

LITERARY ELEMENTS AND FORMS

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Literary Elements

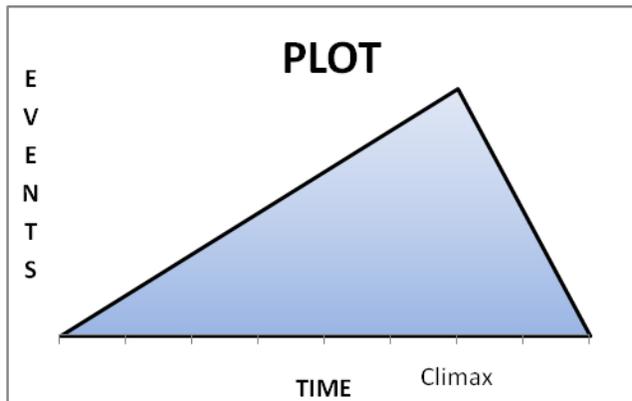
While reading the following descriptions of literary elements, please keep in mind that stories, poems, plays, creative nonfiction, and other forms of literature are *open to interpretation*. Readers may disagree, for example, on what they think is the most important moment in a story's plot. They may also have different ideas on how the setting or a certain character affects a story's meaning or impact.

By sharing our various interpretations of a piece of literature, we can help each other see literary elements in a new or surprising way. The reading process, combined with sharing our reading experience, deepens and broadens our awareness of the world, beauty, cruelty—the struggles and joys of human life.

PLOT

Plot refers to the main or critical events that happen from beginning to end of a story or novel. A good story will have a climax, or the most significant event, where the main character experiences an important change. The character may change internally and/or externally. They may change the way they think or a certain behavior.

The climax, again, is open to interpretation. Some readers may think the climax happens earlier (or later) in the story. All other events in the story lead toward/away from this climatic or pivotal event. See the chart below.



In the story “Vietnam. Thursday” by Johan Harstad, I would argue the climax occurs at the patient’s home, where the main character, a psychologist, experiences empathy. He has been strangely cold and distant with his clients. The reader will notice how his behavior changes after the patient shows him her horrible scar from the Vietnam War. He begins to treat her, finally, like a human being.

In contemporary stories, the change is often subtle, complex, and not necessarily redemptive. A good story, as you probably agree, doesn’t require a fairytale ending. Also, as you may see in

your assigned readings, stories aren't always perfectly linear ("This happened, and then this . . ."). Sometimes the sense of "time" is more like a circle or spiral. The writer may use flashbacks (start when the character is older, for example, and then go back to his childhood), skip long periods of a character's life, or go back and forth. No matter what the temporal shape of a story, the main character must undergo some sort of change, unless the story is *about* the character *not changing*. A story may show the consequences of a character unable to make a certain change.

SETTING

Setting is the location, landscape, weather, time period, and objects—furniture / buildings / fingernail clippers—anything inanimate in a story. Setting can affect a character's emotions and success, set a story's mood, and portray various themes. If a character is dying, for example, the setting might be sunny to contrast the death, or dark to reflect it. Setting is often used as a symbol of something in the story. It can also foreshadow what happens later. If the author uses setting in a cliché or overused way ("It was a dark and stormy night" / "Leaves fell as he died"), the reader may feel annoyed or insulted. Writing, including setting, works best when images and descriptions are original and creative.

THEME

A story can focus on multiple themes or main ideas and concepts. A writer may use a theme, for example, to inspire the reader to think about something differently. In "Vietnam. Thursday," themes include empathy, mental health, doctor-patient relationships, role reversal, and so forth. Johan Harstad, the author, uses an especially vivid writing style in the opening paragraphs: "Imagine that you have to harm yourself. Imagine that you set the razor, or the razor blade, against your soft, pink gums, and that with forceful strokes you begin to shave them off" (241). In describing a graphic, painful image, he inspires empathy in the reader right away, making us imagine the pain so clearly we might even gasp. Eliciting such a reaction in the reader emphasizes one of the story's main themes: the ability to feel another person's pain.

One thing to remember about theme is that it's more than a topic or subject of a text, it's the *statement that the author is making about that subject*. So, when Harstad creates these images that evoke empathy in the reader, and then he portrays characters who show little empathy, we might say that the overriding theme of this story is the *lack of empathy members of a modern society feel for one another*. Note how the theme here is almost a moral. Harstad asks us to think critically about how we engage with others, particularly through a computer mediated world.

Other literary themes can include apathy, domestic violence, family dynamics, racism, death—the list is endless. . . . An author writes for a reason, and that reason is often made clear in a story's theme(s).

CHARACTER

Characters are the people (and/or animals, alien creatures, etc.!) in a story or other piece of literature. The main character is called the *protagonist*. In a good story, the protagonist usually experiences an important change in his or her life, as mentioned under Plot. Often a story

includes an *antagonist*, or a character that works against the protagonist. Sometimes the antagonist is one and the same as the protagonist. For example, a person can be their own worst enemy by making harmful decisions that hurt not only others but themselves. Supporting or minor characters can include the protagonist's and/or antagonist's friends and enemies that help or hinder the main character's actions. The setting can also work like a character, for and/or against the protagonist. An earthquake, for example, can affect a character's ability to accomplish something.

Dialogue (conversation between two or more characters) can really help a story move forward. It shows the characters' interactions and personalities—the way they talk to each other and how their conversation affects what happens in the story.

POINT OF VIEW

First of all, it's important to realize that the author is *not* necessarily the same as the narrator of a story. A narrator is the voice telling the story, but the author is the one who writes that voice. The narrator can be a voice or character that the author makes up. Here are the following different points of view:

1. *First person* uses the pronoun "I" and refers to "my" and "mine." For example, "I bought a new book" or "The book is mine." It can also use the pronoun "we" and refer to "our."
2. *Second person* uses the pronoun "you" and refers to "your." For example, "You bought a new book" or "The book is yours."
3. *Third person* uses the pronouns "he/she/they/it" and refers to "his/her/their." For example, "She bought a new book" or "The book is hers."
 - a. *Third person limited* is from one character's (or a limited number of characters') point of view. For example, "Helen thought the book was great."
 - b. *Third person omniscient* can see from all the characters' perspectives. For example, "Helen thought the book was great. Jim didn't like it."
 - c. Note: The following may seem obvious, but a lot of students misunderstand point of view. Using second and third person pronouns can also be *from* the first person point of view. For example, "I saw her buy the book and read the first page. She smiled as she read, so she must have liked it." Even though the narrator (let's say he is male) uses the pronoun "she" in the second sentence, we know the point of view is his. If the narrator never uses "I" to describe what he sees, or the reader can tell the point of view isn't from only his perspective, then we can assume the point of view is third person.

Consider how the characters and the point of view in a story affect how the story unfolds and how it affects the reader. Would the story be different from a different point of view? Is the narrator biased or does he/she see things that aren't really true?

Also, verb tense can affect point of view. A story is written in past, present, or future tense:

1. *Past tense* uses verbs like “walked,” “flew,” whereas
2. *Present tense* uses “walk/walks,” fly/flies,” and
3. *Future tense* uses “will walk,” “will fly.”

Consider how a story’s person (first, second, or third) and tense (past, present, or future) affect the reader. “We walk to my grandmother’s house” has an immediacy lacking in “They walked to her grandmother’s house.” Fiction writers most often use past tense, but they also use present tense fairly often. Writers rarely use future tense: “They will walk to her grandmother’s house.”

Writing Style

Writing style, though difficult to define, really makes a difference in how a piece of literature impacts us. It can flow as naturally as the way a narrator speaks, or it can be more lyrical and poetic. Style doesn't need to be complicated to be effective, although sometimes a long, poetic sentence can reach us like a great piece of music. Short, simple sentences also have their place.

After reading the examples below, see which elements of writing style you can find in your assigned readings for this class. The elements are separated into sections, but really, they work together, just as literary elements like setting and plot don't really stand on their own. The different elements combine and play off each other to create a story, poem, or other literary form.

VOICE

Each piece of literature has a certain voice, depending on the point of view, the writer's individual style, and so forth. A *natural* voice, or the way someone speaks, can bring the reader closer to a character, especially in first person. Note the narrator's first person voice, for example, in Alice Walker's story "Everyday Use (For Your Grandmama)." The narrator is Maggie's mother, "Mama."

How long ago was it that the other house burned? Ten, twelve years? Sometimes I can still hear the flames and feel Maggie's arms sticking to me, her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little black papery flakes. (334)

Mama's vivid description of the memory reaches us in her own, individual voice (written, of course, by Walker, creating the effect that we are listening to Mama speak/think).

A *lyrical* or *poetic* voice can affect our sense of literary aesthetic—how artfully words are put together. (Note: A natural voice can also be poetic! And a voice can be written in any point of view, though it may sound different written in first versus third, as mentioned under Literary Elements.) Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Housekeeping*, is written in first person and often portrays the immediacy of the narrator, Ruth, speaking her natural voice: "My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster . . ." (3). But below, as Ruth is reflecting, her narration seems to move beyond the individual Ruth thinking to herself. Though still in first person, the voice becomes more universal and poetic:

For need can blossom into all the compensation it requires. To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. . . . [T]o wish for a hand on one's hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again. Though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an angel, fosters us, smooths our hair, and brings us wild strawberries. (152-3)

SENTENCE STRUCTURE / RHYTHM

Sentence structure includes *length* (long versus short) and *type* (e.g., a list, a simple subject/verb, a complex or compound sentence, a fragment)—how a sentence is (or is not) built. Sentence structure affects writing style. Paragraph structure (a long versus short paragraph, for example) can also impact style. Structure can help build *suspense*, for example, as shown in a scene from the autobiographical narrative, “Berkeley Blues”:

The man opened the door. “We’re all going to die,” I thought. “All my hopes and dreams are going to end here, in a stupid pizza place, at the hands of a crazy black bum.”

He took something out of his pocket.

It was shiny.

I couldn’t look.

A knife.

No. It was a flask. He took a swig from it, and, still propping the door open with his sagging frame, spoke the most jolting, burning words I’ve ever heard.

“I love you,” he said. “All of you.” He glanced at Chad, “Even you.” (Klein 548-9)

The four short sentences (one just a fragment), each with their own line, slow the scene down and emphasize that something is about to happen. “A knife” is an incomplete sentence, which we refer to as a sentence fragment.

Below, in her piece “Living Like Weasels,” Annie Dillard varies her sentence structure to build *rhythm* into her description:

A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks? He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose. Sometimes he lives in his den for two days without leaving. Outside, he stalks rabbits, mice, muskrats, and birds, killing more bodies than he can eat warm, and often dragging the carcasses home. Obedient to instinct, he bites his prey at the neck, either splitting the jugular vein at the throat or crunching the brain at the base of the skull, and he does not let go. (566)

Dillard uses a list (rabbits, mice, etc.) to give us the sensation of the weasel stalking all sorts of prey. She ends with “he does not let go,” a short, independent clause emphasizing the image she wants to leave in the reader’s head.

WORD CHOICE / REPETITION

Usually, writers want to *vary* their word choice, so the same word(s) isn’t used too often or too close together. Sometimes, however, a writer uses *repetition* on purpose to create a certain effect. Here, again, is Dillard, a master stylist:

I missed my chance. I should have gone for the throat. I should have lunged for that streak of white under the weasel’s chin and held on, held on through mud and

into the wild rose, held on for a dearer life. We could live under the wild rose wild as weasels, mute and uncomprehending. I could very calmly go wild. I could live two days in the den, curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses. Down is a good place to go, where the mind is single. Down is out, out of your ever-loving mind and back to your careless senses. (568)

Notice all the repetition of both words and phrases! “I should have,” “held on,” “wild,” “could,” “down,” “out,”—Dillard gets by with repeating these words because she makes them work like poetry.

SIMILE / METAPHOR

“Living Like Weasels” begins with a naturalistic description of the weasel and turns the animal into a metaphor, by the end of the narrative, for how a human should live: “I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you” (568).

Writers, as you probably know, often use similes and metaphors to enrich a piece of writing or clarify an image or idea. Similes are similar to metaphors—they are both figures of speech using a word or phrase to represent something else—but similes use “like” or “as.”

One naturalist refused to kill a weasel who was socketed into his hand deeply as a rattlesnake. The man could in no way pry the tiny weasel off, and he had to walk half a mile to water, the weasel dangling from his palm, and soak him off like a stubborn label. (566)

Here Dillard creates two similes: “as a rattlesnake” and “like a stubborn label,” to give us a clearer sense of the weasel not letting go. Usually a writer doesn’t want to use “mixed metaphors” or “mixed similes” (both rattlesnake and label to describe the weasel’s hold), but, I have to say, Dillard gets by with almost anything. If a writer reaches a certain level of expertise, they know how to break rules without hurting their style.

In *Housekeeping*, Ruth imagines building a statue out of snow of Lot’s wife, a metaphor for her own, dead mother: “Though her hands were ice and did not touch them, she would be more than mother to them . . .” (Robinson 153).

ABSTRACT / CONCRETE

All the above examples use varying degrees of abstract versus concrete language. Abstract wording is more general, subjective, and often idea-oriented, whereas concrete descriptions are vivid and specific—something one can feel with one or more of the five senses (sight, taste, hearing, touch, smell).

“Need can blossom into all the compensation it requires”—very abstract. We can’t touch or see, specifically, “compensation.” Following that sentence is a concrete description I skipped when I quoted the passage under Voice:

For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know anything so utterly as when we lack it?

This specific description follows just after the relatively abstract sentence “To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow” (152). By describing, concretely, what it’s like to long for a berry, Robinson allows us to imagine more clearly what the narrator means by “compensation” and “craving.”

Similarly, Dillard doesn’t just leave her description of a weasel with the abstract thought “A weasel is wild.” She gives concrete details: “tail draped over his nose,” “bites his prey at its neck,” and so forth, to help us visualize its “wild” life.

If a writer is too abstract, the reader gets lost in vague ideas that are hard to imagine or feel. But if a writer relies too much on the concrete, the reader can get lost in too many details and the writing becomes tedious. A writer with a strong sense of style creates a skilled balance of abstract and concrete language.

STRONG, ACTIVE VERBS

“My dog chewed a bone” is more active than “A bone was chewed by my dog” (passive).

Be verbs include “was, is, are,” etc. They certainly have their place (“have” is another one, and so is “is”!), but too many *be* verbs and passive verb structure *weaken* a writer’s style. For example, if I write, “A writer’s style *is weakened by* too many *be* verbs and passive verb structure,” the sentence is not as strong. The “is” and “by” make the sentence passive, whereas “weaken” by itself is more active—it directly follows the subject instead of passively letting the subject follow the verb.

“Too many *be* verbs and passive verb structure,” the subject, should come before the verb “weakens” instead of passively following “is weakened by.” “A writer’s style” is the object—what the subject is acting upon—and should follow the verb. Passive style does work sometimes, but a writer should try to use an active style if possible. “The stamps were ordered” is an example of a passive sentence, where the specific subject (who ordered the stamps) isn’t necessarily known.

The following section on the five senses and body language goes into further depth about concrete writing style, where the reader can feel, touch, see, hear, or taste what the author describes. Good writing often combines multiple senses into one image, just as we experience life using more than once sense at a time.

The Five Senses and Body Language (with a few side notes on style & quoting/citing correctly)

A piece of literature can really come alive when the author appeals to one or more of the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. See the examples below from Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*. The novel's point of view is first person, from the 14-year-old character Lily Owen's perspective. The setting is South Carolina, 1964.

SIGHT

The “dance in the sprinkler,” a key moment in the novel, gives the following visual image emotional weight: “Zach sat with his elbows on his knees staring at the circle of grass, still fat and emerald green from our dance in the sprinkler” (206).

After an encounter with her abusive father, Lily narrates what she feels and *sees*, clarifying her point of view: “After he left, I didn't move except to trace the bars of light on the bed with my finger. . . . I don't know how long I sat there feeling broken to pieces. Finally I walked to the window and gazed out at the peach trees stretching halfway to North Carolina, the way they held up their leafy arms in gestures of pure beseeching. The rest was sky and air and lonely space” (40).

Notice the subtle rhyming and rhythm as well. “Peach” rhymes softly with “beseeching.” The last sentence enhances the “sky,” “air” and “lonely space” with the simple use of two “ands.” The lonely landscape with its arms reaching up echoes Lily's own condition.

Note also the *voice*—Lily is a young teenager, so she is more likely to get by with a cliché like “broken to pieces” without it hurting the reader's ear 😊 !

HEARING

“For a second neither spoke. I heard the moths landing against the porch lightbulb” (86). The soft sound of the moths emphasizes the characters' silence.

Below is an **example of a block quotation** (four or more lines). Rosaleen, Lily's African American nanny, has just been arrested for pouring her snuff spit across the shoes of some racist bullies:

Rosaleen climbed in, sliding over on the seat. I moved after her, sliding as she slid, sitting as she sat.

The door closed. So quiet it amounted to nothing but a snap of air, and that was the strangeness of it, how a small sound like that could fall across the whole world. (33)

The “small sound” of the “door clos[ing] . . . fall[s] across” Lily’s “whole world.” Nothing is the same for her or Rosaleen, after they are taken away in the police car.

Note the use of *brackets* [] when quoting but changing the tense, usage, or capitalization of a word to fit into a sentence. The original “close” doesn’t work in the quotation above, so brackets are added around “ing” to show it isn’t the same as the original. Similarly, the original “fall” wouldn’t work in the sentence without an “s” at the end.

SMELL

A little earlier in the above scene, Lily describes what she hears and smells: “Clean it off! That’s all I could hear, over and over. And then the cry of birds overhead, sharp as needles, sweeping from low-bough trees, stirring up the scent of pine, and even then I knew I would recoil all my life from the smell of it” (32).

Certain smells bring up different memories in each of us! Lily noting how the “scent of pine” would make her “recoil” for the rest of her life helps the reader realize how much the scene impacted her.

“We waded through Queen Anne’s lace and thick-stalked purple flowers, into dragonflies and the smell of Carolina jasmine so thick I could almost see it circling in the air like golden smoke” (49). Lily uses a simile here, “like golden smoke,” to help the reader sense the strong smell of jasmine.

TASTE

“‘Shitbucket, hellfire, damnation, and son of a mother bitch,’ said Rosaleen, laying into each word like it was sweet potatoes on her tongue” (49). Here a simile reveals how Rosaleen is truly enjoying the sweet taste of escape from jail (with Lily’s help). (Note I have used single quotation marks ‘ ’ and double quotation marks “ ” here. The double quotation marks indicate that I am quoting from a text, and the single quotation marks indicate that within that quote somebody else is speaking. That’s why the quote opens with three quotation marks, and when Rosaleen stops speaking her quote ends with single quotation marks.)

“[August] was crazy about Nat King Cole, and she returned, with the volume up, frowning in that way people do when they bite into something and it tastes so delicious they appear to be in pain over it” (155). Here, Lily uses a metaphor of music tasting delicious. (Note “August” is in brackets. The original says “She,” but you might not know which character she is or what her name is. Sometimes, as mentioned above, you will want to change the original wording in a quotation so it makes sense to the reader or helps your own writing flow better. If you uncap a capital letter, even, use []!).

TOUCH

Here is another block quotation. Sometimes, when analyzing style, you want to quote more than a couple of lines to show the author’s style or an extended image:

Some people have a sixth sense, and some are duds at it. I believe I must have it, because the moment I stepped into the house I felt a trembling along my skin, a traveling current that moved up my spine, down my arms, pulsing out from my fingertips. I was practically radiating. The body knows things a long time before the mind catches up to them. I was wondering what my body knew that I didn't. (69)

And here is an example of the sense of touch used as both a metaphor and a specific simile: “We walked to the woods beside the pink house with her stories still pulled soft around our shoulders. I could feel them touching me in places, like an actual shawl” (146).

BODY LANGUAGE

Writers often describe body language to help portray a character. Body language, a nonverbal form of communication, is what a character does with his or her body. Above, I quoted the following to lead up to an example under the sense of Hearing: “Rosaleen climbed in, sliding over on the seat. I moved after her, sliding as she slid, sitting as she sat” (33). Kidd describes Rosaleen and the narrator Lily’s body language as a way of showing their relationship: Lily is copying Rosaleen’s movements into the police car after Rosaleen is arrested. At this point in the novel, the reader knows Lily loves her nanny Rosaleen and follows her lead, but the rhythm and motion of the language (“sliding as she slid, sitting as she sat”) echoes something deeper about these characters: both are oppressed—Rosaleen by racists, Lily by her father; both are punished for trying to be independent—Rosaleen for voting, Lily for leaving home.

Another example of body language in the examples above is “Zach sat with his elbows on his knees staring at the circle of grass” (206). Look for examples like this of what characters are doing, specifically, with their bodies, and consider what their body language means and how it helps move a story forward.

See next page for an example Works Cited page! You’ll be citing the literature you analyze in your essays on a separate page at the end, in alphabetical order by author’s last name.

Notice the citation order (but don’t number each part; I’m just numbering them here to show the order):

1. author (last name first)
2. title (put story and poem titles in quotation marks; italicize book titles)
3. copyright date
4. city where it was published
5. publisher
6. publication date
7. End with “Print.” to clarify the story is not online; if it is, you end with “Web.”

Punctuate with periods, etc. (as shown in the example below).

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Poetry

In the first section of this manual, *Literary Elements*, we discuss the narrative structure of a good story, including the climax. Poetry is a little different, though much of contemporary poetry is narrative with a story-like structure. The story a narrative poem tells is usually more focused, however, on one or two events. As you are probably aware, poems, unless they are epic, tend to use words economically and are much shorter than most prose (except for short pieces like prose poems and flash fiction). I would encourage you to browse through the text for this class and read as many poems as you can. See which ones impact you the most, and enjoy!

Note: **Poets.org** and **poetryfoundation.org** are good websites where you can read great poems, watch videos of poets reading their work, and learn much more about poetry than can be discussed here.

THE LINE and THE STANZA

Each *line* in a poem counts. When a poet revises a poem, they often whittle away unnecessary wordiness or lines that weaken a poem's impact. Each line in a poem carries a little more weight, some would argue, than a sentence in prose. Often, the last line is the most powerful. If so, the poem leads up to it much like a story builds to a climax. Here is the last line of a poem by Mirabai, a strong-willed poet from 16th century India. She ends her poem with a question. You can find the rest of the short poem and see how it progresses to the last line at <http://www.cprw.com/Shankar/mirabai.htm>.

Mira says: Without the energy that lifts mountains, how am I to live?

One thing common to most poetry is the *stanza*—most of you already know what that is: a unit in poetry of lines with a space separating it from the next stanza, much like a paragraph is a unit in prose. Some poems, of course, are only one stanza long. Unless a poem is following a certain form where each stanza contains a certain number of lines, the number of lines can vary from one to several dozen. See Yeats' poem on the next page, where he uses three stanzas of four lines each. In the excerpts from Kinnell's poem (below on page 17 and 18), the number of lines in a stanza vary from two to ten. Potter's poem ends with one line set apart by itself.

Here are two stanzas from Tomas Tranströmer, a Swedish poet who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2011. The following is translated from his poem "April and Silence."

The only thing that shines
are some yellow flowers.

I am carried inside
my own shadow like a violin
in its black case.

Notice each stanza contains a separate, specific image. The first stanza, flowers, the second, a metaphor for how the narrator sees himself.

But poets break their poems into stanzas for many other reasons. A stanza can certainly include more than one image. Poets, as artists, choose where to break a stanza, just as songwriters choose where to end a verse. Stanza breaks give the reader a moment to breathe, to take in a certain idea, image, or series of ideas/images at a certain pace or rhythm.

FORMAL POETRY

This manual does not cover all the different forms of poetry (villanelle, haiku, etc.). We will probably discuss form to some extent in class, depending on the individual poem.

The *sonnet*, as you probably know, is one of the most common forms of poetry. Some of you have probably read more than one Shakespearean sonnet! The traditional sonnet is fourteen lines long and uses iambic pentameter, with a certain rhyme scheme at the end of each line. To learn more about sonnets, here is a helpful link: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5791>

Many forms of poetry use *iambic pentameter*—ten syllables per line, with every other syllable stressed or accented. The rhythm matches the way our hearts beat. Emotion affects the heart, and poets, of course, want to impact our emotions. One way to do that is through *meter*.

Below is one of my favorite poems in iambic pentameter. I bolded the accented syllables—the ones that you say with more emphasis—in the first stanza. Notice how the meter varies a little in lines two and three. No good poet is perfectly strict with meter. When “take” and down” as well as “soft” and “look” are stressed together, the rhythm gives unique emphasis to the gesture (“take down”) and the image (“soft look”).

The meter also varies from perfect iambic pentameter in the second and third stanzas. Try reading the poem out loud to help you determine where syllables are stressed.

When You are Old

by W. B. Yeats

When **you** are **old** and **grey** and **full** of **sleep**,
And **nodding** **by** the **fire**, **take** **down** this **book**,
And **slowly** **read**, and **dream** of the **soft** **look**
Your **eyes** had **once**, and **of** their **shadows** **deep**;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled

And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Note how this poem follows a certain rhyme scheme: *abba, cddc, effe*, where *a* is “sleep” and “deep,” *b* is “book” and “look,” and so forth.

CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Most contemporary poetry is written in *free verse*, without specific form or structure. Contemporary poets tend to avoid following strict rules like using obvious rhymes, a structured meter, or a certain form. They still, however, use *subtle rhyming and/or meter* sometimes to create a certain effect. Here’s a stanza from another one of my favorite poems, “Little Sleep’s-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight,” by contemporary poet Galway Kinnell. The narrator is speaking to his little daughter:

In the light the moon
sends back, I can see in your eyes

the hand that waved once
in my father’s eyes, a tiny kite
wobbling far up in the twilight of his last look:

and the angel
of all mortal things lets go the string.

Notice how “twilight” rhymes with “kite,” but in a more subtle way. The words aren’t in an obvious place at the end of each line. In the last line, “things” rhymes imperfectly with “string.” *Imperfect rhymes* can affect the reader with a certain rhythm, sound, and emphasis. If the last line said “of all mortal things lets go the kite,” the sound and impact wouldn’t work quite as well, at least not in the same way, and it would almost hurt the ear since “kite” was already used at the end of a line just four lines up.

I would highly recommend reading the whole poem:
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_1/kinnell/online.htm

As noted in the section on Writing Style, sometimes *repetition* works, even the same word repeated at the end of certain lines, as in a *sestina*:
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5792>

Poets will also repeat certain words for effect, as Kinnell does in “Little Sleep’s-Head”:

When I sleepwalk
into your room, and pick you up,
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me
hard,
as if clinging could save us. I think
you think

I will never die, I think I exude
to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as
my broken arms heal themselves around you.

See how often the word “think” is repeated, but Kinnell gets by with it here. Instead of bothering our ear, it helps emphasize the very act of thinking on the part of both the narrator and his daughter. “Cling” is also repeated, as if the words themselves are trying to cling to us as readers—putting the image of the child clinging to her father into our heads and even further, almost making us feel the child clinging. The phrases “as if” and “could save us” make the clinging, however, feel futile.

The phrase “the permanence of smoke” is *counterintuitive*. Smoke is not permanent, and yet the image is more powerful, I think, because of the contrast. Stars are a little more permanent, but when placed with “smoke,” we feel the impermanence of all things.

Narrative poems are much like stories, as mentioned above. They progress with a certain plot—a series of events—and usually contain some sort of climax. They are more concise than a story, often just a moment in time, and broken into lines and stanzas. Here is an example narrative poem by William Stafford:

Traveling through the Dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

Garrison Keillor chose to read a poem by my friend Jonathan Potter on NPR's The Writer's Almanac! It's easy to read and whimsical.

You and I

You are a warm front
that moved in from the north,
a blind spot bearing beautiful gifts,
a garden in the air, a golden filament
inscribed with the name of God's hunting dog,
a magic heirloom mistaken for a feather duster,
a fountain in a cow pasture, an anachronistic anagram
annoyed by anonymity, a dollar in the pocket
of a winter coat in summer.

And I am the discoverer of you.

Hear Garrison Keillor read it out loud!

<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/?date=2011%2F02%2F28>

Drama

While drama and fiction share many elements—themes, characters, plot, and setting—the pacing, how quickly the action moves along, is often very different. We can read an 800-page novel in stages, but we can only sit and watch a play for so long! It needs to come together in one sitting with a short intermission. A play's narrative arc tends to build to a climax and resolution with more intensity and action than a novel—to keep the audience's attention. A short story is usually more intense as well, though not always. We can still put it down, ponder, do the dishes, or go for a walk.

When reading/studying plays, instead of watching them on stage, you can put the book down, take notes, or think while staring at the wall. But a playwright writes, of course, intending the words to come alive as a staged performance. Plays rely a lot on dialogue, good solid acting, and stage design. The stage requires the playwright to use different techniques than a fiction writer to portray the story and points of view. See below regarding dramatic elements and some example analysis of Rajiv Joseph's play, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. I also included (last page) links to a few articles relevant to the play.

PLAY STRUCTURE and SETTING

Acts

You've probably noticed how plays are divided into *acts* and *scenes*. A certain, unified piece of a play's narrative arc, or plot, occurs in each act. A short play can just be one act, as were the two plays in CCA's production of *Black Heart*, or a long play can include as many as five acts. Acts vary in length, but they usually contain at least a few different scenes. *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* uses two acts. Acts divide a play much like parts divide a book into larger units or sections. The fantasy novel *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, is divided into three parts, each one large enough to be bound into its own book (starting with *Fellowship of the Ring*). Many shorter novels include two or more parts within one bound (or, these days, electronic) book. For each play you read, consider where the playwright ends one act, begins another, and why.

Scenes

Scenes are smaller divisions, much like chapters in a book. For the stage, a new scene often indicates a new setting—a different location, perhaps, or a different time of day. You've probably watched plays where the stage props—the furniture, the walls, the doors, the characters' costumes—are replaced with a new arrangement and/or characters to show a different location or event.

The Stage

Imagine, if you were a set designer, how you would arrange things on stage differently from scene to scene in the plays you read. Instead of describing the setting for the reader as a fiction writer would, a playwright writes directions for the set designers, briefly (or sometimes

extensively) explaining how to show the audience where the drama takes place—a hospital room, a destroyed building . . . Often a playwright leaves much of the stage design up to the discretion and creativity of the producers. When Joseph describes the topiary, for example, in *Bengal Tiger*, he gives certain important instructions regarding what’s lit up, etc., but he leaves a lot of room for designers and builders to use their own creative powers. Joseph’s description for the play’s opening “*The Baghdad Zoo, night*” doesn’t say specifically how to let the audience know by stage design that it’s a zoo.

DRAMATIC ELEMENTS

The Soliloquy

A *soliloquy* occurs when a character speaks his or her thoughts aloud to him or herself, rather than to someone else. The playwright, obviously, intends the audience to hear it! This helps solve the point of view issue in drama. Soliloquies allow the audience to see into a character’s head—what he or she is thinking, worried about, debating internally, and so forth. If we only saw these characters in dialogue with other characters, we would miss out on some fascinating material.

I can’t help it—I’m going to copy and paste the most famous soliloquy of all time, just in case you haven’t read it. Shakespeare’s Hamlet speaks his thoughts in earnest:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause—there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,

And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

Literary Allusion

A piece of literature (like *Bengal Tiger*) often uses literary allusion—referring to something or someone in another literary work (especially well-known) or in history. Understanding literary allusions really deepens a reader's experience of and appreciation for literature. You can find, for example, bits and pieces of Hamlet and other Shakespearean references in *Bengal Tiger*. Contemporary writers often use bits and pieces of famous literature and *remake* them into something new, weaving the world's greatest art in and out of their own art, showing how things have changed, how Saddam Hussein's son Uday mutilates Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy into a different sort of language (Joseph 193). How prominent is Uday's version today? "What do I want? What do I want? But that is not the question . . ." How does our greed affect the world? Also, Uday carries his brother's head like Hamlet carries Yorick's skull, but in a very different way and circumstance!

The character Tiger in Joseph's play is one big, fascinating metaphor or symbol. He could represent all sorts of things, open, of course, to interpretation. Joseph may be alluding to military references in more ways than one. The Tiger Force was a significant U.S. army unit in the Vietnam War, and this play is very much about war. In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the king compares his soldiers to a tiger, inspiring his troops to battle. Often a character (or other literary elements like setting) alludes to more than one piece of literature or history at the same time if the theme is rich and complex. Here's some more Shakespeare, King Henry's speech to his troops, also an example of a *monologue* discussed below. I added the bold and italics:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
*Then imitate the action of the **tiger**;*
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage;
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;
Let pry through the portage of the head
Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it
As fearfully as doth a galled rock
O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,
Swill'd with the wild and wasteful ocean.

*Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,
 Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit
 To his full height. On, on, you noblest English.
 Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!
 Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,
 Have in these parts from morn till even fought
 And sheathed their swords for lack of argument:
 Dishonour not your mothers; now attest
 That those whom you call'd fathers did beget you.
 Be copy now to men of grosser blood,
 And teach them how to war. And you, good yeoman,
 Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
 The mettle of your pasture; let us swear
 That you are worth your breeding; which I doubt not;
 For there is none of you so mean and base,
 That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.
 I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
 Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:
 Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
 Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'*

Bengal Tiger urges the audience (or reader) to consider what Tiger might represent regarding humanity, war, violence, consequence, guilt vs. nature, conscience, eloquence/nobility/God (or lack thereof). Joseph inspires the audience to wonder whether Tiger is noble, as Henry V calls a warrior, or merely a carnivorous beast (or both?). Tiger is set apart from the other “warriors” in the play—Kev, Tom, Uday, and Musa. There is something different and unique about a dead, talking tiger ghost waxing poetic. His monologues sound much like Shakespeare, sometimes, though more profane.

The play also includes tons of **biblical** and other religious allusions. It probably refers to the Quran as well, which I’m not as familiar with. *Imperfect metaphors* often allude to something specifically yet “imperfectly,” meaning the two things are similar yet dissimilar in important ways, like the destroyed topiary garden and the Bible’s Garden of Eden, or the violated Hadia versus Eve. Metaphors shouldn’t be too similar to what they represent, or they don’t work as well. Many other subtle biblical references occur also, but you may have had to grow up in the church to catch them! If you are unfamiliar with the Bible, I would recommend taking a class on “The Bible as Literature” (often offered at colleges and universities) to help you understand the plethora of biblical references in so much of literature, including non-religious/secular literature.

The play also weaves in **Greek mythology**. Musa calls Uday “King Midas” (194). In the myth, Bacchus offers Midas a reward; he chooses the ability to turn everything to gold and pays the consequences for his greed. Apollo gives Midas “donkey ears” for choosing Pan’s music over Apollo’s. Tom and/or Kev could also allude to Midas. Tom loots the gold gun and toilet, and in several ways they both behave like jackasses—American Midases with donkey ears (with the American connotation of jackass)!

Other Dramatic Elements

You've probably heard of other dramatic elements like the *monologue*, a longer speech a character gives, usually directed to another character or the audience (unlike a soliloquy, where the character is thinking out loud and not to someone else). Tiger's speech, for example, at the beginning of Act 2 (Joseph 196) is a great example. At the beginning of Act 1, Tiger is speaking to the audience; even though Kev and Tom are there and interrupt his speech, they can't hear or understand him. On p. 175, the entire Scene 4 is Tiger speaking by himself, contrasting the opening of a later scene (221), where Kev speaks Arabic to God (though Tiger later appears and answers him). Joseph has both Tiger and Kev speak to the audience and/or God—yet sometimes much like they are thinking aloud to themselves. It's open to interpretation, I think, on whether these long, solo speeches should be considered monologues or soliloquies. What really matters, I think, is what they say, how they say it, and how these solo speeches contribute to Joseph's play.

We've already covered the literary elements in the first section: plot, setting, theme, character, and point of view as well as dialogue (very important in plays! Plays are mostly dialogue—conversation between two or more characters), repetition, metaphor/simile, emphasis, and so forth. Keep these elements in mind as you read your assigned play(s).

Bengal Tiger includes a lot of very interesting *symbols* (similar to metaphors, where something, someone, an event—or a whole play—represents something else). It also uses plenty of *repetition* and other literary elements. Joseph often repeats certain things, references, or images. The following symbols are repeated throughout *Bengal Tiger* to emphasize various themes and ideas:

- the hand
- words, phrasing, or tone; e.g., Joseph describes Tom's yelling more than once "as if volume could translate" (199 and 208)
- ghosts
- the topiary garden
- Kev's ghostly letters spoken aloud: "Dear Tommy, How are you. I am fine" (212), for example.
- humor—"knock knock" jokes, etc.

Joseph also uses *juxtaposition*, where two things are dramatized at the same time or close together in time or space. For example, he juxtaposes Tom and Kev in dialogue while the topiary garden emerges (it lights up or otherwise moves into view) with Tiger wandering through it (213). Joseph shows both these things at once for a reason, to impact the audience. While Tom and Kev are discussing Tom's hand, the Tiger coming into view reminds us and emphasizes how he bit the hand off. Kev says, "You feel incomplete without your hand" (213). Then Tiger starts conversing with Kev, so the juxtaposition has a physical reason as well (Tiger enters the scene).

Translation is an interesting theme repeated in *Bengal Tiger*. Joseph has the characters speak in Arabic sometimes (p. 221, for example). He allows the actors, producers, and the play's readers to see the English translations, but the English isn't spoken on stage. Does a bilingual audience

have a special advantage, or does the verbal translation matter? Why did Joseph choose to use the Arabic when he did? These are questions that could make for a very interesting essay 😊

Relevant News Articles Regarding Baghdad

Here are a few articles relevant to the events and characters in *Bengal Tiger*:

Here's an article on what happened at the Baghdad Zoo in 2003:

http://articles.cnn.com/2003-04-16/world/sprj.nilaw.baghdad.zoo_1_baghdad-zoo-zoo-animals-city-zoo?_s=PM:WORLD

At the end of the following article, it describes how a U.S. soldier killed a Bengal Tiger in the Baghdad Zoo. Joseph used the true story in his play, but changed a lot of the details!

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/baghdad-zoo.htm>

And below is an article on the deaths of Saddam Hussein's sons, Uday and Qusay, famous for their cruelty and power:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3088393.stm