Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing
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English Composition III
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What Is Literature and Why Do We Study It?

- Literature is
  - Composition that tells a story, dramatizes a situation, expresses emotions, analyzes and advocates ideas
  - Helps us grow personally and intellectually
  - Provides an objective base for knowledge and understanding
  - Shapes our goals and values by clarifying our own identities, both positively and negatively
  - Literature makes us human.
Genres

Four genres of literature:

- **Prose fiction**
  - Myths, parables, romances, novels, short stories

- **Poetry**
  - Open form and closed form
  - Relies on imagery, figurative language, sound

- **Drama**
  - Made up of dialogue and set direction
  - Designed to be performed

- **Nonfiction prose**
  - News reports, feature articles, essays, editorials, textbooks, historical and biographical works
Guidelines for Reading Literature

• First reading
  – Determine what is happening, where, what, who is involved, major characters
  – Make a record of your reactions and responses
  – Describe characterizations, events, techniques and ideas

• Second reading
  – Trace developing patterns
  – Write expanded notes about characters, situations, actions
  – Write paragraph describing your reactions and thoughts
  – Write down questions that arise as you read (in the margins)
Writing a Precis

- Precis = a concise summary = paraphrase
  - Retell the highlights so reader will know main sections
  - Only essential details – they must be correct and accurate
  - Must be an original essay, written in your own words
  - Be sure to introduce the title and author
  - Avoid judgments
  - Use present tense when retelling a story
Elements of Fiction

- Essence of fiction = narration (the telling)
- Elements of fiction = verisimilitude and donnee
  - Verisimilitude = realism
    - Must be compelling enough that the reader can “suspend disbelief”
  - Donnee = premise
    - Something given by which you can judge the realism = ground rules

- Sources of elements
  - Character, plot, structure, theme, symbolism, style, point of view, tone, irony
Plot and Structure

• Plot = reflection of motivation and causation
  - No plot = The king died and then the queen died.
  - Plot = The king died, and then the queen died of grief.

• Conflict = controlling impulse in a connected pattern of causes and effects
  - Opposition of two or more people (e.g., hatred, envy, anger, argument, avoidance, gossip, lies, fighting, etc.)

• Dilemma = Conflict within or for one person
  - Conflict is a major element of plot because it arouses curiosity, causes doubt, creates tension, produces interest
  - No tension = no interest
Structure of Fiction

- Structure defines the layout of the work

Exposition → Crisis → Complication → Climax → Resolution (denouement)

Another structural element used sometimes = Flashback
**Characters in Fiction**

- **Character** = verbal representation of a human being
  - **Rounded** = lifelike, full, dynamic, reader can predict future behavior because of an understanding of the personality
  - **Protagonist** = the hero or heroine, main person in the story, person on the quest, etc.
  - **Antagonist** = the person causing the conflict, in opposition to the protagonist, the obstacle, etc.
  - **Flat** = no growth, static
  - **Stock** = representative of a group or class (stereotypical)
- Characters disclosed through
  - Actions
  - Descriptions, both personal and environmental
  - Dramatic statements and thoughts
  - Statements by other characters
  - Statements by the author speaking as storyteller, or observer
- Characters need to have verisimilitude, be probable or plausible
Point of View

- Refers to speaker, narrator, persona or voice created by the author to tell the story
- Point of view depends on two factors:
  - Physical situation of the narrator as an observer
  - Speaker’s intellectual and emotional position
- First person = I, we
- Second person = You (uncommon)
- Third person = He, she, they (most common)
- Point of view may be:
  - Dramatic/objective = strictly reporting
  - Omniscient = all-knowing
  - Limited omniscient = some insight
Setting

- Setting = a work’s natural, manufactured, political, cultural and temporal environment, including everything that characters know and own (place, time, objects)
- Major purpose = to establish realism or verisimilitude, and to organize a story
- Setting helps create atmosphere or mood
- Setting may reinforce characters and theme, in order to establish expectations that are the opposite of what occurs = irony
Tone and Style

• **Tone** = methods by which writers and speakers reveal attitudes or feelings

• **Style** = ways in which writers assemble words to tell the story, to develop an argument, dramatize the play, compose the poem
  – Choice of words in the service of content

• **Essential aspect of style is diction**
  – Formal = standard or elegant words
  – Neutral = everyday standard vocabulary
  – Informal = colloquial, substandard language, slang
Tone and Style (cont’d)

• Language may be:
  – Specific = images
  – General = broad classes
  – Concrete = qualities of immediate perception
  – Abstract = broader, less palpable qualities
• Denotation = word meanings
• Connotation = word suggestions
• Verbal irony = contradictory statements
  – One thing said, opposite is meant
  – Irony = satire, parody, sarcasm, double entendre
• Understatement = does not fully describe the importance of a situation – deliberately
• Hyperbole (overstatement) = words far in excess of the situation
Symbolism and Allegory

• Symbolism and allegory are modes that expand meaning

• Symbol creates a direct, meaningful equation between:
  - A specific object, scene, character, or action
  - Ideas, values, persons or ways of life

• Symbols may be:
  - Cultural (universal) = known by most literate people (e.g., white dove, color black)
  - Contextual (authorial) = private, created by the author
Symbolism and Allegory (cont’d)

- **Allegory** is a symbol = complete and self-sufficient narrative (e.g., “Young Goodman Brown”)
- **Fable** = stories about animals that possess human traits (e.g., Aesop’s Fables)
- **Parable** = allegory with moral or religious bent (e.g., Biblical stories)
- **Myth** = story that embodies and codifies religious, philosophical and cultural values of the civilization in which it is composed (e.g., George Washington chopping down the cherry tree)
- **Allusion** = the use of other culturally well-known works from the Bible, Greek and Roman mythology, famous art, etc.
Idea or Theme

• Idea = results of general and abstract thinking
  – In literature, ideas relate to meaning, interpretation, explanation and significance

• Literature embodies values along with ideas
  – Ideas are vital to an understanding and appreciation of literature

• Ideas are not as obvious as character or setting. It is important to consider the meaning of what you’ve read and then develop an explanatory and comprehensive assertion.

• Theme can be found in any of these:
  – Direct statements by the authorial voice
  – Direct statements by a first-person speaker
  – Dramatic statements by characters
  – Figurative language, characters who stand for ideas
  – The work itself