
Literary Terms Study Sheets

Balance Read-Along Materials

Read-Along Radio Dramas

Antagonist

This is the term that refers to the force, person, or obstacle that stands in the way of the main character as he/she attempts to solve the problem or conflict in the story.

Characterization

This is how the author creates people for a story. Character is revealed by what the author says about the character; how the character speaks, thinks, and acts; and how other characters act toward the character and what they say about the character.

Climax

Climax is the point in the story where tension is the highest. It is the point in the action where the conflict is about to be resolved. The climax occurs when the other alternatives to solving the problem have been eliminated.

Complication

Complication refers to the difficult circumstances that come about through the character's attempts to find solutions to his/her problem.

Conflict

The conflict is the problem between the opposing forces in the story. The main character wants something and something else is standing in the way.

There are five types of conflict:

1. Man against Man [One character has a problem with one or more other characters.]
2. Man against Himself [A character has trouble deciding what action to take. This type of conflict deals with right and wrong. For example: A character is hungry. He has no money. He cannot find work to make money, but he must eat. He believes it is wrong to steal. He must decide whether to break into a grocery store and steal food or go hungry.]
3. Man against Society [A character has a problem with the law, school, accepted behavior, etc.]
4. Man against Nature [A character struggles with the elements. In "Love of Life" by Jack London, the man wants to live, but Nature in the form of the barren arctic tundra stands in his way. To survive he must overcome all that Nature puts in his way: an injured ankle, hunger, cold, distance, wolves, etc.]
5. Man against Fate (the God's, the Supernatural) [A character is faced with uncontrollable circumstances.]

Dialogue

This term refers to the exact words of conversation taking place between characters. Dialogue is one of the most common ways an author reveals character. The words a character uses also serve to relate the plot to the reader.

Exposition

Exposition is that part of the story that helps the reader understand the background or situation in which the story is set. It is intended to make clear or explain something that might be difficult to understand.

Falling Action

The action of a story is said to increase in tension to a climax. Falling action is the part of the story that occurs after the climax.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a suggestion or hint in a story. It is put there by the author to indicate an event to come. At times this “hint” may be so subtle that it is difficult to recognize until the “event” has occurred.

Imagery

This term refers to word pictures—groups of words that create specific pictures in the mind. These images are not restricted to visual images. Imagery refers to all the senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. In the story “After the Battle” by Joseph A. Altsheler, the author creates images of touch and smell in this way: “There was no wind. The night had brought no coolness. The thick and heavy atmosphere hung close to the earth and coiled around and embraced everything. Through it came the faint gunpowdery vapor that crept into the throats and nostrils...”

Irony

In literature, an implication of meaning where there is a striking contrast between what the statement says and what the statement means. A simple example of irony is when a character calls a fat person skinny. Another example is in “The Necklace”: M. Loisel (Marsha in the adaptation) sacrifices her youth to pay for a diamond necklace she has lost, but the irony of this is that the necklace was worth only a small amount.

Metaphor

A metaphor is an implied comparison between two things to illustrate a point of similarity. Almost every day, we use metaphors in our speech. For instance: When we speak of someone who has a habit of bragging, we might say, “Oh, he's just a big bag of wind.” (OR) When describing someone who keeps saying the same thing over and over again, we might say “She's a broken record.” (AND) In the adaptation of “The Monkey's Paw” the narrator describes fate as a clock: “But, on rare occasions, when all the pivots and wheels in the Great Clock of Fate are synchronized to permit it, then, we get exactly what we want.”

Mood

Mood is the feeling that an author wants the reader to experience. The way words are put together determine the kinds of feelings the reader feels—fear, humor, sadness, hate, anger, etc. In “The Monkey's Paw” the narrator says, “The cold white of the winter moon cast a slant of light on the far wall, capturing the shadow of the hunched old woman as she peered expectantly toward the graveyard.” This sentence was intended to create a mood of loneliness, depression, misery, etc.

Personification

This is a metaphor where human characteristics are given to inanimate or abstract ideas. In “The Last Leaf” the author gives pneumonia the characteristics of a man: “In November, a cold, unseen stranger whom the doctors called Pneumonia stalked about the colony, touching one here and there with his icy finger. Over on the east side this ravager strode boldly, smiting his victims by scores, but his feet trod slowly through the maze of the narrow and moss-grown places.”

Plot

The plot is the action of the story that moves from the opening situation to the problem and on through to a resolution. The plot usually proceeds this way: (1) a tranquil situation involving a main character is related; (2) a conflict develops; (3) complications arise from the main character's attempts to find a solution to the conflict; (4) the complications eventually result in a climax; (5) the climax is followed by a resolution to the conflict returning the situation to a state of relative calm.

Point of view

From whose point of view is the story told? The two most commonly used by authors are the *first person* and the *third person*.

1. **First Person:** If the author tells the story from the point of view of one of the characters, we call this *first person point of view*. The adaptation of “The Monkey's Paw” is written in first person, when the narrator is speaking, personal pronouns are used (*I, me, my*):

During supper the monkey's paw was more or less forgotten, and afterward *my* three hosts coaxed *me* into telling them more of *my* adventures in a world oceans away from their own. *I* was still weary though from much travel and before long, bid *my* friends good night and left for home.

2. **Third Person:** If the author tells the story from the point of view of someone outside the story, we call this *third person point of view*. The original of “The Monkey's Paw” is written in third person. The pronouns *I, me, and my* are not used by the narrator. The same paragraph as above reads this way:

Mr. White dropped it back in his pocket, and placing chairs, motioned his friend to the table. In the business of supper the talisman was partly forgotten, and afterward the three sat listening in an enthralled fashion to a second installment of the soldier's adventures in India.

Protagonist

This is the main character in a story. When discussing conflict, the main character is referred to as the protagonist when he/she is trying to overcome an opposing obstacle, person, or force.

Rising action

The rising action is that part of the action that happens before the climax.

Setting

The setting is the time and place in which the story occurs. The time or place may be either stated or suggested. The setting provides a background for the action and can also help shape events. For example: London's “Love of Life” takes place within the arctic circle in northern Canada, hundreds of miles from the nearest outpost of civilization. A man with an injured his ankle, has been deserted by his partner, and winter is coming on.

Questions that help analyze the setting are:

1. When does the story occur?
2. Where does it occur?
3. Why is the main character in this particular setting?
4. How does the setting affect the main character?
5. How does the setting help create tension?
6. How does the setting help determine the action?

Suspense

Suspense is the tension created in the reader by the action of the story. This is done when the author hints that something new is about to happen. For example: The narrator in “The Monkey's Paw” says “But, on rare occasions, when all the pivots and wheels in the Great Clock of Fate are synchronized to permit it, then, we get exactly what we want. And believe me, friend, to grant our deepest wish can be one of Fate's cruelest jokes.” After this, it would be difficult to imagine a person who would not want to know more about this “cruellest” of jokes.

Symbol (Symbolism, Symbolic)

Something in a story which stands for something else. A symbol usually is some real object that stands for an abstract meaning. In “The Necklace” by Guy de Maupassant, the diamond necklace is a symbol for the beauty and glamor of the world Madame Loisel (Marsha in the adaptation) yearns for.

Theme

A brief generalized meaning of the story stated (ideally) in one sentence. A good way to approach identification of theme is to ask the question: “The author is trying to show that...” For instance: In “The Last Leaf” O. Henry was trying to show that love for another can be stronger than love for self. Some themes, however, are difficult to state briefly or precisely and need to be discussed.

Tone

The attitude the author has toward the story subject as reflected in the story. Ambrose Bierce's tone (attitude) toward war, in his short story “Chickamauga” is abhorrence. In this story the author describes, through the eyes of a deaf-mute child, the horrors of war.