a story, whereas “plot” always refers to the “entire pattern of conflict” shown “through cause and effect in the story.”

Actions, Incidents

“Actions” or “incidents” are what happens in the story as a result of the conflicts which the characters face.

Organic Unity

“Organic unity” refers to the structure which results when a story seems to “grow” logically from the realistic mixing of certain clear characters with specific conflicts.

Conflict

“Conflict” refers to any problem which results from the protagonist’s facing an antagonist, either another person or an opposing force in nature or the environment or within himself.

Protagonist

The “protagonist” in a story is the “primary struggler” (from Greek proto “first” + agonistes “wrestler”). May be a hero, a common person, or a villain, or any combination of these. His/her central position in the story is relative: he/she is developed in more detail, is involved in more of the action, or is most clearly central to the story.

Antagonist

The “antagonist” is generally a person in opposition to the protagonist. However, the antagonists in a story are all those persons, forces, or ideas which create conflict for the protagonist. Therefore, in a single story the protagonist might face a human antagonist who wants to take his land, struggle against drought which seems determined to

destroy his crops, and wrestle with doubts that he can save the farm.

Theme (central idea)

The “theme” of a story is the idea on which the story is built, or out of which the story grows. It might be a commonplace, such as the idea that friendship is more important than money, or it might be much more complex. In fact, most good stories have several ideas, interwoven into the particular theme which the stories bears out.

Narration

“Narration” means “telling.” Fiction began as primarily straight narration. Current fiction, however, also depends heavily on what the characters say (“dialogue”). Instead of just telling us what happened, current fiction prefers to show. A novelist has said, “Don’t say, ‘The old lady screamed.’ Bring the old lady in and let her scream.”

Style and Mood

“Style,” a major tool of the writer, consists mainly of diction (choice of words), imagery, and sentence patterns. The types of words chosen help to create mood (“atmosphere”) and delineate character. Imagery (precise images of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch as well as such comparisons as metaphor, simile, and the like) further define the feeling of the story. Sentence patterns (short, terse sentences; long, leisurely rambling ones; or complex, convoluted sentences carrying us into labyrinths of philosophy) can also create mood or determine the depth, complexity of theme, and point of view of a story.

Point of View

“Point of view” refers to who is telling us the story and how he or she feels about it. While the “speaker” may seem merely an extension of the writer at times, he may be a persona, an invented character whose limitations or peculiarities come out in what he tells us and how he tells it.

First Person

Point of view also has to do with how involved in the story the speaker is. A “first person” narrator is a speaker who is himself part of the story’ he or she is either the protagonist or a character who has observed the protagonist. First person narration creates immediacy in storytelling, along with some données: one is that if the speaker is talking to us now, he or she must have survived whatever happened. (This is why first person narration is rarely used in any suspense or mystery story where the reader is expected to fear for the protagonist’s life.)

Third Person

“Third person” narration is divided into “limited omniscient,” “omniscient,” and “objective” (or dramatic) narration.

Limited

“Limited omniscient” narration refers to a speaker telling of a protagonist’s thoughts feelings as well as what he or she says and does, without revealing the inner thoughts or feelings of other characters. This form has some of the immediacy and intimacy of first person narration because it focuses on just one person’s point of view. It also creates two main differences:

- (1) We do not know that the protagonist survives his crises;
- (2) we may understand the protagonist’s inner thoughts and feelings better than he or she does.

Omniscient

“Omniscient” narration occurs when the speaker gives the reader the thoughts and feelings of other characters as well as the protagonist. The effect of this point of view is to give a broader scope, since the views of very different characters may be given.

Dramatic

“Dramatic” results from the speaker telling nothing of the inner thoughts or feelings of any of the characters. We see what they do, we hear what they say, and we must judge — as we do in viewing a play — how honest, sincere, and well-informed they are. The effect of this point of view is similar to what we experience in real life.

Description

“Description” refers to the detail with which the writer fills in place, character, and action. Most modern writers depend more on straightforward fast-paced action and on dialogue to carry their stories, but writers in the past — and some current ones — use detailed descriptions (particularly at key points in the story) to create intense moods.

Commentary, Analysis, Interpretation

Explanation of the writer’s theme (or any part of it) in a story is called “commentary,” “editorial analysis,” or “interpretation,” an accepted pattern in early novels, such as those of Richardson and Fielding in the 18th century or George Eliot or Jane Austen in the 19th century. Modern writers tend to avoid commentary, leaving the reader to comprehend the theme from the elements of the story itself.

Tone

“Tone” refers to the attitude of the speaker to the events and characters and the methods used by the writer to convey this attitude. The tone of a story may be sad, exhilarated, comic, bitter, angry, ironic — any feeling produced by the diction, dialogue, conflicts, and imagery of the story.

Irony

“Irony” refers to the discrepancy between what is expected and what occurs. It is the tone created when things in a story do not turn out as expected, or when a character says something quite different from what he or she really means.

Situational Irony

“Situational irony” occurs when the events in a story develop quite differently from what one is led to expect.

Dramatic Irony

“Dramatic irony” occurs when the reader sees the situation clearly but the protagonist does not and says or does things clearly indicating this discrepancy. E.g., much of the early reaction to the investigations in All the President’s Men.

Verbal Irony

“Verbal irony” is a statement contrary to fact or feelings, as when someone says, “Oh, I’m just fine!” while sitting on the floor amid a tumble of fallen books. “Sarcasm” refers to particularly heavy verbal irony, usually quite bitter. Verbal irony ranges from the gentle to the sarcastic.

Symbol

A “symbol” is anything — usually an object, person, or action — which carries two or more levels of meaning. On one level the symbol is just itself — perhaps a large maple tree; on another, however, it suggests a layers of ideas and feelings which have come to be associated with the symbol. Thus the maple tree might be a symbol of family reunions and childhood summer fun.

Allegory

“Allegory” results when a story is composed of an interrelated pattern of symbols which allows the whole story to be read on two different levels — the “surface” story and the suggested parallel. E.g., John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress.

Precis

A “precis” is a condensation of a work of literature. Good precis writing requires that you

- (1) read the work and take notes,
- (2) put the work aside and write; and
- (3) compare your precis to the work, supplying quotes for any exact wording which you’ve borrowed from the work.

A good precis will be mostly in your own words while giving an accurate sense of the main elements of the work.

Plot and Structure

TERMS TO STUDY

Plot	Doubt	Crisis
Structure	Tension	Climax
Formal	Interest	Exposition
Actual	Irony	Flashback
Conflict	Cause and Effect	Resolution
Dilemma	Complication	<u>Denouement</u>

SUMMARY OF TERMS

Plot and Structure

“Plot” and “structure” are NOT the same: “Plot” means what happens — the conflicts between people and/or things which make this story interesting. “Structure” means the arrangement of the parts of the story.

Formal Structure

The term “formal structure” indicates a simple, chronological arrangement of the plot of a story, starting with exposition and ending with denouement. Especially for stories which are not told in chronological order, formal structure can be very useful in analyzing plot.

Actual Structure

“Actual structure” refers to the arrangement of character and conflict; for instance, “A Worn Path,” by Eudora Welty, does not begin with exposition, we don’t know clearly who this old woman is, where she comes from, or why she’s going to town. The why of her trip, particularly, affects how we react to and understand the story — and we learn why only at the story’s end. (This delay of important facts is a typical element in detective stories.)

Conflict (Study Guide p. 12)

Dilemma, Doubt, Tension, and Interest

“Dilemma” refers to a situation in which the protagonist is faced with two (or more) choices (either equally horrendous or equally appealing). The reader’s doubts about the outcome of such choices create tension and interest, basic ingredients of good storytelling.

Irony (Study Guide p. 15)

“Cosmic irony” (irony of fate) occurs when a sympathetic protagonist’s expectations seem dashed by malevolent fortune or an uncaring God.

Cause and Effect Relationships

Cause and effect relationships are necessary for events to become a story: the chronology of events must be interwoven with why they occurred and how they affect human concerns and motivations.

Complication

The “complication” is the beginning of the major conflict of the story, pitting the protagonist against one or more of the story’s antagonists.

Crisis

A “crisis” in a story is any turning point before which the conflicts increase in tension and after which they move toward apparent resolution. In a “crisis,” the protagonist takes action to try to resolve the primary conflict. But since this action may not be successful, there may be several “crisis points” in a complex story. In a simple story, however,

the “crisis” will probably be the “climax.” “Dilemma” is a crisis in which the protagonist is frankly baffled as to which of two actions to take, usually under circumstances which demand that he choose one or the other course immediately.

Climax

“Climax” is the highest level of crisis. While many crises may occur in a story, the climax is the point after which the tension and doubts of the story seem to become less intense.

Exposition, Flashback, In Medias Res

“Exposition” is the background explanation of a story: the who, where, when, what, and why. Parts of this may be omitted at the beginning, the missing information being provided in bits as the story goes on (through conversation, memories, or even a shift back to an earlier scene which sheds light on what is now happening — called “flashback” or “retrospective”). Most stories give readers fairly full exposition, though many stories written in this century delay some of it in favor of starting off “in the middle of things” (in medias res).

Resolution (Denouement)

“Resolution” (French denouement, “unknotting”) is the point where the conflicts of the story are explained and the problems are resolved. This formal “tying up” is omitted in many contemporary stories, leaving us to conclude for ourselves how things turn out. A story with a clear resolution is Crane’s “The Blue Hotel.” One without a clear resolution is Welty’s “A Worn Path.”

4

Characters: The People in Fiction

TERMS TO STUDY

Character	Flat	Verisimilitude
Traits	Static	Probability
Appearance, Action	Stock	Plausibility
Round	Stereotype	
Dynamic	Complications	

SUMMARY OF TERMS

Character

“Character” means “an extended verbal representation of a human being” within a story. “Characterization” is used to mean the descriptions, actions, dialogue, and commentary by which the writer conveys the person he or she wants us to see.

Traits

“Character traits” refer to the qualities revealed in the story, the details by which the reader judges who this character is, whether he is good or bad, and whether the character is capable of changing.

Appearance, Action

Two ways in which character can be revealed are physical appearance and actions. Consider a character’s appearance and actions in terms of what they reveal about his or her mental or psychological qualities. While appearance and action are good indicators of character in most stories, occasionally writers create complex characters who are not easily judged by how they look or even by parts of what they do.

Round

A character is “round” when the reader sees enough facets (“sides”) of him or her to recognize lifelike complexity.

To create “roundness,” a writer may use many ways of revealing character: direct commentary, actions, dialogue, and the comments of other characters. A round character is always an individual and appears capable of change.

Dynamic

A round character may be “dynamic”; that is, he or she may change in the course of the story. Such change needs to come, if it does, logically out of the character’s qualities and the situations he or she deals with.

Flat

A “flat” character lacks development, usually because he or she is not a protagonist and therefore functions in a minor role requiring only a few traits at most. A flat character usually represents a type or group (e.g., lawyers in general rather than a clearly developed individual lawyer).

Static

Lacking development, a flat character is always static; that is, he does not change. Round characters may also be static if they do not undergo a change of outlook, maturity, or understanding.

Stock

A flat character who represents a well-known group, such as the “henpecked husband” or the steely-eyed, monosyllabic cowboy is known as a “stock character.”

Stereotype

A “stereotype” is a stock character who says and does nothing but what the reader has come to expect of this type. Highly conventionalized stories — some westerns and murder mysteries, for example — have protagonists who never rise above the level of stereotypes (some writers are good enough to overcome the conventions and write exciting stories, most don’t.)

Complications

“Complications” — unexpected turns of thought and action — can turn an apparent stock character into a round one; e.g., the wife in “A Jury of Her Peers.”

Verisimilitude

“Verisimilitude” (probability, plausibility) refers primarily to characters, and means that their actions, statements, and thoughts seem what humans in similar situations would be likely do (not what they could possibly do or what some individuals have done). A woman tending the dead body of her husband for several years insisting that he is merely very ill, is not an example of verisimilitude — even though this has occurred.

5

Point of View

TERMS TO STUDY

Point of View

Voice

Persona

Narrator

Speaker

Authorial Voice

Physical Position

Opinion

First Person

Second Person

Third Person

Dramatic (Objective)

Omniscient

Limited Omniscient

Point of View Character

Mingling

Evidence

SUMMARY OF TERMS

Point of View

“Point of view” involves the person telling the story and the perspective from which he or she tells it.

Voice, Persona, Narrator, Speaker

“Voice,” “persona,” “narrator,” “speaker” are all terms for the storyteller, as opposed to the writer. Point of view involves the character of the speaker, so his or her beliefs, attitudes, and understanding help explain why the speaker tells the story in the way that he does.

Authorial Voice

“Authorial voice” is the narrator in a work where the author appears to speak directly. It is more logical to speak of the “authorial voice” than of the author himself or herself, since in a work of literature one can never be sure.

Physical Position

Point of view involves, particularly in the case of first person narration, the question of how involved in the story the speaker has been (or still is). For instance, a narrator may have seen all or part of the action and characters about whom he is telling us, or might even be the protagonist in the story. In either case, we will want to consider several questions:

- a. How honest is the speaker? Does he/she have any apparent reasons for misrepresenting what happened, such as ego, guilt, etc.?
- b. How mature (is he/she too young, too naive, etc., to understand what has happened?)?
- c. Do external limitations restrict what the speaker knows (or can ever know) about the story? Does he/she depend on others for facts? If so, are they trustworthy? Has he/she “researched” the material at all before telling us the story? If so, where? How?

Clearly an objective or omniscient narrator cannot be judged in the same ways: these narrators remain vague, almost invisible and impersonal, able to tell us what happened (even, in the case of the omniscient narrator, what went on inside characters’ minds) without ever bringing themselves into the story. This “transparent narrator” is particularly the case in objective narration, where the point is to make the reader see and hear the story as if he or she were there, observing.

Opinion

Some people confuse “point of view” with “opinion.” “Opinion” means what one thinks or believes at a particular moment — something found in all humans and all believable characters in literature. “Point of view,” on the other hand, means all the idiosyncrasies of personality, background, understanding, and physical proximity of a speaker to what is being discussed or told. Opinion may be interesting but has no value whatsoever in discussing point of view; point of view, though, can explain why any speaker holds the opinions he or she does.

First Person (Study Guide p. 13)

Second Person

“Second person” point of view occurs when the narrator tells what the reader or listener has done. (“You got up early that morning...”) This method is not used much in literature. (It occurs most often in Pick-a-Path interactive adventure books or computer games, in Colombo style mystery story resolutions, and stories about people with amnesia.)

Third Person (Study Guide pp. 13–14)

Dramatic (Objective) (Study Guide p. 14)

Omniscient (Study Guide p. 14)

Limited Omniscient (Study Guide p. 14)

Point of View Character

A “point of view character” is the protagonist of a story told from limited point of view. E.g., Mathilde in “The Necklace” or Granny in “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.”

Mingling

“Mingling” occurs when a writer, after presenting most of a story in one point of view (usually limited or first person, to give readers an intimate sense of the character’s perceptions — and limitations), shifts to another point of view (such as omniscient or objective, to give a more balanced view of the protagonist. E.g., the end of “Young Goodman Brown,” where limited narration changes to objective.

Evidence

Judge the evidence given by the narrator: By piecing together all of what you are given you can reasonably judge the qualities, decisions, and behavior of the characters. In first person point of view, the speaker — like you or I — might not have all the information needed to tell the truth (or might even want to conceal part of it). Be careful, even with dramatic point of view, not to accept surface appearances as truth. Don’t jump to conclusions: patiently gather information, apply the problem-solving logic, consider reasonable hypotheses, and then draw a valid conclusion.

6

Setting: Place and Objects in Fiction

TERMS TO STUDY

Setting	Statement	Atmosphere
Natural	Character	Irony
Manufactured	Character	
Credibility	Framing Method	

SUMMARY OF TERMS

Setting

“Setting” refers to

- (1) natural location and time (such as the mountains of southern France in the last part of 1822),
- (2) artificial structures (such as houses, fences, roads, etc., which are part of the environment or background of the story), and
- (3) any objects which the characters make use of in the story (such as swords, books, cars, etc.).

Natural Setting

“Natural setting” involves nature and the out-of-doors. “Nature,” as a personification of the forces of nature, is a major influence on characters and situations in many stories.

Manufactured Setting

“Manufactured setting,” any manmade things in the story, show something of the person or people who made them and/or own them.

Credibility

The “credibility” (verisimilitude) of a story depends on how believable the details of setting are. Fantasy stories such as “Young Goodman Brown” and “The Masque of the Red Death” achieve credibility “even though they make no pretenses at everyday realism” due to detailed, believable settings.

Statement

Setting may become a means of making a “statement” about life. E.g., the paths in “Young Goodman Brown” and “A Worn Path” suggest very clearly the types of lives Brown and Old Phoenix have chosen to live by.

Character

Setting may intersect with character: in one or more scenes the setting may directly explain the character’s choice of action, or may motivate him to behave as he does. E.g., the influence of the kitchen on the wife in “A Jury of Her Peers.”

Organization

Setting may help organize the story: the whole story may take place within a limited setting (e.g., “The Lottery”) or may change settings for an obvious reason (e.g., “The Necklace”).

Framing Method

The “framing method” organizes the story within a repeated scene, used at the story’s beginning and end (e.g., “Act of Faith” and “Young Goodman Brown”). The juxtaposition of the same setting, with the insights gained during the story, creates a marvellous opportunity for irony.

Atmosphere

“Atmosphere” (mood) is the feeling generated within a story. Setting affects atmosphere heavily: the details of the forest in “Young Goodman Brown” create a gloomy, oppressive, haunting mood, while in another story a forest might give a feeling of rest, shelter, and happiness. Colors often affect atmosphere: reds, oranges, and yellow suggest warmth and happiness; blues, greys, browns, and black often suggest cold and sadness.

Irony

“Irony” occurs when the setting is at odds with what happens there. For instance, an open village square (“The Lottery”) gives a sense of light and air and life — in ironic counterpoint to a killing which subsequently occurs there. Sealed doors (“The Masque of the Red Death”) intended to keep plague out ironically seal party-goers in with the Red Death.

7

Style: The Words That Tell the Story

TERMS TO STUDY

Style	Rhetoric	Parallelism
Diction	Counting	Cumulatio or Accumulation
Formal	Sentence Types	Chiasmus or Antimetabole
Neutral	Simple	Style in General
Informal	Compound	
Specific — General	Complex	
Concrete — Abstract	Compound-complex	
Denotation — Connotation	Loose and Periodic	

SUMMARY OF TERMS

Style

“Style” means a writer’s choice and arrangement of words “in the service of content.” Style is highly individualistic, differing from writer to writer and from one purpose to another (even at times within a specific work).

Diction

A writer’s selection of specific words is called “diction.” Good diction requires powerful verbs to describe actions

and appropriately detailed nouns and adjectives to convey accurate descriptions, explanations, and reflections.

Formal

“Formal” or high diction uses standard choice of words (often polysyllabic), and standard word order, and no “contractions” (e.g., “It is I”).

Neutral

“Neutral” or middle diction is normal, everyday usage of standard vocabulary which avoids long words and uses contractions “when necessary” (e.g., “It’s me”). Words in neutral diction “do not draw attention to themselves but are centered on the topic.” They are “like clear windows, while words of the high style are more like stained glass.”

Informal

“Informal or low diction” includes “colloquial — the language used by people in relaxed, common activities” and “substandard or slang expressions.” It is “appropriate for dialogue in stories, depending on the characters speaking, and for stories told in the first-person point of view as though the speaker is talking directly to a group of sympathetic and relaxed close friends” (e.g., “A & P”).

Specific and General Words

“Specific” words refer to specific things, “general” to broad classes. E.g., “Vacations are fun” is general. “My vacation to Bimini was exciting because I learned to surf” is specific.

Concrete — Abstract

“Concrete” words describe qualities or conditions. E.g., “cold” describes a quality clearly distinct from “hot.” “Abstract” words refer “to qualities that are more removed from the concrete, and abstract words can therefore refer to many classes of separate things.” For example, “good” is so abstract that it tells far more about the person saying it than about the thing described.

Denotation — Connotation

“Denotation” is the basic meaning of a word. “Connotation” is all the associated meaning and feeling that a word has picked up over years of use. Denotation determines the rightness of a word; connotation determines its power in specific context.

Rhetoric

“Rhetoric” is “the art of persuasive writing” or “the general art of writing.”

Counting Words

Counting words per sentence is a way to analyze style and develop rhetoric (e.g., counting verbs, adjectives, or the average of syllables per word). Such counts indicate whether a writer’s style is terse or expansive, choppy or smooth. For a “definitive test of style,” word count must be combined with analysis of other matters, such as sentence types used.

Sentence Types

“Sentence types” are judged by number of clauses per sentence and types of clauses (i.e., independent or dependent).

Simple

A “simple sentence” consists of one subject and one verb (known as a “main clause”), with whatever modifiers and complements the writer chooses. Such sentences are often short, used for actions, declarations, and idiomatic dialogue. Note, however, that with a string of prepositional phrases, a “simple sentence” can become quite long.

Compound

A “compound sentence” consists of two or more simple sentences (main clauses), joined by “and,” “but,” “or,” “for,” “nor,” “yet” or “so” or by a semicolon without a conjunction. Compound sentences are used to join ideas of similar importance or “balance.”

Complex

A “complex sentence” is one main clause and one or more subordinate clauses. (A “subordinate clause” is a subject and verb, with modifiers and complements as needed, so worded that it cannot stand alone as a logical sentence.) Complex sentences can express cause and effect relationships (“Because he lied, his wife turned from him”), as well as analysis and reflection.

Compound-Complex

A “compound-complex sentence” is exactly what it sounds like: a combination of a compound and a complex sentence. Like the complex sentence, the compound-complex is ideal for expressing involved relationships. Since such a sentence can be very long, it may become very difficult (note Faulkner’s use of this sentence type repeatedly in “Barn Burning”).

Loose and Periodic

A “loose sentence” states a main idea directly, up front, followed by any number of modifiers or secondary ideas after. E.g., “Jean came into the room just then, wearing a long white dress with ruffles at the neck, and red shoes and a red bow in her hair.” A “periodic sentence,” on the other hand, presents modifiers and subordinate clauses first, leading up to the climactic main idea. E.g., “Wearing a long white dress with ruffles at the neck, and red shoes and a red bow in her hair, Jean walked into the room just then.” A periodic sentence, as you can see, is an effective tool for suspense, and is usually employed only at key points in a narrative.

Parallelism

“Parallelism” is deliberate “repetition of the same grammatical form (nouns, verbs, phrases, clauses) to balance expressions, conserve words, and build up to climaxes.” E.g., Julius Caesar’s “I came, I saw, I conquered” (repetition of short clauses, each with subject “I” and a one-word verb). Longer parallel phrases or clauses create balance between ideas, helping to organize a passage and give it force.

Cumulatio or Accumulation

“Cumulatio” (accumulation) occurs when details build up in sentences beginning with the same structure (as the “They” sentences in “The Found Boat”: see p. 269).

Chiasmus or Antimetabole

Another type of parallelism is “chiasmus,” or antimetabole. A pattern of two or more verbs, nouns, or whatever is repeated in reverse order (as in the example from “Luck” p. 270). It is not used much today, but has been much used in the past.

Style in General

“Style,” if it is successful, is “invisible”: you will probably not think about it as you read. But keep two points in mind:

- (1) Writers use elements of style comfortable to the audiences of their time. Some elements will give you difficulty until you work with them enough to recognize them and understand how they work.
- (2) Observing elements of style, even in modern works with which you feel immediately comfortable, will let you better understand what the writer has done in the story and how he has done it. Seeming simplicity and ease of reading is usually the result of careful stylistic construction and artful control.

8

Tone: Attitude and Control in Fiction

TERMS TO STUDY

Tone
Literary

Laughter, Comedy, and Farce
Irony

Overstatement
Double-entendre

Speaking
Tone & Character
Tone & Author

Verbal
Understatement

Situational
Cosmic
Dramatic

SUMMARY OF TERMS

Tone (Study Guide p. 14)

Literary and Speaking Tone

“Literary tone” comes from the concept of a speaker’s tone of voice. The way a speaker says something often conveys that person’s feelings about the situation, about the subject spoken of. “I feel great!” conveys joy and energy when it is said brightly, forcefully, and sincerely by someone who looks in good spirits, about to compete in a race or other activity. The same statement, however, said in a hostile, bitter tone when one is faced with seemingly insurmountable hardships or has just suffered some crushing defeat, conveys unhappiness, anger, and pain.

Tone & Character

Assuming that all writers have choices “about what they say and how they say it” leads us to assume that the tone of a story is intended as part of the message to the reader. The writer assumes an intelligent reader, and may supply just enough subtle hints, through tone, that the reader — perhaps only on second or third reading — will discover the full intent of the story. (“The Chaser” is an excellent example of this, since the veiled statement of the old man is so very ironic in terms of what the boy wants — and what we see that he is going to get.)

Tone & Author

If the author believes in his reader’s ability to perceive subtleties of tone, he is able to create a much more realistic story, one in which everything is not spelled out precisely because, as in real life, we can draw conclusions from some evidence ourselves.

Laughter, Comedy, and Farce

“Laughter” is essential to humans, a basic part of mental health. “It resists close analysis,” but nevertheless it seems to include all or some of the following:

- (1) An object of laughter: “something to laugh at.”
- (2) Incongruity: something unexpected, which does not fit the situation.
- (3) Safety and/or good will: when the audience knows that no harm comes to the participants (as in farce), one can laugh at things which would otherwise not be funny (as in slapstick in the circus or movies like Animal House or The Jerk).
- (4) Unfamiliarity, newness, uniqueness, spontaneity: “the circumstances promoting laughter are always spontaneous,” so that the unfamiliar, the new, the unique will often cause us to smile or laugh — as long as we are secure enough. An oddly-costumed person appearing in our home town might make us laugh; finding ourselves alone among 40,000 such people in a foreign country, we may feel differently. Even a joke already known or a comic work already read can make us laugh if it is well done, since both are designed to lead us from a common view to another, illogical, incongruous, refreshing.

Irony (Study Guide p. 15)

“Irony,” it has been said, is the thinking person’s humor, for it is usually apparent only to those “who are aware of the ambiguities and complexities in life.” Thus “in expressing an idea ironically, writers pay the greatest compliment to their readers, for they assume that readers have sufficient skill and understanding to see through the quizzical or ambiguous surface into the clarity beneath.”

Verbal (Study Guide p. 15)

Understatement

One form of verbal irony is “understatement,” in which the speaker says, in response to a major crisis, something expected for minor, day-to-day occurrences. When a man who’s just picked himself up from the rubble of an explosion which has leveled a city block is asked, “Are you all right?” and replies, “Rough neighborhood you have here,” he is using understatement.

Overstatement

“Overstatement” (hyperbole) is deliberate exaggeration. When one tramp says to another, by a hobo jungle fire, “Superb cuisine!” this is overstatement, since such a comment seems better suited to a fine restaurant.

Double-entendre

“Double-entendre” means “having two meanings” (the second meaning often risqué). “Double-entendre,” however, refers to any double meaning, and the final line of “The Chaser” is an excellent example where the second meaning is clearly threatening.

Situational (Study Guide p. 15)

If a man looking into his horoscope in the morning (as in Graham Greene’s “The Destroyers”) and seeing “Beware a crash,” thinks his stock market investments are in danger, we would understand. After all, that is the most likely meaning of “Beware a crash.” Situational irony occurs when, at the story’s end, the man’s whole house comes down, in one monumental crash.

Cosmic Irony (Study Guide p. 22)

Dramatic Irony (Study Guide p. 15)

9

Symbolism and Allegory: Keys to Extended Meaning

TERMS TO STUDY

Symbolism

- Cultural
- Universal
- Private
- Authorial
- Contextual

Allegory

- Fable
- Beast Fable
- Parable
- Myth
- Allusion

SUMMARY OF TERMS

Symbolism (Study Guide p. 15, Symbol)

“Symbolism” is the use of things, persons, places, actions, situations — even thoughts — to stand for something different but connected. We have “gesture-symbols” for “hello” and “please give me a ride” and “get out of here” — and much more. Whatever it is, a symbol “points beyond itself to greater and more complex meaning.”

Cultural

“Cultural symbols” are those which are shared by an entire culture. E.g., among Christians, the cross is a unifying symbol of good; among Jews, the menorah is a similar unifying symbol. Examples of national symbols would be the eagle for the United States and the maple leaf for Canada.

Universal

Unlike cultural symbols, “universal symbols” are shared by all human beings, such as water symbolizing life, fire warmth, night or darkness death, and so on. NOTE: you must be very careful not to confuse your own cultural symbols with universal symbols. For instance, Americans accept white as a symbol of good and purity. In Russia, it symbolizes death. The context determines the symbolic associations.

Private

Anything may become a “private symbol” if it gains a distinct symbolic value for those in a small group. A graveyard can symbolize family unity to those who gather each year to do “graveyard cleaning” and share food and fellowship, despite the universal symbolism in which graveyards suggest death.

Authorial or Contextual

“Authorial” or “literary” (“contextual”) symbols are those created by a writer out of the situations in a story. In “A Jury of Her Peers,” the dead canary symbolizes the cruelty of the husband. In “Young Goodman Brown,” the pink ribbon symbolizes Brown’s wife, Faith.

Allegory

“Allegory” is a type of story which creates a “consistent and sustained” fabric of symbols and can, therefore, be read on at least two levels of understanding: (1) the basic story level, and (2) the symbolic or allegorical level. NOTE: some stories contain one or more allegorical sections without being a complete allegory like Pilgrim’s Progress.

Fable

“Fable” is an allegorical short story with an attached “moral,” or lesson, at the end (e.g., Aesop’s Fables).

Beast Fable

“Beast fables” are fables featuring animals in all the roles (standing for humans). E.g., Aesop’s Fables, the “Uncle Remus Stories,” and “Pogo.”

Parable

A “parable” is “a simple allegory usually used in religious teaching.” E.g., the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son.

Myth

A “myth” is a story “associated with the religion, philosophy, and collective psychology of various groups of cultures.” Myths may include “pre-scientific” perceptions and history as well as social and cultural beliefs. Think of “mythical” as meaning “bearing symbolic and allegorical [cultural] truths.”

Allusion

“Allusion” is deliberate reference, within a story, to a situation or action from history or another work of literature. Allusions are usually clear to the intended audience and you will understand many of them. Use reference works when you have questions. (See the list on p. 331, adding Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable). The older the work or the more highly educated the intended audience, the more you will need to refer to reference works.

10

Idea or Theme: The Meaning and the Message in Fiction

TERMS TO STUDY

Idea (Form)	Direct Statements by Unnamed Speaker	Figurative Language
Theme	Direct Statements by Persona	Characters Who Stand for Ideas
Assertion	Dramatic Statements by Characters	The Work Itself
Retelling		
Values		

SUMMARY OF TERMS

Idea (Form)

“Idea” is the mental image (“form”) which the mind gives to “external reality.” Idea is “connected to actions of seeing and knowing,” originally used to mean “mental images that, once seen, could be remembered and therefore known,” today used to mean “a concept, thought, opinion, or belief.” Ideas are embodied in stories as characters in

action within specific conflicts. (People who do not visualize abstract ideas may prefer to read “pattern” for “image.”) Webster’s New World Dictionary (1972) says that an idea is the “form or appearance of a thing as opposed to its reality;” and further states that “idea... may be applied to anything existing in the mind as an object of knowledge or thought.”

Theme

“Theme” is any idea brought to life in a work of literature or the “central or unifying idea” of a story.

Assertion

A complete sentence statement of the theme of a story is called an “assertion.” The theme (“meaning”) must be stated in “an assertion about human nature, conduct, or motivation — that is, the form of an idea.”

Retelling

Do not confuse “meaning” of a story with what happens: Do not retell the events of the story; make an assertion as to what and how relationships, motivations, and/or beliefs operate in the story.

Values

Ideas in a story imply values held by the writer (e.g., in “A Jury of Her Peers,” the idea that a beaten, abused woman may have the right to kill her cruel husband). In analyzing ideas in a story, consider the writer’s implied value system.

Finding Ideas

Finding ideas in a story requires careful study:

- (1) Read the story carefully.
- (2) Consider main characters, situations, statements, and actions.
- (3) Evaluate such variables as mood, setting, and atmosphere.
- (4) Study your notes and observations carefully.
- (5) List several assertions, compare them, and combine two or more of them into an assertion about which you decide to write your paper.

Direct Statements by Unnamed Speaker

Third person point of view involves an unnamed speaker who, whether or not he expresses the author’s exact views may state ideas directly, as commentary. Be careful with such “authorial comments”: Defer judgment until you have finished reading and can place them properly in the context of the ideas of the whole story.

Direct Statements by Persona

While comments made by a first person speaker (the persona) may reflect the views of the author, “there is a danger in making a direct equation, for the author may not be underwriting the ideas of a speaker, but only examining them.” Look carefully at context, views of other characters, and evidence of understanding, beliefs, and actions of a speaker before you decide to accept or question the persona’s comments.

Dramatic Statements by Characters

Statements made by characters in a story may be a way of getting the reader to think more carefully about what is being discussed. Whether such statements are valid should be carefully considered, based on

- (1) the character speaking,
- (2) conflicting evidence from other characters,
- (3) the context within the story, and
- (4) what you know of human nature and action.

Figurative Language

“Figurative language” is the use of effective comparisons. It involves comparing something complex and difficult to understand to something more common. We use figurative language daily, though much of it has become cliché, and its figurative power has been lost. Writers try, in using figurative language, to keep the reader seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, or tasting those common things which form figurative bridges to more difficult ideas.

Characters Who Stand for Ideas

A character may stand for an idea, even becoming a symbol of that idea. Brown, in “Young Goodman Brown,” seems to represent an ordinary sort of man (“brown,” not “white” or “black”) whose pride (and curiosity?) draw him so close to evil that he is not able to tell what is good any longer. He ultimately symbolizes foolish pride which wants to do heroic things but in the process loses heart and soul.

The Work Itself

The work as a whole is the ultimate vehicle for ideas, and you must read a story completely (sometime reread) before you can make a reasonable assertion of the main idea. The whole reading lets you see the relationships between characters, situations, actions, and beliefs. “Thus, although an idea may not be directly stated in so many words, it will be clear after you have finished reading.”