

# Literary Analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Just as painters express ideas and feelings by arranging colors and images on a canvas, literary artists convey emotions and ideas through the skillful arrangement of words. One of the most important concepts for students to understand is that writers make conscious choices about how to use words, phrases, and sentences to communicate meaning and effect.

This section begins with a brief overview of literary terms, is followed by sample analyses of literary passages, and ends with a list of suggestions for possible classroom activities that could be used or adapted by the teacher at various grade levels.

From the time students begin to recognize the elements of imaginative writing, they should develop a literary vocabulary that will enable them to articulate their ideas about literature with increasing confidence and proficiency. Although some of the following literary devices may figure more prominently in poetry, they cross all genres.

## LITERARY TERMS

*Alliteration* is the practice of beginning several consecutive or neighboring words with the same sound: e.g., "The twisting trout twinkled below."

*Allusion* is a reference to a mythological, literary, or historical person, place, or thing: e.g., "He met his Waterloo."

*Antithesis* is a direct juxtaposition of structurally parallel words, phrases, or clauses for the purpose of contrast: e.g., "Sink or swim."

*Apostrophe* is a form of personification in which the absent or dead are spoken to as if present and the inanimate, as if animate. These are all addressed directly: e.g., "Milton! Thou shouldn't be living at this hour."

*Assonance* is the repetition of accented vowel sounds in a series of words: e.g., the words "cry" and "side" have the same vowel sound and so are said to be in assonance.

*Consonance* is the repetition of a consonant sound within a series of words to produce a harmonious effect: e.g., "And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds." The "d" sound is in consonance. The "s" sound is also in consonance.

*Details* are the facts revealed by the author or speaker that support the attitude or tone in a piece of poetry or prose.

*Diction* is word choice intended to convey a certain effect.

*Figures of speech* are words or phrases that describe one thing in terms of something else. They always involve some sort of imaginative comparison between seemingly unlike things. Not meant to be taken literally, figurative language is used to produce images in a reader's mind and to express ideas in fresh, vivid, and imaginative ways. The most common examples of figurative language, or figures of speech, used in both prose and poetry, are simile, metaphor, and personification.

*Flashback* is a scene that interrupts the action of a work to show a previous event.

*Foreshadowing* is the use of hints or clues in a narrative to suggest future action.

*Hyperbole* is a deliberate, extravagant, and often outrageous exaggeration: e.g., "The shot heard 'round the world." It may be used for either serious or comic effect.

*Imagery* consists of the words or phrases a writer uses to represent persons, objects, actions, feelings, and ideas descriptively by appealing to the senses.

*Irony* occurs in three types. *Verbal irony* occurs when a speaker or narrator says one thing while meaning the opposite. An example of verbal irony occurs in the statement, "It is easy to stop smoking. I've done it many times." *Situational irony* occurs when a situation turns out differently from what one would normally expect—though often the twist is oddly appropriate: e.g., a deep sea diver drowning in a bathtub is ironic. *Dramatic irony* occurs when a character or speaker says or does something that has different meanings from what he or she thinks it means, though the audience and other characters understand the full implications of the speech or action: e.g., Oedipus curses the murderer of Laius, not realizing that he is himself the murderer and so is cursing himself.

*Metaphor* is a comparison of two unlike things not using "like" or "as": e.g., "Time is money."

*Mood* is the atmosphere or predominant emotion in a literary work.

*Motivation* is a circumstance or set of circumstances that prompts a character to act in a certain way or that determines the outcome of a situation or work.

*Narration* is the telling of a story in writing or speaking.

*Onomatopoeia* (imitative harmony) is the use of words that mimic the sounds they describe: e.g., “hiss,” “buzz,” and “bang.” When onomatopoeia is used on an extended scale in a poem, it is called *imitative harmony*.

*Oxymoron* is a form of paradox that combines a pair of opposite terms into a single unusual expression: e.g., “sweet sorrow” or “cold fire.”

*Paradox* occurs when the elements of a statement contradict each other. Although the statement may appear illogical, impossible, or absurd, it turns out to have a coherent meaning that reveals a hidden truth: e.g., “Much madness is divinest sense.”

*Personification* is a kind of metaphor that gives inanimate objects or abstract ideas human characteristics: e.g., “The wind cried in the dark.”

*Plot* is the sequence of events or actions in a short story, novel, play, or narrative poem.

*Point of view* is the perspective from which a narrative is told.

*Prosody* is the study of sound and rhythm in poetry.

The *protagonist* is the central character of a drama, novel, short story, or narrative poem. Conversely, the antagonist is the character who stands directly opposed to the protagonist.

*Pun* is a play on words that are identical or similar in sound but have sharply diverse meanings. Puns can have serious as well as humorous uses: e.g., when Mercutio is bleeding to death in *Romeo and Juliet*, he says to his friends, “Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man.”

*Repetition* is the deliberate use of any element of language more than once—sound, word, phrase, sentence, grammatical pattern, or rhythmical pattern.

*Rhyme* is the repetition of sounds in two or more words or phrases that appear close to each other in a poem. *End rhyme* occurs at the end of lines; *internal rhyme*, within a line. *Slant rhyme* is approximate rhyme. A *rhyme scheme* is the pattern of end rhymes.

*Sarcasm* is the use of verbal irony in which a person appears to be praising something but is actually insulting it: e.g., “As I fell down the stairs headfirst, I heard her say, ‘Look at that coordination.’”

*Setting* is the time and place in which events in a short story, novel, play, or narrative poem take place.

*Shift* or *turn* refers to a change or movement in a piece resulting from an epiphany, realization, or insight gained by the speaker, a character, or the reader.

*Simile* is a comparison of two different things or ideas through the use of the words “like” or “as.” It is a definitely stated comparison in which the poet says one thing is like another: e.g., “The warrior fought like a lion.”

*Sound devices* are stylistic techniques that convey meaning through sound. Some examples of sound devices are *rhyme* (two words having the same sound), *assonance* (repetition of similar vowel sounds), *consonance* (repetition of consonant sounds in the middle or at the end of words), *alliteration* (words beginning with the same consonant sound), and *onomatopoeia* (words that sound like their meaning).

*Structure* is the framework or organization of a literary selection. For example, the structure of fiction is usually determined by plot and by chapter division; the structure of drama depends upon its division into acts and scenes; the structure of an essay depends upon the organization of ideas; the structure of poetry is determined by its rhyme scheme and stanzaic form.

*Style* is the writer’s characteristic manner of employing language.

*Suspense* is the quality of a short story, novel, play, or narrative poem that makes the reader or audience uncertain or tense about the outcome of events.

A *symbol* is any object, person, place, or action that has both a meaning in itself and that stands for something larger than itself, such as a quality, attitude, belief, or value: e.g., the land turtle in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* suggests or reflects the toughness and resilience of the migrant workers.

*Synecdoche (metonymy)* is a form of metaphor. In synecdoche, a part of something is used to signify the whole: e.g., “All hands on deck.” Also, the reverse, whereby the whole can represent a part, is synecdoche: e.g., “Canada played the United States in the Olympic hockey finals.” Another form of synecdoche involves the container representing the thing being contained: e.g., “The pot is boiling.” In one last form of synecdoche, the material from which an object is made stands for the object itself: e.g., “The quarterback tossed the pigskin.” In metonymy, the name of one thing is applied to another thing with which it is closely associated: e.g., “I love Shakespeare.”

*Syntax* means the arrangement of words and the order of grammatical elements in a sentence.

*Theme* is the central message of a literary work. It is not the same as a subject, which can be expressed in a word or two: courage, survival, war, pride, etc. The theme is the idea the author wishes to convey about that subject. It is expressed as a sentence or general statement about life or human nature. A literary work can have more than one theme, and most themes are not directly stated but are implied. The reader must think about all the elements of the work and use them to make inferences, or reasonable guesses, as to which themes seem to be implied. An example of a theme on the subject of pride might be that pride often precedes a fall.

**Tone** is the writer's or speaker's attitude toward a subject, character, or audience, and it is conveyed through the author's choice of words and detail. Tone can be serious, humorous, sarcastic, indignant, objective, etc.

**Understatement** (*meiosis, litotes*) is the opposite of hyperbole. It is a kind of irony that deliberately represents something as being much less than it really is: e.g., "I could probably manage to survive on a salary of two million dollars per year."

As students become more skilled at recognizing and analyzing how these basic devices and techniques are used in the literary works they are studying, they can begin to add more to their repertoire, gaining a greater understanding and appreciation of how *all* literary devices work together to express tone and theme. *The SIFT Method* is one strategy that may help students derive meaning from a text.

### USING THE SIFT METHOD OF LITERARY ANALYSIS

When exploring how a writer uses literary elements and stylistic techniques to convey meaning or theme, teachers may introduce the following technique to help young readers begin to practice literary analysis. This method allows students to "sift" through the parts in order to comprehend the whole.

#### *SIFT Method*

**Symbol:** examine the title and text for symbolism

**Images:** identify images and sensory details

**Figures of speech:** analyze figurative language and other devices

**Tone and Theme :** discuss how all devices reveal tone and theme

An example of the *SIFT Method* as applied to John Steinbeck's novel, *The Pearl*, follows. Before reading the book, it would be a good idea for the teacher to engage the students in standard prereading activities such as examining the title for clues as to what the story might be about, making predictions based on the cover illustration, and sharing some information about the author.

Teachers might assign the book ahead of time so that students can read it a week or two before class discussion is scheduled to begin. Then, as the novel is studied in class, students can reread it with closer attention to detail.

#### **Symbol**

Steinbeck's writing is rich in the use of symbolism. Since the title of a story or novel often contains symbols that hint at theme, students should first be encouraged to reexamine the title. The teacher might suggest that the pearl is the central symbol of the story and might ask students to reflect on the characteristics of the pearl and speculate about its significance. The teacher might point out that a pearl has often been used in literature to represent spiritual purity and innocence; at this point, the class might debate the issue of whether the pearl is used here in its traditional symbolic sense. For Kino, the pearl seems to symbolize potential wealth, education for his son, and betterment for

his family. A class or small group discussion focused on the ways in which the meaning of the pearl changes throughout the story may reveal additional insights about Steinbeck's use of symbolism and its contribution to theme.

A list of possible interpretations of other symbolic elements in *The Pearl* follows.

The *scorpion* may suggest evil or natural calamity.

The *doctor* may represent willful evil (inhumanity).

The *pearl* dealers may exemplify conspiracy and exploitation.

The *trackers* may symbolize a society bent on destroying an individual.

*Kino* could represent the common man oppressed by society.

The *canoe* may represent family tradition, something of value which Kino can pass on to his son.

### Imagery

Writers use language to create sensory impressions and to evoke specific responses to characters, objects, events, or situations in their works. The writer "shows" rather than "tells," thus allowing the reader to participate in the experience more fully. Therefore, imagery helps to produce mood and tone.

When reading a piece containing imagery, students might ask themselves two questions:

*What do I see, hear, taste, smell, or feel?*

*What effect is the author trying to convey with these images?*

*The Pearl* opens with intense imagery. Students could examine the following excerpt for examples of imagery and discuss how these images and sensory details contribute to meaning and effect. They might ask why the author chose to begin with these descriptive details. What kind of information do they provide about Kino and the society in which he lives?

Kino awakened in the near dark. The stars still shone and the day had drawn only a pale wash of light in the lower sky to the east. The roosters had been crowing for some time, and the early pigs were already beginning their ceaseless turning of twigs and bits of wood to see whether anything to eat had been overlooked. Outside the brush house in the tuna clump, a covey of little birds chattered and flurried with their wings.

Kino's eyes opened, and he looked first at the lightening square which was the door and then he looked at the hanging box where Coyotito slept. And last he turned his head to Juana, his wife, who lay beside him on the mat, her blue shawl over her nose and over her breasts and around the small of her back. Juana's eyes were open too. Kino could never remember seeing them closed when he awakened. Her dark eyes made