

Elements of Prose Fiction

Plot:

The plot is the author's particular arrangement of incidents in a story. The events can be related chronologically, or the story may begin with later incidents before going back to let the reader know how things reached that point. In any case, you should pay attention to how the author's conscious ordering of events affects your responses to the story as a whole.

Character:

The author's characterization, or means of developing a character so that they seem real, greatly affects one's attitude toward individual characters and toward the story as a whole. Characters may simply be described, or they may reveal themselves through dialogue and action. (The main character in a work is called the protagonist. And, if s/he is pitted against an important opponent, that character is called the antagonist.)

Setting:

Such elements as the time, place, physical surroundings, and social environment constitute a story's setting. The setting(s) may be very important to the overall meaning and purpose of a story.

Point of View:

Who tells a story and how it is told determine a story's point of view. The teller of the story, or narrator, may or may not be identifiable with the author, but inevitably affects one's understanding of characters and events by filtering what is told through his or her closeness to the story and perspective. While more than one point of view may be used in a story, stories are often told in either first or third person point of view.

The first person narrator uses "I" and is somehow a participant in the actions being related. The reader is restricted to the observations, thoughts, and feelings of whatever character is narrating. Hence, the narrator may or may not be entirely reliable. For example, an author may consciously use a naïve narrator in order to achieve a certain ironic effect.

The third person narrator is not a character in the story, and may be omniscient—moving freely through time and space or into various characters' heads—or may have only limited omniscience—being restricted to the thoughts of one character, for example. In either case, the narrator may remain neutral with regard to characters and events, or the narrator may evaluate thoughts and actions for the reader.

Symbolism:

Any person, object, setting, name or event that suggests more than its literal meaning can be a symbol. Symbolic meanings are not so much hidden in a story, as they are carefully placed and woven into the texture of the work. To identify and interpret symbols in a story, pay close attention to language and apply common sense. Some symbols are standard or conventional, appearing throughout literature, while others may be highly unusual (authorial) and gain their significance from the context of the individual work in which they appear.

Theme:

The theme of a story is the idea which binds the elements of the story together. It may be explicitly stated, or it may be communicated entirely through the elements of the story themselves. The theme is essentially the truth or comment on life that the author intends to communicate to the reader. In addition to what the author of a work intended to say at the time a story was written, however, a work may also have other meanings and significance to readers of a different time period.

In any case, one's interpretation of a story's theme should be firmly grounded in the details of the story, not simply the experiences, values, attitudes, or associations of the reader. Consequently, one interpretation of a story is NOT just as good as any other. While multiple interpretations of a work of literature are possible, good interpretations are based on evidence from the text and make sense of as many of the elements of the work as possible. Pay attention to the work's title and major symbols. Also, look for a change in the protagonist: does s/he gain some important insight or change in some way?

Style, Tone, and Irony:

The characteristic manner in which an author uses language to create specific effects constitutes his or her style, and is influenced by such things as word choice, diction, sentence length and structure, tone, and irony. An author's style may contribute significantly to the meaning and effectiveness of a work.

As noted, part of what determines an author's style is tone. Tone reveals the attitude taken by the author or narrator toward characters, places, and events—whether that attitude is sympathetic, humorous, indifferent, angry, etc. Indeed, without paying careful attention to tone, one may miss irony—a figure of speech in which the actual intent of words is expressed in words that carry the opposite meaning. Other forms of irony include situational irony—in which there is an incongruity between what is expected to happen and what does happen, and dramatic irony—in which a character's words have one meaning for them, but have a different meaning to those who know something the character does not.