

Glossary of Critical Terms for Prose

Adapted from “LitWeb,” The Norton Introduction to Literature Study Space

<http://www.wnorton.com/college/english/litweb10/glossary/C.aspx>

Action

Any event or series of events depicted in a literary work; an event may be verbal as well as physical, so that speaking or telling a story within the story may be an event.

Allusion

A brief, often implicit and indirect reference within a literary text to something outside the text, whether another text (e.g. the Bible, a myth, another literary work, a painting, or a piece of music) or any imaginary or historical person, place, or thing.

Ambiguity

When we are involved in interpretation—figuring out what different elements in a story “mean”—we are responding to a work’s ambiguity. This means that the work is open to several simultaneous interpretations. Language, especially when manipulated artistically, can communicate more than one meaning, encouraging our interpretations.

Antagonist

A character or a nonhuman force that opposes, or is in conflict with, the protagonist.

Anticlimax

An event or series of events usually at the end of a narrative that contrast with the tension building up before.

Antihero

A protagonist who is in one way or another the very opposite of a traditional hero. Instead of being courageous and determined, for instance, an antihero might be timid, hypersensitive, and indecisive to the point of paralysis. Antiheroes are especially common in modern literary works.

Archetype

A character, ritual, symbol, or plot pattern that recurs in the myth and literature of many cultures; examples include the scapegoat or trickster (character type), the rite of passage (ritual), and the quest or descent into the underworld (plot pattern). The term and our contemporary understanding of it derive from the work of psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961), who argued that archetypes emerge from—and give us a clue to the workings of—the “collective unconscious,” a reservoir of memories and impulses that all humans share but aren’t consciously aware of.

Author

The real author who actually wrote a narrative, not to be confused with the *implied author*, or authorial persona adopting an outlook implied by the work as a whole (and that may differ drastically from that of the real author). The *author* should not be confused with the *narrator* who tells the story. When a narrator tells a story in the first person, it does not mean that the author is telling his/her own experiences.

Bildungsroman (German for “education novel”)

A novel that depicts the intellectual, emotional, and moral development of its protagonist from childhood into adulthood; also sometimes called an *apprenticeship novel*. This type of novel tends to envision character as the product of environment, experience, nurture, and education (in the widest sense) rather than of nature, fate, and so on.

Biography

A work of nonfiction that recounts the life of a real person. If the person depicted in a biography is also its author, then we use the term *autobiography*. An autobiography that focuses only on a specific aspect of, or episode in, its author’s life is a *memoir*.

Canon

The range of works that a consensus of scholars, teachers, and readers of a particular time and culture consider “great” or “major.”

Character

An imaginary person who acts, appears, or is referred to in a literary work.

Major or main character: central character that receives most attention.

Minor character: marginal or secondary character that receives less attention.

Flat character: relatively simple and two-dimensional character with few traits and predictable behavior or responses.

Round character: complex, multifaceted character capable of surprising the readers.

Static characters do not change while **dynamic characters** do.

Characterization.

The presentation or delineation of a fictional personage.

Direct characterization or **direct definition** occurs when the narrator explicitly tells what a character is like.

Indirect characterization or **indirect presentation** occurs when the narrative reveals a character’s trait/s implicitly, through his or her speech, behavior, thoughts, appearance, and so on.

Climax. The third part of plot (see Freytag’s pyramid), the point at which the action stops rising and begins falling or reversing; also called *turning point*.

Coming-of-Age Story

A narrative in which a character—often a child or young person—first learns a significant, usually life-changing truth about the universe, society, people, or himself or herself; also called an *initiation* or *rites-of-passage story*.

Complication

In plot, an action or event that introduces a new conflict or intensifies the existing one, especially during the rising action phase of plot.

Conclusion

Also called *resolution*, the fifth and last phase or part of plot, the point at which the conflictive or destabilized situation at the beginning becomes stable once more and the conflict is resolved.

Conflict

A struggle between opposing forces that sets the action in motion.

An *external conflict* pits a character against something or someone outside himself or herself—another character or characters or something in nature or society.

An *internal conflict* happens when the opposing forces are two drives, impulses, or parts of a single character.

Crisis

In plot, the moment when the conflict comes to a head, often requiring the character to make a decision; sometimes the crisis is equated with the climax or *turning point* and sometimes it is treated as a distinct moment that precedes, and prepares for, the climax.

Dénouement (French for “untying” as of a knot)

A plot-related term used in three ways: (1) as a synonym for falling action, (2) as a synonym for conclusion or resolution, and (3) as the label for a phase following the conclusion in which any loose ends are tied up. See Freytag’s pyramid.

Dialogue

- 1) Usually, the representation of an oral exchange involving two or more characters.
- 2) More rarely, a literary work that consists mainly or entirely of the speech of two or more characters.

Diction

Choice of words that largely determines the tone of a narrative and influences the style of the creative piece of fiction.

Informal or colloquial diction resembles everyday speech

Formal diction: lofty, impersonal, and dignified language

Discriminated Occasion

A specific, discrete moment portrayed in a fictional work, often signaled by phrases such as “At 5:05 in the morning . . . ,” “It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season . . . ,” or “the day before Maggie fell down. . . .”

Epilogue

In fiction, a short section or chapter that comes after the conclusion, tying up loose ends and often describing what happens to the characters after the resolution of the conflict.

Epiphany

A sudden moment of illumination or revelation of truth, often inspired by a seemingly simple or commonplace event. The term, originally from Christian theology, was first popularized by the Irish fiction writer James Joyce, who evoked the epiphanic realizations of his characters in his collected short stories entitled *Dubliners*.

Episode

A distinct action or series of actions within a plot.

Exposition

The first phase or part of plot (see Freytag’s pyramid), which sets the scene, introduces and identifies characters, while establishing the situation at the beginning of a story. Additional information is often scattered throughout the work.

Fable

An ancient type of short fiction, in verse or prose, illustrating a moral or satirizing human beings. The characters in a fable are often animals that talk and act like human beings. The fable is sometimes treated as a specific type of folktale and sometimes as a fictional subgenre in its own right.

Falling Action

The fourth of the five phases or parts of plot (see Freytag’s pyramid), in which the conflict or conflicts move toward resolution.

Fantasy

A genre of literary work featuring strange settings and characters and often involving magic or the supernatural; though closely related to horror and science fiction, fantasy is typically less concerned with the macabre or with science and technology.

Fiction

Any narrative, especially in prose, about invented or imagined characters and action. Today, fiction falls into three major subgenres based on length—the *short story*, *novella*, and *novel*. Older, originally oral forms of short fiction include the *fable*, *legend*, *parable*, and *tale*. Fictional works may also be categorized not by their length but by their handling of particular

elements such as plot and character. *Detective* and *science fiction*, for example, are subgenres. Others fictions include *gothic*, *romance*, *historical* and *nonfiction*.

Figurative language

Language that uses figures of speech or literary devices to express ideas.

Flashback

A plot-structuring device inserting a scene from the fictional past into the fictional present.

Flash-forward

A plot-structuring device inserting a scene from the fictional future into the fictional present.

Focalization

The perspective from which the narrated situations and events are presented.

Internal focalization: perspective locatable in one character because it highlights the feelings and thoughts of that character.

External focalization: a perspective located outside the characters, merely reporting events and actions from the outside, that is, without access to feelings and thoughts.

Other equivalent terms are *internal narration* and *external narration*.

Foil

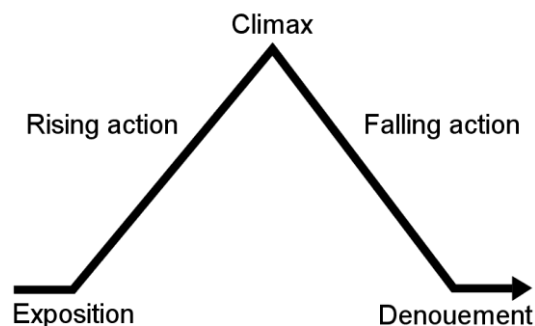
A character with behavior and/or values that contrast those of another character in order to highlight the distinctive temperament of that character.

Foreshadowing

A hint or clue about what will happen at a later moment in the plot.

Freytag's Pyramid.

A diagram of plot structure first created by the German novelist and critic Gustav Freytag (1816–1895).



Genre

A type or category of works sharing particular formal or textual features and conventions; especially used to refer to the largest categories for classifying literature—fiction, poetry,

drama, and nonfiction. A smaller division within a genre is usually known as a *subgenre*, such as gothic fiction or epic poetry.

Hero/Heroine

A character in a literary work, especially the leading male/female character, who is especially virtuous, usually larger than life, sometimes almost godlike.

Image/imagery

Broadly defined, imagery is any sensory detail or evocation in a work; more narrowly, the use of figurative language to evoke a feeling, to call to mind an idea, or to describe an object. Imagery may be *auditory*, *tactile*, *visual*, or *olfactory* depending on which sense it primarily appeals to—hearing, touch, vision, or smell. An *image* is a particular instance of imagery.

Inciting incident

An action that sets a plot in motion by creating conflict.

In medias res (Latin for “in the midst of things”)

Opening of the plot in the middle of the action, and then filling in past details by means of flashback.

Irony

A situation or statement characterized by a significant difference between what is expected and what actually happens, or between what is understood and what is meant.

Verbal irony occurs when a word or expression in context means something different from, and usually the opposite of, what it appears to mean; when the intended meaning is harshly critical or satiric, verbal irony becomes *sarcasm*.

Situational irony occurs when the character’s actions have an opposite effect from what was intended, or lead to a reversal of expectation or unexpected.

Dramatic irony occurs when there is a gap between what an audience knows and what a character believes or expects; when this occurs in a tragedy, dramatic irony is sometimes called *tragic irony*.

Cosmic irony and **irony of fate** are sometimes used to refer to situations in which situational irony is the result of fate, chance, the gods, or some other superhuman force or entity.

Metaphor

A general term for almost any figure of speech involving comparison; more commonly, a particular figure of speech in which two unlike things are compared implicitly—that is, without the use of a signal such as the word *like* or *as*—as in “Love is a rose, but you better not pick it”.

Monologue

1) A speech of more than a few sentences, usually in a play but also in other genres, spoken by one person and uninterrupted by the speech of anyone else.

2) an entire work consisting of this sort of speech. In fiction, an interior monologue takes place entirely within the mind of a character rather than being spoken aloud.

Mood

The feelings evoked while reading a literary text.

Narration

- 1) Broadly, the act of telling a story or recounting a narrative.
- 2) More narrowly, the portions of a narrative attributable to the narrator rather than words spoken by characters (that is, dialogue).
- 3) Term used in conjunction with qualifiers that determine the sort of perspective taken in the narrative (*first-person narration, second-person narration, third-person narration, internal narration and external narration*).

Narrative

A story, whether fictional or true, in prose or verse, related by a narrator or narrators (rather than acted out onstage, as in drama). At times a **frame** recounts the telling of another narrative or story that thus “frames” the inner or **framed narrative**.

Narrator

Someone who recounts a narrative or tells a story. An **internal** narrator is a character within the work telling the story to an equally fictional auditor or listener; internal narrators are usually first- or second-person narrators (*see below*). An **external** narrator is not a character. When applied to the actual narration, one talks of either **internal narration** or **external narration**.

A **first-person narrator**: an internal narrator who consistently refers to himself or herself using the first-person pronoun *I* (or, infrequently, *we*). The **first-person narrator** should not be confused with the *author*. When a narrator tells a story in the first person, it does not mean that the author is telling his/her own experiences.

A **second-person narrator** consistently uses the second-person pronoun *you* (not a common technique).

A **third-person narrator** uses third-person pronouns such as *she, he, they, it*, and so on; almost always **external narrators**, third-person narrators include **omniscient, limited** and **objective narrators**.

Omniscient narrators (literally, “all-knowing”) describe the inner thoughts and feelings of multiple characters.

Limited narrators relate the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of only one character (the central consciousness).

Objective or detached narrators (acting as “**camera eye**”) reveal nothing of characters’ thoughts and feelings, but report only actions, dialogue and behavior.

An **unreliable narrator** causes the reader to view the account of events with suspicion, as opposed to a **reliable narrator**, whose judgment and narration the readers may trust.

An *intrusive narrator* is a third-person narrator who occasionally disrupts his or her narrative to speak directly to the reader or audience in *direct address*.

Novel

A fictitious prose narrative of book length.

Novella

A piece of fiction shorter than a book-length novel but longer than a short story.

Persona

The voice or figure of the author who tells and structures the story and who may or may not share the values of the actual author; also called *implied author*.

Plot

The arrangement of the action. The five main parts or phases of plot are *exposition*, *rising action*, *climax or turning point*, *falling action*, and *conclusion or resolution*.

Point of View

The perspective from which people, events, and other details in a work of fiction are viewed; also called focus, though the term *point of view* is sometimes used to include both focus and voice. The narrator conveys the point of view.

A *limited point of view* reveals only the perspective of one character.

An *omniscient* or *unlimited point of view* reveals the perspective of multiple characters.

Prose

The regular form of spoken and written language, measured in sentences rather than lines, as in poetry.

Protagonist

The main character in a work, whether male or female, heroic or non-heroic.

Rising Action

The second of the five phases or parts of plot (see Freytag's pyramid), in which events complicate the situation existing at the beginning of a work by intensifying the initial conflict or introducing a new one.

Scene

A section or subdivision of narrative that presents continuous action in one specific setting.

Sequence. The ordering of events in a fictional plot.

Setting

The time and place of the action in a work of fiction.

The *spatial setting* refers to the place or places in which action unfolds.

Temporal setting: the period in time in which action unfolds (temporal setting is thus the same as *plot time*.)

General setting: the general time and place in which all the action unfolds.

Particular settings: the times and places in which individual episodes or scenes take place. Both general and specific settings include the cultural, economic, manufactured, natural, political, religious, social and temporal environment of a text, including everything that the characters know and own.

Short Story

A relatively short work of prose fiction (approximately 500 to 10,000 words) that, according to Edgar Allan Poe, can be read in a single sitting of two hours or less and works to create “a single effect.” Two types of short story are the initiation story and the *short short story*.

Short Short Story

Especially brief short story, as its name suggests, also sometimes called *microfiction*.

Simile

A figure of speech involving a direct, explicit comparison of one thing to another, usually using the words *like* or *as* to draw the connection, as in “My love is like a red, red rose.”

Stream of Consciousness

A type of third- or first-person narration that replicates the thought processes of a character without much or any intervention by a narrator. The term was originally coined by the nineteenth-century American psychologist William James (brother of novelist Henry James) to describe the workings of the human mind and only later adopted to describe the type of narration that seeks to replicate this process. The technique is closely associated with early twentieth-century fiction writers influenced by early psychologists such as William James and Sigmund Freud.

Style

A distinctive manner of expression; an author’s style results from a combination of aspects, such as diction, rhythm, imagery, and so on.

Symbol

A person, place, thing, or event that figuratively represents or stands for something else. Often the thing or idea represented is more abstract and general, and the symbol is more concrete and particular.

A **traditional symbol** recurs frequently in (and beyond) literature, making it immediately recognizable to those who belong to a given culture. In Western literature and culture, for example, the rose and snake traditionally symbolize love and evil respectively. Some symbols may accumulate their complex meanings only within a particular literary work.

Tale

A brief narrative with a simple plot and characters, an ancient and originally oral form of storytelling. Unlike fables, tales typically do not convey or state a simple or single moral.

Folktale: especially common type of tale that follows conventions such as formulaic beginning and ending (“Once upon a time . . . ” “. . . they lived happily ever after”), a setting not highly particularized in terms of time or place, *flat* and often *stock characters*, animal or human, and fairly simple plots.

Fairy tale: often used as a synonym for *folktale*, but more properly designating a specific type of folktale featuring fairies or other fantastic creatures, such as pixies or ogres.

Theme

- 1) Broadly and commonly, an idea explored in a literary work (e.g. “the value of all life”).
- 2) More narrowly, the insight about a topic communicated in a work (e.g. “All living things are equally precious”).

Most literary works have multiple themes, though some people reserve the term *theme* for the central or main insight and refer to others as *subthemes*. Usually, a narrative illustrates a given theme rather than explicitly stating it. Many narratives may illustrate the same theme, such as war and peace, generational gap, gain of maturity, and more, but the particulars will differ.

Time

Fiction includes at least four potentially quite different time frames:

- 1) **author time:** time when the author has originally created or published a literary text
- 2) **narrator time:** time when the narrator in a work of fiction supposedly narrates the story
- 3) **plot time:** time when the action depicted in the work supposedly takes place (in other words, the work’s temporal setting)
- 4) **reader (or audience) time:** time when an actual reader reads the work

In some cases, author, narrator, plot, and reader time will be roughly the same. But in other cases, some or all of these time frames might differ.

Tone

The attitude a literary work takes toward its subject, especially the way diction reveals it.

Verisimilitude (from Latin *verisimilitudo* or “likeness to truth”)

The internal truthfulness, lifelikeness, and consistency of the world created within any literary work. Verisimilitude suggests judging that world on its own terms rather than in terms of its correspondence to the real world. Thus even a work that contains utterly fantastic or supernatural characters or actions (and does not aim at realism) may very well achieve a high degree of verisimilitude.

Voice

The narrating instance, the verbal aspect of point of view, the acknowledged or unacknowledged source of a story’s words; the speaker; the “person” telling the story and that person’s particular qualities of insight, attitude, and verbal style.