

# Introduction to literature; plot; character

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

ENG 150 Reynolds 1 Online Lecture 1: Introduction to Literature; Plot; Character

If you've ever taken a literature class, you will have realized that not all literature is the same. There's the stuff you read for information (mostly nonfiction, and not our concern in this class), there's the stuff you read for fun (literature with a little "l"), and there's the stuff you read in classes like this (Literature with a capital "L"). The stuff you read for fun ("literature") is mostly easy to read. Most romance, sciencefiction, and mystery novels fall into this category, for example. Okay, you hard-core sci-fi fans: I said "most"! ) It's usually plot-oriented; that is, you read it to see what's going to happen next, and you enjoy it more if it builds suspense and keeps your interest. It entertains you. It doesn't require much thought; no one needs to discuss it to discover its hidden messages--it doesn't have any. When you've finished it, you're finished. This sort of reading rarely challenges your ideas about the world. In fact, it usually reinforces the things we'd all like to think are true: everything happens for a reason, the good are rewarded and the bad suffer, everything comes out okay in the end.

You'll notice that most of these books have happy endings. When they don't, you cry along with the characters, but their sad fates don't make you question the order of the universe. Those who die, die for a clear and logical reason. Literature with a capital "L" is different. It demands more of you. It requires both your attention and your participation. It asks you to think, to analyze, to stop occasionally in the middle and ask, " Why did that happen? " or " What is he doing in this scene? " Many of these stories (or poems or plays) make you uncomfortable.

They make you question your comfortable and easy assumptions about the world and your place in it. And sometimes there's not a happy ending. In return, Literature helps you grow. It allows you to experience events emotionally and intellectually without having to suffer the physical danger. You get to experience the Vietnam War in "The Things They Carried" without having to worry that you'll be the next to die. You get to meet a serial killer in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" without having to worry about being murdered. You get to follow a woman into insanity in "The Yellow Wallpaper" without having to be institutionalized yourself. You get to look into the hearts and minds of the characters and take home for free what they teach you about yourself, your family, and your friends. Everything in this class is designed to enhance that experience--to help you learn to read more effectively, so that you can experience Literature more fully, and enjoy it more. And any reader will tell you, that's the point of all this: enjoyment. I can't promise you that any of the information you receive in this class will ever make you a dime.

I seriously doubt that any Human Resources director is going to look at your resume and say, "Oh! Here's someone who's read *A Streetcar Named Desire*! Let's hire him!" Your gains will be less tangible: an enhanced ability to see things from other points of view, to detect patterns in people's actions, to have a deeper understanding of the complexities of human motivation. Okay, okay, enough with the theory; let's get to some real stuff.

ENG 150 Reynolds

2 One example of a literary work that challenges the traditional canon is "All about Suicide" by Luisa Valenzuela, an Argentinean writer.

A brief, shocking story, "All about Suicide" is part of a large and growing genre of literature from around the world that purposely violates our standard literary expectations to make its point - in this case, a point about the political realities of Argentina in the 1960s. LUISA VALENZUELA (1938- ) All about Suicide (1967) Translated by Helen Lane Ismael grabbed the gun and slowly rubbed it across his face. Then he pulled the trigger and there was a shot. Bang. One more person dead in the city. It's getting to be a vice.

First he grabbed the revolver that was in a desk drawer, rubbed it gently across his face, put it to his temple, and pulled the trigger. Without saying a word. Bang. Dead. Let's recapitulate: the office is grand, fit for a minister. The desk is ministerial too, and covered with a glass that must have reflected the scene, the shock. Ismael knew where the gun was, he'd hidden it there himself. So he didn't lose any time, all he had to do was open the right-hand drawer and stick his hand in. Then he got a good hold on it and rubbed it over his face with a certain pleasure before putting it to his temple and pulling the trigger.

It was something almost sensual and quite unexpected. He hadn't even had time to think about it. A trivial gesture, and the gun had fired. There's something missing: Ismael in the bar with a glass in his hand thinking over his future act and its possible consequences. We must go back farther if we want to get at the truth: Ismael in the cradle crying because his diapers are dirty and nobody is changing him. Not that far. Ismael in the first grade fighting with a classmate who'll one day become a minister, his friend, a traitor. No, Ismael in the ministry without being able to tell what he knew, forced to be silent. Ismael in the bar with the glass (his third) in his hand, and <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-literature-plot-character/>

the irrevocable decision: better death. Ismael pushing the revolving door at the entrance to the building, pushing the swinging door leading to the office section, saying good morning to the guard, opening the door of his office. Once in his office, seven steps to his desk. Terror, the act of opening the drawer, taking out the revolver, and rubbing it across his face, almost a single gesture and very quick. The act of putting it to his temple and pulling the trigger - another act, immediately following the previous one.

Bang. Dead. And Ismael coming out of his office (the other man's office, the minister's) almost relieved, even though he can predict what awaits him. (When reading this, remember that the ENG 150 Reynolds 3 story takes place in Argentina; there, a "minister" is a highly placed government employee, similar to a Cabinet member in the U. S. ) Then tell me: what happened? Did Ismael kill himself? What details of the story make you think he did or didn't? Did Ismael kill the minister? What details of the story make you think he did or didn't? Are there other possibilities?

How does the use of pronouns ("he," "him," "his") contribute to the ambiguity of the story? ("Ambiguous" means "susceptible to more than one interpretation. ") If Ismael didn't kill the minister, why is the story called "All About Suicide"? Why doesn't Valenzuela tell the story in chronological order (that is, in the order in which the events happened)? Do you think Valenzuela is deliberately confusing the reader? What point might she be making about the political situation in her country by doing that? Theme When I asked that last question, I was asking you to think about the author's intentions.

Most authors, in addition to telling a story, want their stories to explore ideas. The "theme" is the dominant or central idea of the story. It is seldom stated explicitly--most stories do not have a "Moral" at the end. A theme is not the same as a plot. The plot is what happens in a story, the events that take place in the story. A theme is the ideas the story asks you to think about. For example, in "All About Suicide," Luisa Valenzuela is telling you about Ismael--but not just about Ismael. We know he's just one of many people in the country who have died. ("It's becoming a vice.") So maybe the story is asking you to think about what it's like to live in a country where you can't speak freely and where it's easy for the government to kill. How might that affect a person's character? How might it affect his way of handling problems? And Valenzuela doesn't tell her story straightforwardly, in the same way that people may not be able to speak straightforwardly in this country. So the truth gets confused, and you never really know what it is--just as someone living in this country would have to deal with never knowing the real truth; the most he could hope for would be the official version of the truth for that day.

A story may have one theme; more often, it has several, as you can see from Valenzuela's story. Interpreting Literature As you can see, it is possible--in fact, it's likely, that different readers will come up with different interpretations of stories and poems. Many works are deliberately written so as to allow more than one interpretation. So if, in the discussions, you find yourself disagreeing with anyone else's ideas about the story, please don't hesitate to say so, and volunteer your ideas. The point of having the

discussions is to allow readers to learn from each other, to show each other things they might not have noticed themselves.

ENG 150 Reynolds 4 But! A note of caution here. While it is usually true that there is no single correct reading of a text, your interpretation must be supported by the text. It is often tempting to "read into" a work things that are not there. After all, we all bring our own experiences and preconceptions to anything we read. Like scientific theory, literary interpretation must have a basis in fact: you must be able to support your interpretation with dialogue, descriptions, events, or other details from the text. The Reading Process To read more effectively, follow these steps: Read the story once, all the way through.

Highlight or otherwise mark the text to identify key elements: words, phrases, or images that are repeated; any elements that seem out of place or unnecessary. Make notes in the margins of any ideas that occur to you about what the writer's theme(s) might be, any questions you might have, or the definitions of any words you didn't know and had to look up. Read the story a second time, and make note of anything else that occurs to you.

Literary Criticism Many books and articles have been written by professional literary critics who analyze and interpret literature.

Reading their work can help you gain new perspectives on particular works and help you understand them better. But you should not accept the ideas of any critic unquestioningly. Each critic, like other readers, has his own interpretation. And different critics come up with very different conclusions about the same work. For an example of this, look on pp. 1912-1920 followed

<https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-literature-plot-character/>

by a sample student paper on page 1921-1926 each with a different interpretation of a story. Plot The plot of a story is simply the events that take place in the story. Most people read only for plot--but you now know to look for theme, too.

And often, clues to the author's intentions can be found in the plot. For example, pay attention to beginnings and endings of stories, and ask yourself questions: Why did the author choose to begin the story with this event? Why choose to end it with that event? What has changed between the beginning and the end? "The Secret Lion," for instance, begins when the boys are in junior high, and then moves back in time. Why wouldn't Rios choose to begin when the boys were younger, and then work his way up to junior high? And what has changed in the boys, and in their lives, between the beginning and the end of the story?

Look also at the stages in all the important changes. What happens to change things or people? Why do you think the author chose to take this course of action? In "Happy Endings," Atwood ENG 150 Reynolds 5 details the possible outcomes of a single event. What is her point in showing us all these alternatives? Look for events, people, and/or circumstances that work against the action of the story. In "The Things They Carried," for example, the narrator tells us what happens to the soldiers--but he also repetitively tells us what they carry, and this slows down the story. Why would O'Brien choose to include all this information?

Why not just tell us what happened? Look for characters, events, and details which seem to make no contribution to the plot or movement of the story,



and ask yourself why they are there. In "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," (pg. 474) for instance, the narrator tells us a lot of stories about Victor's and Thomas's past which seem to have nothing to do with the events taking place on their trip. Why tell us? We are told about a gymnast they meet; but the gymnast is unnecessary to the plot; why is she there? The reservation where the boys live is described; what details are we told about the reservation?

What is left out? Why? Look for repetition of events and details. What details repeat themselves in Faulkner's "A Rose For Emily"? (pg. 29) Is there any sort of pattern that you can detect in this repetition? The narrator of "The Tell-tale Heart" also repeats himself; why? Note the conflicts that occur in the story, whether they are between the characters, the characters and their surroundings, or within the characters themselves. And look at how those conflicts are resolved. In "Kansas," the narrator describes the conflict between the boy and the farmer; why is he so frightened? How does this affect his later actions?

And how is the conflict resolved? What does this resolution reveal about the boy? About the reader? Character Characters in books and stories can function in two ways: they can be individuals, with unique characteristics, habits, quirks, and personalities, so that they seem like real people; or they can be "types"--that is, they can typify or represent something larger than themselves. The best characters do both. In a story, the main character is called the "protagonist." The protagonist's opponent is the "antagonist." The antagonist is usually another person, but in some stories it is an animal, or a spirit, or even a natural force.

<https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-literature-plot-character/>

Figuring out which character is the protagonist can help you to interpret the story's theme. For example, in "A Rose for Emily," we might say the protagonist is Emily--or we might say the protagonist is the town. If we choose Emily, we might see the story's theme as having to do with fear, loneliness, or mental illness. If we choose the town, we might see the story as having to do with social isolation or social class. Some characters are "flat"; others are "round." Flat characters may play a small or a large role in a story, but they experience no change or development throughout the course of the story.

Round characters change, grow, develop. (This does not make round characters superior to flat characters; it simply means they serve a different function in the story, depending on the author's intention. ) In "The Yellow Wallpaper," (pg. 436) for instance, the husband is flat; we do not see him experience any growth or development during the story. But the narrator, his wife, is round; her experiences change her. Sometimes it is not easy to figure out whether a character is round or flat, and that in itself can help you arrive at an interpretation of the story.

For example, is the narrator of "The Tell-tale Heart" flat or round? Does he change or develop during the course of the story, or does he stay the same? The way you answer this question may affect the way you see the theme(s) of the story. Often, the names of characters are revealing. Authors are usually careful to give their characters appropriate names. Charles Dickens, for example, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, names a schoolmaster "Mr. Choakumchild"; right away, we know that Nicholas is in for a rough time at this school. Sometimes, the