

Definitions and Examples of Literary Elements and Literary Techniques

Introduction:

- In general, literary devices are a collection of universal artistic structures that are typical of all works of literature and frequently employed by writers to give meaning and a logical framework to their works through language.
- When employed properly, the different literary devices help readers to appreciate, interpret and analyze a literary work.
- Literary Devices have two aspects. They can be categorized as either **Literary Elements** or **Literary Techniques**. Let's define them separately.

Literary Elements are aspects or characteristics of a whole text. Every good story has a theme, a setting, a conflict where the antagonist and protagonist of the story eventually reach a climax and a resolution. Readers and viewers then identify, interpret and /or analyze the works using the literary techniques and elements that were employed.

To have a better understanding of **Literary Elements**, it is useful to look at their definitions.

Definition of different **Literary Elements**:

- **Antagonist:** The character in conflict, competition, or rivalry with the protagonist. The person may not be bad by any conventional moral standard, but s/he opposes the protagonist in a significant way.
- **Characterization:** The author's means of conveying to the reader a character's personality, life, history, values, and physical attributes. The author may describe this directly or show it indirectly through the character's words and actions.

- **Climax:** The turning point in a story at which the end results become inevitable. The dramatic high point of the story where something suddenly goes terribly wrong.
- **Conflict.** It is the issue/problem in a narrative around which the whole story revolves. Conflicts can exist between individual characters, between groups of characters, between a character and society, between a character and nature, and it can also be abstract (conflicting ideas).
- **Context:** Facts and conditions surrounding a story, plot, character, the book and the author, or the time the story was written.
- **Dialogue:** The words spoken by characters of a narrative. They may communicate with one another, but it may also be used to communicate characters' thoughts and actions.
- **Mood:** A general atmosphere of a narrative, or the emotional condition created by the piece and setting.
- **Motif:** A recurring important idea or image. A motif differs from a theme in that it can be expressed as a single word or fragmentary phrase, while a theme usually must be expressed as a complete sentence.
- **Narrator:** The person who tells the story. They may or may not be a character participating in the story.
- **Point-of-view:** The identity of the narrative voice; the person or entity through whom the reader experiences the story. May be a third-person (no narrator) or first-person (narrated by a character in the story who either merely observes or directly participates). Some experimental authors may use second-person (talking directly to the reader).
- **Plot:** The logical sequence of events that develops a story.
- **Protagonist:** The main character of a short story, novel or play. Most likely the one with whom the reader is meant to identify. A protagonist will not necessarily be "good" by any convention or standard, but s/he is the person in whose plight the reader/viewer is most invested.

- **Setting:** Refers to the time and place in which a story takes place. It can be a specific place or left ambiguous.
- **Structure:** The way the various elements of a story are assembled.
- **Theme:** The central idea, message or concept conveyed by the story, usually stated as a complete sentence.
- **Tone:** The apparent emotional state of the speaker/narrator/narrative voice, as conveyed through the language of the piece.

Literary Techniques are specific, deliberate constructions of language which an author uses to convey meaning.

An author's use of a literary technique usually occurs with a single word or phrase, or a particular group of words or phrases. This is also called a figure of speech. It is a departure from the usual form of expression for the purpose of making the meaning clearer, more forceful, or more beautiful.

Unlike literary elements, literary techniques are not necessarily present in every text. An author may choose whether or not to include different techniques depending on his or her goals for the piece.

To have a better understanding of **Literary Techniques**, it is useful to look at their definition and examples.

Definition of different **Literary Techniques**:

1. **Allegory:** A literary technique in which an abstract idea is given a form with characters, actions or events.

For example:

- *Animal Farm*, written by George Orwell, is an allegory using the actions of animals on a farm to represent the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II and the Communist Revolution of Russia before WW II. In addition, the actions of the animals on the farm are used to expose the greed and corruption of the Revolution.

2. **Alliteration:** The repetition of consonant sounds, usually in consecutive or nearby words within the same sentence or line.

For example:

- Better butter always makes the batter better.
- She sells seashells at seahore.

3. **Anthropomorphism:** The portrayal of animals or inanimate objects as people. They can walk, talk, or have arms, legs and facial features. They behave and appear like human beings. These anthropomorphized animals or objects act as characters in a narrative.

For example:

- Pinocchio, the famous wooden doll, was anthropomorphized when he was given the ability to talk, walk, think, and feel like a real boy.
- Fables and fairy tales usually have characters that can serve as anthropomorphism examples.
- (Note: This technique is often confused with the term **“personification.”**)

4. **Creative license:** Exaggeration or alteration of objective facts or reality for the purpose of enhancing meaning in a fictional context. This technique is often used in novels.
5. **Dramatic irony:** This is the result of the audience/reader’s awareness of something important, while the characters in the story are not aware.
6. **Exposition:** An interruption in the story, often by the author, in order to explain something. It often provides important background information.
7. **Figurative language:** Any use of language where the intended meaning differs from the actual literal meaning of the words themselves.
8. **Foreshadowing:** The indication of future events in a story, or perhaps the outcome, before they happen.
9. **Hyperbole:** Deliberate exaggeration of actions and ideas for the sake of emphasis.

For example:

- *Your bag weighs a ton!*
- *I have got a million issues to look after!*

10. Imagery: The use of figurative language to create representations of actions, objects and ideas in our mind in such a way that they appeal to our physical senses.

For example:

- *The room was dark and gloomy.* -The words “dark” and “gloomy” are visual images.
- *The river was roaring in the mountains.* – The word “roaring” appeals to our sense of hearing. As this sentence shows, imagery is not limited just to sight.

11. Irony: The use of the words in such a way that the intended meaning is completely opposite of their literal meaning.

It can also refer to an unexpected event that happens which is in absurd or mocking opposition to what is expected or appropriate.

For example:

- The bread is soft as a stone.
- So nice of you to break my new PSP!
- In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Jem and Scout are saved by Boo Radley, who had ironically been an object of fear and suspicion to them at the beginning of the novel.

12. Metaphor: An implied comparison made between two unlike things that actually have something in common. Among the most common metaphors are those that refer to our senses of touch, taste, sight, hearing, and smell.

For example:

- *He is an old fox, very cunning.* (**Metaphor**)
- *I am boiling mad.*

13. Metonymy: Is a figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated (such as “crown” for “royalty”). Metonymy is also the rhetorical strategy of describing something indirectly by referring to things around it, such as describing someone’s clothing to characterize the individual.

For example:

- The government says...

- The White House asked the public to remain calm during the crisis.
- The suits at the large investment firms will finally have their day in court.

14. **Onomatopoeia:** The technique of spelling out sounds as words, or when words describing sounds actually sound like the noises they describe.

For example:

- “Baa Baa Black Sheep” (with every “Baa Baa” of the sheep onomatopoeia is used in this nursery rhyme)
- “Old Macdonald” (similarly, every “Moo Moo” and “Neigh Neigh” in this nursery rhyme exemplifies onomatopoeia)

15. **Oxymoron:** A figure of speech pairing two words together that are opposing and/or contradictory. As a literary device, it has the effect of creating an impression, enhancing a concept, and even entertaining the reader.

For example:

- *Little Bighorn* Battlefield (national monument in Montana)
- “True Lies” (American film)
- Jenny thinks of her garage as an *organized mess*.

16. **Paradox:** The creation of an impossible situation. Different elements of it cancel each other out.

For example:

- If there’s one thing that I know, it’s that I don’t know anything at all.
- The final rule you need to remember is to ignore all rules.

17. **Parallelism:** Use of similar or identical language, structures, events, or ideas in different parts of a text.

For example:

- One of the most well-known examples of parallelism is featured in Neil Armstrong's statement, made as he stepped on the moon:
"That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

The structure of the two noun phrases in this sentence is similar due to the repeated use of "one," "for," and "man." This engages the audience's attention and emphasizes the contrast between "small step for man" and "giant leap for mankind."

Two more examples:

- "Where there is smoke, there is fire."
- "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

18. **Personification (1):** Attributing human like self-awareness to a thing, an idea or an animal. Human thoughts, actions, and perceptions are directly ascribed to inanimate objects or abstract ideas.
(Not to be confused with **"anthropomorphism"**)

For example:

- *The flowers are dancing beside the lake.*
- *Have you seen my new car? She is a real beauty!*

19. **Repetition:** An author gives emphasis to a particular idea by using a specific word, phrase, or structure more than once.

For example:

- "Every person had a star, every star had a friend, and for every person carrying a star there was someone else who reflected it, and everyone carried this reflection like a secret confidante in the heart."
(Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*)

A couple different repetitions here. Star is repeated three times. Person is repeated twice and reflected/reflection is repeated twice.

However, when you read it, it doesn't seem redundant in any way. That's because redundancy is unnecessary repetition, while

beautiful repetition develops meaning and is exactly what the sentence needs.

20. *Simile*: Direct comparison to unlike things – will almost always use the words “like” or “as”:

For example:

- “*My love is like a red, red rose*”
- Sally whistled like a bird.
- “Wandered lonely as a cloud.” (Wordsworth)

21. *Symbolism/Symbol*: The use of specific objects or images to represent abstract ideas. A symbol must be something tangible or visible, while the idea it symbolizes must be something abstract or universal.

For example:

- Scales of justice
- Lady liberty
- The land of the free and the home of the brave.

- *Light and Fire in Frankenstein*:

In this novel, light is symbolic of knowledge and enlightenment that can also bring harm.

This is evident in the monster’s first encounter with fire:

“One day, when I was oppressed by cold, I found a fire which had been left by some wandering beggars, and was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it. In my joy I thrust my hand into the live embers, but quickly drew it out with a cry of pain. How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce opposite effects!”

Victor Frankenstein’s knowledge also led to creation, but one that ultimately harmed everyone around him—everyone he loved was killed by the monster he brought to life.

22. *Synecdoche*: A figure of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole, the whole for a part, the specific for the general, the general for the specific, or the material for the thing made from it.

For example:

- Many hands make light work.
- She worked two jobs because she had six hungry mouths to feed.

23. *Verbal Irony*: The meaning is intended to be the exact opposite of what the words actually mean.

For example:

- "The cake is as soft as concrete" - The author means that the cake is not so soft. It is too hard to eat.
- "Water is as clear as mud" - The person actually means that the water is not at all clear.
- "Isn't it as pleasant as a root canal?" - This implies that whatever occurred was not pleasant at all.