

The *Five* Essential Elements of Literary Analysis

One

A character is a person presented in a dramatic or narrative work, and a hero or heroine, often called the **protagonist**, is the central character who engages the reader's interest and empathy. The **antagonist** is the character, force, or collection of forces that stands directly opposed to the protagonist and gives rise to the conflict of the story. A **static character** does not change throughout the work, and the reader's knowledge of that character does not grow, whereas a **dynamic character** undergoes some kind of change because of the action in the plot. A **flat character** embodies one or two qualities, ideas, or traits that can be readily described in a brief summary. They are not psychologically complex characters and therefore are readily accessible to readers. Some flat characters are recognized as **stock characters**; they embody stereotypes such as the "dumb blonde" or the "mean stepfather." They become types rather than individuals. **Round characters** are more complex than flat or stock characters, and often display the inconsistencies and internal conflicts found in most real people. They are more fully developed, and therefore are harder to summarize.

Characterization is the process by which a writer reveals the personality of a character, making that character seem real to the reader. Authors have two major methods of presenting characters: telling (**direct characterization**) and showing (**indirect characterization**). In **direct characterization**, the author intervenes to describe and sometimes evaluate the character for the reader. For example, the narrator may tell the reader directly what the character's personality is like: humble, ambitious, vain, gullible, etc. **Indirect characterization** allows the author to present a character talking and acting and lets the reader infer what kind of person the character is. There are five different ways that a writer may provide indirect characterization:

1. by describing how the character looks and dresses,
2. by allowing the reader to hear the character speak,
3. by revealing the character's private thoughts and feelings,
4. by portraying the character's effect on other individuals—showing how other characters feel or behave toward the character, and
5. by presenting the character's actions.

Characters can be convincing whether they are presented by showing or by telling, as long as their actions are motivated. Motivated action by the characters occurs when the reader or audience is offered reasons for how the characters behave, what they say, and the decisions they make. Plausible action is action by a character in a story that seems reasonable, given the motivations presented.

Two

The setting is the physical and social context in which the action of a story occurs. The major elements of setting are the time, the place, and the social environment that frames the characters. Setting can be used to evoke a mood or atmosphere that will prepare the reader for what is to come. Specific elements of the setting include:

- the geographical location (its topography, scenery, and physical arrangements),
- the occupations and daily manner of living of the characters,
- the time period in which the action takes place (epoch in history or season of the year), and
- the general environment of the characters (social, religious, cultural, moral, and emotional conditions and attitudes).

Three

The conflict in a work of fiction is the struggle within the plot between opposing forces—the issue to be resolved in the story. The protagonist engages in the conflict with the antagonist, which may take the form of a character, society, nature, or an aspect of the protagonist's personality. Thus, conflict may be **external**, a struggle against some outside force, another character, society as a whole, or some natural force; or **internal**, a conflict between forces or emotions within one character.

Four

Style is the writer's distinctive manner of arranging words to suit his or her ideas and purpose in writing. The unique imprint of the author's personality upon his or her writing, style is the product of an author's way of arranging and presenting ideas. Elements of style include:

- **Syntax** is the sentence structure, sentence variety, sentence arrangement, word order, parallelism, spelling, grammar conventions (or lack thereof), phrasing, punctuation, and repetition.
- **Diction** is word choice with its denotation and connotation as well as concrete and abstract details.
- **Tone**, the writer's or speaker's attitude toward the subject, the audience, himself, or herself, provides the emotional coloring of meaning of a work.
- **Figurative Language** relies on comparison and includes *metaphor, simile, hyperbole, understatement, personification, synecdoche, metonymy, paradox, and allusion*.
- **Imagery**—categorized as auditory, gustatory, kinetic, olfactory, organic, tactile, and visual—is often contrasted (light vs. dark, apathy vs. energy, sweet vs. sour) or repeated.
- **Point of View** can be sorted into first-person, third-person, omniscient, stream-of-consciousness, narrative, childhood, adulthood, personal, and impersonal.
- **Organization** is the structure or form, which can utilize contrast or similarity and be classified as formal, informal, logical, or chaotic.
- **Musicality** describes the sound of language—euphony, cacophony, or monotony.
- **Rhyme** is the repetition of sounds and may be formal, informal, traditional, unconventional, and completely absent.
- **Use of Time** may include flashback, flash-forward, or a framed story with narration that is chronological, realistic, synchronous, asynchronous, magical, or circular.
- **Repetition** can involve words, phrases, clauses, sentences, images, structure, or grammatical type.

Five

Theme is the central meaning or dominant idea in a literary work. A theme provides a unifying point around which the plot, characters, setting, point of view, symbols, and other elements of a work are organized. It is important not to mistake the theme for the topic of the work; the theme expresses an opinion about an abstract concept (i.e. *freedom, jealousy, guilt, unrequited love, self-pity*). Theme should be written in a complex statement: **The [genre] [title] by [author] is about [topic/abstract concept] and reveals that [opinion].**