
WRITING ESSAYS
ABOUT LITERATURE

A Guide and Style Sheet

SIXTH EDITION

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THOMSON



HEINLE

(2002)

Australia Canada Mexico Singapore Spain United Kingdom United States

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Interpreting Fiction

This chapter begins an analysis of the three major genres of literature: fiction, drama, and poetry. The word *genre* comes from French and means “type” or “kind.” To identify literary genres is to classify literature into its kinds. Literary critics sometimes disagree about how to classify literature into genres. Some say the genres of literature are tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, satire, the elegy, and so forth. But for our purpose, we will classify literature into three broad “kinds”: fiction, drama, and poetry. This chapter begins with the most popular genre, fiction.

Although literary genres are interesting subjects in themselves, our purpose in this and the next two chapters is to identify things to think about that can help us interpret works of literature. To that end, we will look at many of the best known elements that characterize fiction, drama, and poetry. Our goal when we interpret elements of literature should not be to consider and comment on *every* element of a work. Although all the elements of a work contribute to its meanings, probably only several will stand out to you as the most important ones. Focusing on one or more of these is a fruitful strategy for discovering meaning in texts. The questions and “Thinking on Paper” exercises that follow the discussions of each element should help you do this.

The Nature of Fiction

As a descriptive term, *fiction* is misleading, for although fiction does often include made-up or imaginary elements, it has the potential for being “true”: true to the nature of reality, true to human experience.

The intellectual activity that most resembles fiction is history. Both writers of history and fiction attempt to create a world that resembles the multiplicity and complexity of the real world. Both history and fiction writers attempt to speculate about the nature of the real world. But fiction differs from history in important ways, and these differences help reveal fiction's nature and uniqueness.

The most obvious difference is that writers of fiction can make up facts but historians must take facts as they find them. In works of history, historians cannot manufacture facts to fill in the gaps of their knowledge. Consequently, the fictional world is potentially more complete and coherent than the historical world. Not only can writers of fiction produce facts at will, they can produce them to fit a coherent plan. If they have an optimistic view of reality, for example, fiction writers can include only positive and affirming facts. Further, they can know more about their worlds than historians (or anyone else) can know about the real world. They can enter their characters' minds, create chains of cause and effect, and foresee the future. A second difference is that writers of fiction must establish some principle of order or coherence that underlies their work. They must establish at least an aesthetic order, and they may also impose a philosophical order upon their materials. Although historians often do both, they need do neither. Like newspaper reporters, historians need only record events as they occur, no matter how unrelated or senseless they may seem. A third difference is that writers of fiction must build conflict into their worlds, whereas historians need not. The events of history are not inevitably characterized by conflict, but the events of fiction almost always are.

All three of these differences point to qualities that make fiction enjoyable: its imaginative, orderly, and dramatic qualities. Two more differences reveal an equally important aspect of fiction—the kinds of reality it deals with and thus the kinds of truth it attempts to expose. The fourth difference, then, is that writers of fiction celebrate the separateness, distinctness, and importance of all individuals and all individual experiences. They assume that human experiences, whatever they are and wherever they occur, are intrinsically important and interesting. In contrast, historians record and celebrate human experiences that affect or represent large numbers of people—wars, rises and falls of civilizations, technological innovations, economic developments, political changes, social tastes, and mores. If historians discuss individuals at all, it is because they affect or illustrate these wider experiences. Henry Fleming, the protagonist of Stephen Crane's novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, has no historical importance. As far as history is concerned, he is an anonymous participant in the Civil War battle of Chancellorsville,

one soldier among thousands. Even his deeds, thoughts, and feelings do not necessarily represent those of a typical soldier at Chancellorsville. Yet, in the fictional world, they are important because they are *his* deeds, thoughts, and feelings. We are interested in him not for his connection with an important historical event but simply because he is a human being.

Finally, a fifth difference is that writers of fiction see reality as welded to psychological perception, as refracted through the minds of individuals. In contrast, historians present reality as external to individuals and thus as unaffected by human perception. Both historians and writers of fiction, for example, deal with time. But time for the historian is divisible into exact measurable units: centuries, decades, years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds. Time, for historians, is a river in which individuals float like so many pieces of driftwood. In contrast, writers of fiction present time as an experienced, emotional phenomenon, as a river flowing *inside* the mind. Its duration is not scientifically measurable but rather is determined by states of mind, the familiar when-I-am-happy-time-goes-fast, when-I-am-sad-time-goes-slowly phenomenon. Other aspects of reality take on a similar psychological dimension within works of fiction. A house may not be haunted, but a character is so nervous and disoriented that it seems to be. A mountain may not be steep, but a character may be so fatigued from climbing that it seems that way.

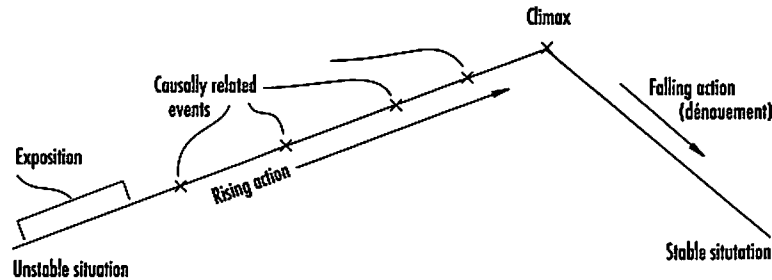
The Elements of Fiction

The preceding explanation of the nature of fiction should help you know generally what to expect from it. But fiction, poetry, and drama all have more specific characteristics, and knowing what these are will help you identify and think about them as you read. The rest of this chapter includes definitions of the elements of fiction. Following each discussion are questions and "Thinking on Paper" exercises. Use these definitions, questions, and exercises to develop your own ideas about works of fiction.

Plot

Put simply, *plot* is what happens in a narrative. But this definition is too simple. A mere listing of events, even in the order in which they occur, is not plot. Rather, writers of fiction arrange fictional events

into patterns. They select these events carefully, establish causal relationships among events, and enliven these events with conflict. A more complete and accurate definition, then, is that plot is a pattern of carefully selected, causally related events that contains conflict.



Although writers of fiction arrange events into many patterns, the most common is that represented by the *Freytag pyramid*, shown above, which was developed by the German critic Gustav Freytag in 1863 (114–115). Although Freytag meant this diagram to describe a typical five-act tragedy, it applies to most works of fiction. At the beginning of this pattern is an *unstable situation*, a conflict that sets the plot in motion. The author's *exposition* here explains the nature of the conflict. He or she introduces the characters, describes the setting, and provides historical background. The author next introduces a series of *events*, all related by cause. One event may cause another event, which in turn causes another event, which causes the next event (husband gets angry with wife, who gets angry with kids, who get angry with dog, who sulks in the basement). Or several events may be linked to the same cause (a series of deaths at the beach, all caused by a monster killer shark). Whatever the causal relationship among events, each event intensifies the conflict so that the plot “rises” toward a *climax*.

The climax is the most intense event in the narrative. The rest of the story—the *falling action*—is usually brief. It contains events that are much less intense than the climax and that lead toward the resolution of the conflict and toward a *stable situation* at the end. Another term for falling action is *dénouement*, a French word meaning “unraveling.”

An example of the Freytag pyramid is the stereotypical fairy tale in which the youngest son must seek his fortune (unstable situation: He has no source of income, no home). He goes into a far country whose king is offering a prize, the hand of his daughter, to anyone who can accomplish three tasks. The hero completes all three (rising action and

climax: Each task is increasingly difficult, but the third is a humdinger and is therefore the climax). The remaining part of the story may contain obstacles, but they are easily overcome. The king praises the hero but does not want his daughter to marry a commoner. The hero reveals that he is not, as he seems, a mere peasant but the son of a nobleman (falling action/dénouement: The conflicts now are minor and easily resolved). The hero marries the princess and lives happily ever after (stable situation: The hero has eliminated the initial conflict; he now has a wife, a source of income, and a home).

There are two general categories of conflict: external and internal. *Internal conflicts* take place within the minds of characters. An example is the good person who wrestles inwardly with temptation. *External conflicts* take place between individuals or between individuals and the world external to individuals (the forces of nature, human-created objects, and environments). The climactic shootout in an American western is an example of a physical, external conflict, but not all external conflicts are physical or violent. A verbal disagreement between two people is also an external conflict.

The forces in a conflict are usually embodied by characters, the most relevant being the protagonist and the antagonist. The term *protagonist* usually means “main character,” but it might be helpful sometimes to think of the protagonist as someone who is fighting for something. The *antagonist* is the opponent of the protagonist; the antagonist is usually a person, but can also be a nonhuman force or even an aspect of the protagonist—his or her tendency toward evil and self-destruction, for example. Although a protagonist sometimes fights for evil—Macbeth, for example—we usually empathize with the protagonist and find the antagonist unsympathetic.

Questions about plot Probably the most revealing question you can ask about a work of literature is: What conflicts does it dramatize? For fiction, this is a crucial question. You can break it down into subquestions, each of which might produce interesting ideas: What is the main conflict? What are the minor conflicts? How are all the conflicts related? What causes the conflicts? Which conflicts are external, which internal? Who is the protagonist? What qualities or values does the author associate with each side of the conflict? Where does the climax occur? Why? How is the main conflict resolved? Which conflicts go unresolved? Why?

An example of how you can use these questions to interpret fiction is Ernest Hemingway's story “Hills Like White Elephants.” The

story consists almost entirely of a dialogue between a young woman and man who are waiting for a train at a tiny station in the Spanish countryside. We learn that they have traveled widely and are lovers—but they are in conflict. About what? The conflict they bring out into the open and discuss aloud concerns an abortion. The woman is pregnant, and the man urges her to have an abortion. He keeps telling her that the abortion will be “simple,” “perfectly natural,” and will make them “all right” and “happy.” But she resists. She asks if after the abortion “things will be like they were and you’ll love me” (275). She says that they “could get along” without the abortion (277).

Gradually we realize that although the immediate conflict is about the abortion, there is a deeper, unspoken conflict. This more important conflict—the main conflict—is over the nature of their relationship. The man wants the abortion because it will allow him to continue the rootless and uncommitted relationship he has enjoyed with the woman up to now. The woman, however, wants a more stable relationship, one that having the child would affirm, one that she has apparently believed the man wanted too. Hemingway resolves the conflict by having the woman realize, in the face of the man’s continued insistence on the abortion, that the relationship she wants with the man is impossible.

Examining the story’s main conflict in this way helps to reveal several important things about the story. At first glance, it seems to have little “action,” but examining the conflict reveals what its action is. Studying the conflict also helps to illuminate the characters: The man is selfish and obstinate; the woman is idealistic and somewhat innocent. Analyzing the conflict points to the meaning or theme of the story. Hemingway seems to support the woman’s view of the way a loving relationship should be. He makes her the protagonist, the more sympathetic character of the two. Because examining conflict in works of literature is crucial to understanding them, such a study is a rich source of interpretations, perhaps the richest. This discussion of “Hills Like White Elephants” is but one of many examples of what an essay might do with conflict.

■ Thinking on Paper about Plot

1. On one side of a piece of paper, list the external conflicts of the work. On the other side, list the internal conflicts. Draw a line between the external and internal conflicts that seem related.
2. List the key conflicts. For each conflict, list the ways in which the conflict has been resolved, if it has.

3. Describe the turning point or climax. Explain what conflicts are resolved. List the conflicts that are left unresolved.
4. List the major structural units of the work (chapters, scenes, parts). Summarize what happens in each unit.
5. List the qualities of the protagonist and antagonist.
6. Describe the qualities that make the situation at the beginning unstable. Describe the qualities that make the conclusion stable.
7. List the causes of the unstable situations at the beginning and throughout the work.

Characterization

Characters are the people in narratives, and *characterization* is the author’s presentation and development of characters. Sometimes, as in fantasy fiction, the characters are not people. They may be animals, robots, or creatures from outer space, but the author endows them with human abilities and human psychological traits. They really are people in all but outward form.

There are two broad categories of character development: simple and complex. The critic and fiction writer E. M. Forster coined alternate terms for these same categories: *flat* (simple) and *round* (complex) characters (67–78). Flat characters have only one or two personality traits and are easily recognizable as stereotypes—the shrewish wife, the lazy husband, the egomaniac, the stupid athlete, the shyster, the miser, the redneck, the bum, the dishonest used-car salesman, the prim aristocrat, the absent-minded professor. Round characters have multiple personality traits and therefore resemble real people. They are much harder to understand and describe than flat characters. No single description or interpretation can fully contain them. An example of a flat character is Washington Irving’s Ichabod Crane, the vain and superstitious schoolmaster of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” An example of a round character is Shakespeare’s Hamlet. To an extent, all literary characters are stereotypes. Even Hamlet is a type, the “melancholy man.” But round characters have many more traits than just those associated with their general type. Because it takes time to develop round characters convincingly, they are more often found in longer works than in shorter ones.

Authors reveal what characters are like in two general ways: directly or indirectly. In the *direct* method, the author simply tells the reader what

the character is like. Here, for example, is Jane Austen telling us very early in her novel *Pride and Prejudice* what Mrs. Bennet is like:

She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news (3).

When the method of revealing characters is *indirect*, however, the author shows us, rather than tells us, what the characters are like through what they say about one another, through external details (dress, bearing, looks), and through their thoughts, speech, and deeds.

Characters who remain the same throughout a work are called *static* characters. Those who change during the course of the work are called *dynamic* characters. Usually, round characters change and flat characters remain the same, but not always. Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff (in *Henry IV, Part I* and *Part II*), a round character, is nonetheless static. Dynamic characters, especially main characters, typically grow in understanding. The climax of this growth is an *epiphany*, a term that James Joyce used to describe a sudden revelation of truth experienced by a character. The term comes from the Bible and describes the Wise Men's first perception of Christ's divinity. Joyce applied it to fictional characters. His own characters, like Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead," perfectly illustrate the concept. Often, as in "The Dead," the epiphany coincides with the climax of the plot.

Questions about characters You can ask many revealing questions about characters and the way they are portrayed: Are they flat, round, dynamic, or static? If they change, how and why? What steps do they go through to change? What events or moments of self-revelation produce these changes? Does what they learn help or hinder them? What problems do they have? How do they attempt to solve them? What types do they represent? If they are complex, what makes them complex? Do they have traits that contradict one another and therefore cause internal conflicts? Do they experience epiphanies? When, why, and what do their epiphanies reveal—to themselves and to us? How do they relate to one another? Do the characters have speech mannerisms, gestures, or modes of dress that reveal their inner selves? Is the character sad, happy, or in between?

The overriding questions that any character analysis attempts to answer are simply: What is the character like? What are the character's

traits? Consider the example of the woman in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," discussed previously. Hemingway drops hints that indicate something about her personality. She compares the Spanish hills to white elephants, a comparison that at first seems capricious but later suggests an imaginative, even artistic, quality that the man cannot comprehend. After she senses the man's true motivation for wanting the abortion, she looks out over the fields of ripe grain, the trees, the river, and the mountains beyond, and tells the man that "we could have all this" but that "every day we make it more impossible." She seems to connect the appreciation of nature—the sympathy they could feel for it—with the moral quality of their relationship. But because their relationship must remain superficial, she says that the landscape "isn't ours any more" (276). Once again, the man lacks the imagination to make the connection, and he fails to grasp her moral point. Hemingway seems to admire the woman's ability to make these comparisons. It underscores her more obvious and admirable desire for a profound and lasting relationship. Another thing we learn about the woman is that she is a dynamic character. At the beginning of the story, she does not fully recognize the falseness of her relationship with the man. She seems genuinely to hope for something better. By the end of the story, however, she knows the truth and, from all appearances, has changed as a result. At the beginning she is innocent and dependent upon the man for her happiness; by the end she has lost her innocence and has become independent.

■ Thinking on Paper about Characterization

1. List the traits of the main characters in the story.
2. Describe the ways the author reveals the traits of a character.
3. Write a description of a complex character in which you try to account for every trait of the character.
4. Describe the emotional reaction a character has to an important event or events.
5. Write a paragraph explaining how and why a character changes.
6. Describe the scene in which a character has an epiphany. Explain what happens and what the character comes to see.
7. Mark the places in which the author or other characters make revealing statements about a character.

Theme

Theme is perhaps the most obvious statement of the “truth” of a work. This discussion of theme, then, is a continuation of the discussion in Chapter 2 (on pages 21–26) of how literature is true. *Theme* is a central idea in the work—whether fiction, poetry, or drama. For many readers, theme is an attractive element because it gives works meaning; it makes them relevant. In identifying a work’s themes, consider the following characteristics of theme. First, although the terms *subject* and *theme* are often used interchangeably, it is helpful to distinguish between them. The *subject* is what the work is about. You can state the subject in a word or phrase. The subject of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116 (page 107) is love. In contrast, theme is what the work *says* about the subject. The statement of a work’s theme requires a complete sentence, sometimes several sentences. A theme of Sonnet 116 is “Love remains constant whether assaulted by tempestuous events or by time.”

Second, a work’s theme must apply to people outside the work. For example, it is incorrect to say that the theme of “Rip Van Winkle” is “Rapid change in his environment threatens Rip’s identity.” This statement is true, but it is not the theme, because it applies only to Rip. You must state the theme in such a way as to include people in general, not just the characters in the story. A correctly stated theme for “Rip Van Winkle,” then, would be “Rapid change in environment causes *many people* to feel their identity is threatened.” Stating the theme in a work of literature means that you move from concrete situations within the work to generalizations about people outside the work. In this way, literature becomes a form of “philosophy”—universal wisdom about the nature of reality.

A third characteristic of theme is that there may be several, possibly even contradictory, themes in a work. This is especially true of complex works. A subject of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* is sacred love versus profane love. But another, equally important subject is social entrapment. One theme of *Anna Karenina*, then, seems to be that people should not abandon “sacred” commitments, such as marriage and parenthood, for extramarital “loves,” no matter how passionate and deeply felt they may be. This theme emerges from Anna’s desertion of her husband and child for Count Vronsky. An alternate theme is that people, through little fault of their own, can become trapped in painful, long-lasting, and destructive relationships that they want desperately to escape. This theme emerges from Anna’s marriage. When she was very

young, Anna married an older man whom she now realizes is too petty, prim, and self-absorbed to satisfy her generous and passionate nature. So discordant is her relationship with her husband that it seems no less “immoral” than her affair with Vronsky. Tolstoy, in other words, draws complex, even contradictory lessons from Anna’s adultery. She is not simply the sinful person; she is also the driven person. This combination of traits characterizes the condition of many people.

Fourth, we may be hard pressed to find clear themes in some works. There may be so many contradictory or incompletely developed ideas in a work that it seems impossible to say for sure what the work means. Some critics, for example, have cited Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” as examples of works that lack themes.

Fifth, the subjects and themes of complex works can rarely be accounted for completely. Even when the author says what the work means, we cannot exclude other possibilities. We find evidence of a work’s themes in the concrete world the author creates. But we can rarely see all the evidence at once or see all the possible patterns inherent in the work. The best we can do is support our interpretations as logically and with as much evidence as we can. We may disagree with the author’s conclusions about a given subject—with his or her theme. Our job is first to identify and understand the work’s theme and then, if we are writing about it, to represent it fairly. To do this, however, is not necessarily to agree with the work. We are always free to disagree with an author’s worldview.

Sixth, theme may present an intellectual dilemma rather than a “message” that neatly solves the dilemma. Robert Penn Warren’s novel *All the King’s Men*, for example, raises the problem of morality in politics. A question the novel seems to ask is: How can political leaders in a democratic society do good when citizens are apathetic and easily misled? The character who embodies this question is a well-meaning and gifted politician who uses corrupt and violent means to attain good ends. By telling his story, Warren dramatizes the question. But he never really answers it. You cannot pull a neat moral out of the story of this character’s rise and fall. Rather, to state the “theme” of this novel—or one theme—you need to summarize as accurately as you can the problem Warren presents in the way he presents it. You could explain how the problem is worked out in this one character’s life, but you could not necessarily generalize from that to all people’s lives. Or the generalization might be that politics is morally contradictory, never simply right or wrong.

Questions about theme The key questions for eliciting a work's theme are: What is the subject (that is, what is the work about)? Then, What is the theme (that is, what does the work say about the subject)? And, finally, In what direct and indirect ways does the work communicate its theme? In "Hills Like White Elephants," Hemingway does not state his subject and theme directly, but given his development of conflict and characterization, it seems fair to say that his subject is love (or loving relationships) and that one possible theme might be something like this: "Loving relationships are impossible without unselfish commitment from both partners."

One strategy for discovering a work's theme is to apply frequently asked questions about areas of human experience, such as the following:

Human nature. What image of humankind emerges from the work? Are people, for example, generally good? deeply flawed?

The nature of society. Does the author portray a particular society or social scheme as life-enhancing or life-destroying? Are characters we care about in conflict with their society? Do they want to escape from it? What causes and perpetuates this society? If the society is flawed, how is it flawed?

Human freedom. What control over their lives do the characters have? Do they make choices in complete freedom? Are they driven by forces beyond their control? Does Providence or some grand scheme govern history, or is history simply random and arbitrary?

Ethics. What are the moral conflicts in the work? Are they clear cut or ambiguous? That is, is it clear to us exactly what is right and exactly what is wrong? When moral conflicts are ambiguous in a work, right often opposes *right*, not wrong. What rights are in opposition to one another? If right opposes wrong, does right win in the end? To what extent are characters to blame for their actions?

Another strategy for discovering a work's theme is to answer this question: Who serves as the *moral center* of the work? The *moral center* is the one person whom the author vests with right action and right thought (that is, what the *author* seems to think is right action and right thought), the one character who seems clearly "good" and who often serves to judge other characters. Not every work has a moral center; but in the works that do, its center can lead you to some of the work's themes. In Dickens's *Great Expectations*, for example, the moral center is Biddy, the girl who comes to Pip's sister's household as a servant. She is

a touchstone of goodness for Pip, and when he strays from the good, Biddy and his remembrance of her helps bring him back to it. *Great Expectations* is largely about morality (subject), and by studying Biddy we can uncover some of Dickens's ideas about morality (theme).

When identifying a work's moral center, answer questions such as these: How can we tell that this person is the moral center? What values does the moral center embody? Is the moral center flawed in any way that might diminish his or her authority? What effect does the moral center have on the other characters and on us?

■ Thinking on Paper about Theme

1. List the subject or subjects of the work. For each subject, see if you can state a theme. Put a check next to the ones that seem most important.
2. Explain how the title, subtitle, epigraph, chapter titles, and names of characters may be related to theme.
3. Describe the work's depiction of human behavior.
4. Describe the work's depiction of society. Explain the representation of social ills and how they might be corrected or addressed.
5. List the moral issues raised by the work.
6. Name the character who is the moral center of the work. List his or her traits.
7. Mark statements by the author or characters that seem to state themes.

Setting

Setting includes several closely related aspects of a work of fiction. First, setting is the physical, sensuous world of the work. Second, it is the time in which the action of the work takes place. And third, it is the social environment of the characters: the manners, customs, and moral values that govern the characters' society. A fourth aspect—"atmosphere"—is largely, but not entirely, an effect of setting.

Questions about place You should first get the details of the physical setting clear in your mind. Where does the action take place?

On what planet, in what country or locale? What sensuous qualities does the author give to the setting? That is, what does it look like, sound like, feel like? Do you receive a dominant impression about the setting? What impression, and what caused it?

Once you have answered these questions, you can move on to questions about place that lead to interpretations: What relationship does place have to characterization and to theme? In some fiction, geographical location seems to have no effect on characters. Indoors or out, in one locale or another, they behave the same. In other works, such as those by Thomas Hardy or Joseph Conrad, place affects the characters profoundly. In the story, "Among the Corn Rows," Hamlin Garland shows how environment brings about a character's decision.

A cornfield in July is a hot place. The soil is hot and dry; the wind comes across the lazily murmuring leaves laden with a warm sickening smell drawn from the rapidly growing, broad-flung banners of the corn. The sun, nearly vertical, drops a flood of dazzling light and heat upon the field over which the cool shadows run, only to make the heat seem the more intense.

Julia Peterson, faint with fatigue, was toiling back and forth between the corn rows, holding the handles of the double-shovel corn plow while her little brother Otto rode the steaming horse. Her heart was full of bitterness, and her face flushed with heat, and her muscles aching with fatigue. The heat grew terrible. The corn came to her shoulders, and not a breath seemed to reach her, while the sun, nearing the noon mark, lay pitilessly upon her shoulders, protected only by a calico dress. The dust rose under her feet, and as she was wet with perspiration it soiled her till, with a woman's instinctive cleanliness, she shuddered. Her head throbbed dangerously. What matter to her that the king bird pitched jovially from the maples to catch a wandering blue-bottle fly, that the robin was feeding its young, that the bobolink was singing? All these things, if she saw them, only threw her bondage to labor into greater relief. (107-108)

Garland shows geographical environment pressuring Julia Peterson into a decision that will affect the rest of her life. Garland has already told us that Julia's parents treat her harshly and force her to work too hard. By emphasizing one sensuous quality, the heat, Garland makes us feel the hardship of her life. She has dreamed of a handsome suitor who will take her away from the farm and give her a life of ease, but the heat makes her feel that anything would be better than this mis-

ery. So when a young farmer happens along just after the incident described here and offers her a life of respect and only normal difficulty, she marries him. Garland shows that Julia's environment leads her to settle for less than she really wants. She is not free to choose exactly as she would choose.

Questions about time Three kinds of time occur in fiction, thus three types of questions about time are important. First, at what period in history does the action take place? Many stories occur during historical events that affect the characters and themes in important ways. Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* are examples. To answer this question, you may have to do background reading about the historical period. Tolstoy and Mitchell give you a great deal of historical information in their fiction, but many authors do not. In either case, you may need to supplement facts in the work with what you can find out elsewhere.

Second, how long does it take for the action to occur? That is, how many hours, days, weeks, years are involved? Authors often use the passage of time as a thematic and structuring device: The mere fact that some specific amount of time has passed may be important for understanding characters. Years go by in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, for example, allowing her characters to grow and change. But because of her method of telling the stories—through letters—we are not immediately aware of how much time passes until near the end of the book. Because we read the letters one after the other, we get the illusion of time passing quickly. In fact, the letters are written over long intervals, which means that we must consciously slow down the time of the novel to understand its effect on the characters. What clues, then, does the author give to indicate how much time is passing? Is the passage of time in the work relevant to characterization and theme? Is it important to the plausibility of the plot? If an author seems to obscure how much time is passing, why? Does the author use time as a structuring device?

Third, how is the passage of time perceived? Time may seem to move very slowly or very quickly, depending on a character's state of mind. Thus our recognition of how a character perceives time helps us understand the character's internal conflicts and attitudes.

In *Jane Eyre*, for example, Charlotte Brontë intertwines length of time and perception of time. Jane, the narrator, describes her stays at various "houses." She spends about the same amount of time at each house, but the length of her description of each stay is proportional to the value she places on it. She devotes about one fourth of the novel to

her stays with the Reeds and at Lowood and one fourth to her stay with the Rivers family. But she devotes over half of the novel to her stay at Thornfield, where she falls in love with Mr. Rochester. The effect of these unequal proportions is to slow down the time spent at Thornfield and thus to emphasize Jane's emotional reaction to the experiences she has there.

Brontë uses this slowing down method with specific events as well. In fact, the novel is a collection of highly charged, intensely felt moments in Jane's life that seem to last far longer than they actually do. The novel opens, for example, with Jane's imprisonment in the hated "red room" of the Reed mansion. As her anger subsides, she becomes aware that the room is "chill," "silent," and "solemn." She recalls that Mr. Reed died there. In a mirror she sees her "glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still." Daylight "forsakes" the room. She feels "oppressed, suffocated" at thoughts of Mr. Reed's death and the possibility of her own. When she sees a light on the wall, she thinks it is a ghost. She screams. When Mrs. Reed rushes to check on her, she thrusts Jane back into the room and locks the door. Jane faints from hysteria (45–50). The length of this description corresponds to Jane's perception of time, which in turn corresponds to her fear of the room. Each detail is like the tick of a loud clock.

What, then, is the relationship between the length of narrated events and the amount of time in which they occur? Is the author purposely slowing down or speeding up our perception of time? If so, why? What mental states or internal conflicts does a character's perception of time reveal?

Questions about social environment Often the social environment represented in a work is of little importance. There may even be virtually no social environment. When it is important, however, it affects interpretations of the work. Some questions: What is the social environment portrayed in the work—the manners, mores, customs, rituals, and codes of conduct of a society? What does the author seem to think about them? (Approving? Ambivalent? Disapproving?) How do they affect the characters? Sinclair Lewis spends much of his novel *Babbitt* describing the social environment of his fictional Midwestern city, Zenith. Then he shows that the pressure to conform to this environment is almost irresistible. His characters sometimes want to rebel against this pressure, but they are too weak to do so without extreme guilt or without threat to their economic and social security. Their social environment determines their behavior and entraps them.

Questions about atmosphere *Atmosphere* refers to the emotional reaction that we and—usually—the characters have to the setting of a work. Sometimes the atmosphere is difficult to define, but it is often found or felt in the sensuous quality of the setting. Our emotional reaction to the Hamlin Garland passage is probably pain, discomfort, weariness, and oppression, mainly because of his emphasis on the thermal sense, the sense of hot and cold. Fruitful questions about atmosphere are: What methods does the author use to create the work's atmosphere? What does the author achieve by creating this atmosphere? Why does the author create this particular atmosphere? Sometimes, the author's purpose may simply be to play upon your emotions. A writer of gothic fiction may just want to scare us. Garland's purpose, however, is more meaningful. He seems to want to convince us of a philosophical point: Physical environment affects human behavior. Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* creates an atmosphere of mystery, foreboding, and imminent danger to reflect his hatred of colonialism and his belief that "civilized" people are capable of the worst barbarities.

■ Thinking on Paper about Setting

1. Mark the most extensive or important descriptions of physical place. Underline the most telling words and phrases.
2. Characterize physical locales, such as houses, rooms, and outdoor areas.
3. Explain the relationship to the physical place that one or more of the main characters has. Explain the influence that place exerts on the characters.
4. Arrange the main events in chronological order. Indicate when each event occurs.
5. Mark passages where a character's emotional state affects the way the passage of time is presented to us.
6. List the historical circumstances and characters that occur in the work. Explain their importance.
7. List the patterns of behavior that characterize the social environment of the work. For example, people drink heavily, go to church, have tea, gamble, throw parties, get in fights, marry, have children, cheat in business, wander restlessly, and so forth.

8. Mark scenes in which the author or characters express approval or disapproval of these patterns of behavior.
9. Explain the influence one or more of these patterns has on a character or characters.
10. Mark sections that contribute to atmosphere. Underline key words and phrases.
11. List the traits of the atmosphere.

Point of View

Point of view is the author's relationship to his or her fictional world, especially to the minds of the characters. Put another way, point of view is the position from which the story is told. There are four basic points of view, four positions the author can adopt in telling the story.

Omniscient point of view In the omniscient position, the author—not one of the characters—tells the story, and the author assumes complete knowledge of the characters' actions and thoughts. The author can thus move at will from one place to another, one time to another, one character to another, and can even speak his or her own views directly to the reader as the work goes along. The author will tell us anything he or she chooses about the created world of the work. Many of the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels use an omniscient point of view; examples are Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, and Eliot's *Adam Bede*.

Limited omniscient point of view When the limited omniscient position is used, the author still narrates the story but restricts (limits) his or her revelation—and therefore our knowledge—of the thoughts of all but one character. This character may be either a main or peripheral character. One name for this character is “central consciousness.” A device of plot and characterization that often accompanies this point of view is the character's gradual discovery of himself or herself until the story climaxes in an epiphany (see page 40). Examples of the limited omniscient point of view are Hawthorne's “Young Goodman Brown,” Stephen Crane's “The Open Boat,” and, for the most part, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Sometimes the author restricts the point of view so severely that we see everything solely through the mind of a

single character, like sunlight filtered through a stained glass window. The later fiction of Henry James experiments with this severe restriction of the limited omniscient point of view. His story “The Beast in the Jungle” and his novel *The Ambassadors* are examples. Other writers, such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, carry James's experiments further with a “stream of consciousness” technique, which puts the reader literally in the mind of a character. In the first section of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* we experience the chaotic thoughts of a mentally retarded man, and we view the novel's world solely through his mind. A short story that uses a stream-of-consciousness technique is Katherine Anne Porter's “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.”

First-person point of view In the first-person position, the author's role as story teller is even more restricted: One of the characters tells the story, eliminating the author as narrator. Whereas in the limited omniscient point of view the author can reveal anything about one character—even things the character may be dimly aware of—here, the narration is restricted to what one character *says* he or she observes. The character–narrator may be a major character who is at the center of events or a minor character who does not participate but simply observes the action. Examples of first-person narratives are Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Poe's “The Cask of Amontillado,” and Melville's “Bartleby the Scrivener.” An unusual use of the first-person point of view is the epistolary narrative, which reveals action through letters. (An *epistle* is a letter, and *epistolary* means “written in letters.”) Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Henry James's “A Bundle of Letters,” and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are all epistolary narratives.

Objective (dramatic) point of view In the objective position, the author is more restricted than in any other. Though the author is the narrator, he or she refuses to enter the minds of any of the characters. The writer sees them (and lets us see them) as we would in real life. This point of view is sometimes called “dramatic” because we see the characters as we would the characters in a play. We learn about them from what they say and do, how they look, and what other characters say about them. But we do not learn what they think unless they tell us. This point of view is the least common of all. Examples are Ernest Hemingway's “Hills Like White Elephants” and “The Killers,” Stephen Crane's “The Blue Hotel,” and Shirley Jackson's “The Lottery.”

Tone *Tone* is also an aspect of point of view since it has a great deal to do with the narrator. Tone is the narrator's predominant attitude toward the subject, whether that subject is a particular setting, an event, a character, or an idea. The narrator conveys his or her attitude through the way narrative devices are handled, including choice of words. Sometimes the narrator will state point blank how he or she feels about a subject; more often, the narrator's attitude is conveyed indirectly. Jack Burden, the narrator of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, maintains a flippant and cynical tone through most of the narration. Jake Barnes, the narrator of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, maintains a stoical, hard-boiled tone. Dr. Watson, the narrator of the Sherlock Holmes stories, manifests a bemused, surprised tone.

Questions about point of view Point of view is important to an understanding of a story in two main ways. First, the author may choose a particular point of view to emphasize one character's perception of things. Point of view also influences *our* perception of things. The omniscient narrator can tell us what a character thinks, but the limited omniscient and first-person points of view make us *experience* what the character thinks. An author may even include several points of view in the same work. Dickens in *Bleak House* shuttles back and forth between a first-person narrative and an omniscient narrative. We see that the first-person narrator has a more limited view of things than the omniscient narrator. Point of view here becomes a means of developing character and of making a point about the limits of human perception.

Second, point of view is important when you suspect the trustworthiness of the narrator. A preliminary question is: Who tells the story? But a searching follow-up question is: Can you trust the narrator to tell us the truth about the events, characters, and setting of the story? You can almost always trust omniscient narrators. But you should be suspicious about first-person narrators and the "centers-of-consciousness" characters in limited omniscient stories. Sometimes these characters distort what they observe. Ask, then, if circumstances such as their age, education, social status, prejudices, or emotional states should make you question the accuracy or validity of what they say and think. Ask, also, if the author differentiates between his or her view of things and the characters' views.

Mark Twain makes such a distinction in *Huckleberry Finn*. When Huck sees the Grangerford house, he says, "It was a mighty nice family, and a mighty nice house, too. I hadn't seen no house out in the country before that was so nice and had so much style." He proceeds to

describe the interior with awe and reverence. Although Huck is impressed with the furnishings, Twain clearly is not. We recognize Twain's attitude from the details Huck provides: the unread books, the reproductions of sentimental paintings, the damaged imitation fruit, the crockery animals, the broken clock, the painted hearth, the tablecloth "made out of beautiful oilcloth," the piano "that had tin pans in it" (85–88). Huck also shows his admiration for Emmeline Grangerford's poetry by reproducing some of it to share with us (87–88). But we see, as Twain wants us to see, that the poetry is terrible.

Finally, Huck is awestruck by the family's aristocratic bearing: "Col. Grangerford was a gentleman, you see. He was a gentleman all over; and so was his family. He was well born. . . . He didn't have to tell anybody to mind their manners—everybody was always good mannered where he was" (89). Yet he fails to see, as Twain and we see, the ironic contrast between the family's good manners and its irrational and murderous feud with another family. Twain's handling of point of view in this novel helps to develop both character and theme. By presenting Huck's credulous view of things, it develops Huck as an essentially innocent person. By ironically contrasting Twain's view to Huck's, it underscores the author's harsher and more pessimistic perception of "reality."

Once you have determined a work's point of view, ideas should emerge from two general questions: Why has the author chosen this point of view? What effects does it have on other elements of the story—theme, characterization, setting, language? Some follow-up questions are: What effect does the author's point of view have on us and the way we view the world of the work? For example, if the point of view is first person, we have a much more limited view than if it is omniscient. The omniscient point of view makes us feel as though we understand everything about the world of the work, as though everything revealed by the omniscient narrator is true. What perspective of the world, then, does the author want us to have? Also, what do we learn about the nature of human perception from the author's handling of first person and especially limited omniscience? Henry James's limited omniscience often shows people as blind to the needs and desires of other people and of themselves as well. If the point of view is first person, is the narrator telling the story to someone? If so, to whom? How do they react? What do we learn about the narrator from that fact? If the point of view is objective (dramatic), does it seem as though the narrator is emotionally uninvolved and rationally objective about the characters and events? What do we gain by not being able to enter the characters' minds?

■ Thinking on Paper about Point of View

1. Identify the point of view of the story. Describe how the story would change if it were told from each of the other points of view.
2. List the main characters in the story. Write a paragraph on one or more characters, explaining how the story would be different if that character were narrating it.
3. Mark places where the narrator or central consciousness differs from our view of reality or fails to see important truths that we or other characters see.
4. Mark places that are particularly expressive of the narrator's tone. List the characteristics of tone.

Irony

Authors use irony pervasively to convey their ideas. But irony is a diverse and often complex intellectual phenomenon difficult to define in a sentence or two. Generally, *irony* makes visible a contrast between appearance and reality. More fully and specifically, it exposes and underscores a contrast between (1) what is and what seems to be, (2) between what is and what ought to be, (3) between what is and what one wishes to be, and (4) between what is and what one expects to be. Incongruity is the method of irony; opposites come suddenly together so that the disparity is obvious to discriminating readers. There are many kinds of irony, but four types are common in literature.

Verbal irony Verbal irony is perhaps the most common form of irony. Most people use or hear verbal irony daily. In verbal irony, people say the opposite of what they mean. For example, if the day has been terrible, you might say, "Boy, this has been a great day!" The hearer knows that this statement is ironic because of the speaker's tone of voice and facial or bodily expressions or because the hearer is familiar with the situation and immediately sees the discrepancy between statement and actuality. Understatement and overstatement are two forms of verbal irony. In *understatement*, one minimizes the nature of something. "Greg Maddox pitched a pretty good game," one might say after seeing a no-hitter. Mark Twain's famous telegram is another example of understatement: "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." In *overstatement* one exaggerates the nature of something. After standing

in a long line, you might say, "There were about a million people in that line!"

Why do people use verbal irony? One reason is that verbal irony is more emphatic than a point-blank statement of the truth. It achieves its effect by reminding the hearer or reader of what the opposite reality is and thus providing a scale by which to judge the present reality. Verbal irony often represents a mental agility—wit—that people find striking and, as with the Mark Twain retort, entertaining. Verbal irony in its most bitter and destructive form becomes sarcasm, in which the speaker condemns people by pretending to praise them:

Oh, you're a real angel. You're the noble and upright man who wouldn't think of dirtying his pure little hands with company business. But all along, behind our backs, you were just as greedy and ruthless as the rest of us.

Situational irony In situational irony, the situation differs from what common sense indicates it is, will be, or ought to be. It is ironic, for example, that General George Patton should have lived through the thickest of tank battles during World War II and then, after the war, have been killed accidentally by one of his own men. It is ironic that someone we expect to be upright—a minister or judge—should be the most repulsive of scoundrels. Authors often use situational irony to expose hypocrisy and injustice. An example is Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, in which the townspeople regard the minister Arthur Dimmesdale as sanctified and angelic when in fact he shamefully hides his adultery with Hester Prynne, allowing her to take all the blame.

Attitudinal irony Situational irony results from what *most* people expect, whereas attitudinal irony results from what one person expects. In attitudinal irony, an individual thinks that reality is one way when, in fact, it is a very different way. A frequent example in literature is naïve characters—Fielding's Parson Adams, Cervantes's Don Quixote, Dickens's Mr. Micawber, Voltaire's *Candide*—who think that everyone is upright and that everything will turn out for the best, when in fact people they encounter treat them unfairly and events are hurtful.

Dramatic irony Dramatic irony occurs in plays when a character states or hears something that means more to the audience than to the character. An example is the play *Oedipus Rex*. Like all Greek tragedies, *Oedipus Rex* dramatizes a myth that its audiences know. Thus, when

Oedipus at the beginning boasts that he will personally find and punish the reprobate who killed King Laius, the audience recognizes this boast as ironic. Oedipus does not know—but the audience does—that he himself is the unwitting murderer of Laius. Although dramatic irony gets its name from drama, it can occur in all forms of literature. The key to the existence of dramatic irony is the reader's foreknowledge of coming events. Many works become newly interesting when we reread them because we now know what will happen while the characters do not; this dramatic irony intensifies characterization and makes us aware of tensions that we could not have known about during our initial reading.

Questions about irony The first question to ask is: What are the most obvious ironies in the work? The second is: How are the ironies important? What, for example, are their implications? Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is layered with irony. An essay might deal with one of its ironies, such as the ironic contrast between the placid country-town setting and the horrible deeds done there. The setting seems like everyone's nostalgic image of the ideal American small town, with its central square, post office, country store, cranky old men, gossipy housewives, laconic farmers, mischievous children, settled routine, and friendly atmosphere. Is Jackson implying, then, that "normal" American communities conduct lotteries to decide which of their members is to be destroyed by the others? The answer is probably yes, she is suggesting just this. Americans are guilty of conducting "lotteries," perhaps not exactly in this manner, but with equal arbitrariness and cruelty. Instead of making this point directly, however, she implies it through the use of irony. And she achieves a much greater emphasis than if she were to state her accusation directly. She shocks us by associating something we agree is horrible with a way of life we think of as "normal" and benign. The irony packs an emotional wallop that captures our attention and gets us thinking.

Other, more specific questions about irony are these:

Verbal irony: If characters constantly use verbal irony, why? What do we learn about their attitudes toward the world? Does their verbal irony usually take the form of sarcasm? Are they, then, bitter, and disappointed or simply realistic?

Situational irony: What are the most obvious situational ironies? Are the characters aware of the situational ironies? At what point do they

become aware of them? Should we blame the characters for creating situational ironies or not understanding them? Does the author, for example, want us to do something about them—to reform society and ourselves?

Attitudinal irony: What attitudes do the characters have that contradict reality? Are we supposed to admire the characters who misconstrue the world, or are we to blame them for being naïve and deluded? What troubles do they encounter because of their attitudes?

Dramatic irony: What do you know about coming events or past events in the work that the characters do not know? When and what do they say that triggers this disparity? What does the author want us to think of them when they say these things? What effect does dramatic irony have on the plot? Does it, for example, make the plot suspenseful?

■ Thinking on Paper about Irony

1. Mark examples of verbal irony, either by the narrator or other characters. Explain how a character's verbal irony helps characterize him or her.
2. Mark episodes in which a character's beliefs and expectations are contradicted by reality. Explain the importance to characterization of these episodes.
3. List instances of situational irony; identify people, for example, whom we expect to behave in one way but who behave quite differently. Explain the importance to theme of these instances.

Symbolism

In the broadest sense, a symbol is something that represents something else. Words, for example, are symbols. But in literature, a *symbol* is an object that has meaning beyond itself. The object is concrete and the meanings are abstract. Fire, for example, may symbolize general destruction (as in James Baldwin's title *The Fire Next Time*), or passion (the "flames of desire"), or hell (the "fiery furnace"). Symbols, however, are not metaphors; they are not analogies that clarify abstractions, such as the following metaphor from Shakespeare's Sonnet 116:

love is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken.

Here, the abstract concept (the referent) is “love” and the clarifying concrete object is the stable mark (buoy, lighthouse, rock) that tempests cannot budge. A symbol, in contrast, is a concrete object with no clear referent and thus no fixed meaning. Instead, it merely suggests the meaning and, in an odd way, partly *is* the meaning. For this reason, the meaning of symbols is difficult to pin down. And the more inexhaustible their potential meaning, the richer they are.

There are two kinds of symbol: public and private. *Public symbols* are conventional, those that most people in a particular culture or community would recognize as meaning something fairly definite. Examples of public symbols are the cross, the star of David, the American eagle, flags of countries, the colors red (for “stop”) and green (for “go”), and the skull and crossbones.

Private symbols are unique to an individual or to a single work. Only from clues in the work itself can we learn the symbolic value of the object. There are many examples of private symbols in literature. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, there is an area between the posh Long Island suburbs and New York City through which the major characters drive at various times and which Fitzgerald calls a “valley of ashes.” It is a desolate, gray, sterile place, and over it all broods a partly obliterated billboard advertisement that features the enormous eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, an optometrist. Fitzgerald invests this area with symbolic meaning. He associates it with moral decay, urban blight, the oppression of the poor by the wealthy, meaninglessness, hell, and violent death. At one point he connects the eyes with failure of vision, at another with God, who sees all things. But we never know exactly what the valley of ashes represents; instead, it resonates with many possible meanings, and this resonance accounts for its powerful suggestiveness.

Questions about symbolism Not every work uses symbols, and not every character, incident, or object in a work has symbolic value. You should ask the fundamental question: What symbols does the work seem to have? You should, however, beware of finding “symbols” where none were intended. A second question, then, is necessary to the believability of any interpretation based on symbols: How do you know they are symbols? What does the author do that gives symbolic meaning to the elements you mention? Once you answer this question,

you can move on to a third and more interesting question: What does the symbol mean? In Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, for example, the following dialogue between Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley suggests that Hemingway intended a symbolic meaning for rain; it also suggests what the symbol represents:

[Frederic says] “It’s raining hard.”

“And you’ll always love me, won’t you?” [Catherine replies]

“Yes.”

“And the rain won’t make any difference?”

“No.”

“That’s good. Because I’m afraid of the rain.”

“Why? . . . Tell me.”

“All right. I’m afraid of the rain because sometimes I see me dead in it.”

“No.”

“And sometimes I see you dead in it. . . . It’s all nonsense. It’s only nonsense. I’m not afraid of the rain. I’m not afraid of the rain. Oh, oh, God, I wish I wasn’t.” She was crying. I comforted her and she stopped crying. But outside it kept on raining. (125–126)

Throughout the novel, Hemingway’s recurrent association of rain with destruction of all kinds broadens its significance from a mere metaphor for death to other and more general qualities such as war, fate, alienation, foreboding, doom, and “reality.” Because of these associations, the last sentence of the novel is more than just a description of the weather: “After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain” (332). The sentence seems to suggest that Frederic is stoically and bravely facing the harsh realities—including Catherine’s death, the war, the arbitrariness and cruelty of fate—represented by the rain.

■ Thinking on Paper about Symbolism

1. List the symbols in the work.
2. State why you think the objects are meant as symbols.
3. Mark the descriptions or episodes that give the symbols meaning.
4. List each symbol’s possible meanings.

Other Elements

In this chapter we have treated the elements most obviously identified with fiction. But other elements are also sometimes important in fiction: dialogue, description, metaphor, poetic use of language, diction. We will discuss these other elements in the next two chapters.

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4

Interpreting Drama

Drama contains many of the elements of fiction. Like fiction, drama contains plot, characters, theme, and setting. Like fiction, drama uses irony and symbolism. And indeed, you can read a play as you would a short novel, using your imagination to fill in all the "missing" material you typically find in fiction: character description, background information, vivid action scenes. Similarly, drama often contains many of the elements of poetry, and you can read the poetic passages in plays just as you read any poetry. Because of the great similarity of drama to fiction and poetry, the definitions, questions, and exercises stated in the preceding chapter on fiction and in the following chapter on poetry are all equally valid for drama. Use them to generate your own interpretations of the plays.

The Nature of Drama

Drama is different from fiction and most poetry in one essential way: It is meant to be performed. Some theorists of drama argue that a play is incomplete *until* it is performed. According to the critic Bernard Beckerman in *Dynamics of Drama*, "a play is a mere skeleton; performance fleshes out the bones" (3). When you read a play, you miss qualities the playwright intended as a part of the play. For one thing, you miss the audience, whose physical presence and reactions to the performance influence both the performance and your perception of the play. For another, you miss the set designers' vision of the atmosphere and physical world of the play. You miss the interpretive art of the actors and