



20-Minute Lit. Course



The term fiction is used to refer to imaginative works of literature, writing that includes made-up or invented elements. On the other hand, works that consist entirely of historical facts are referred to as non-fiction. Both types of writing have the potential for arguing Truths. In fact, it can be argued that works of fiction have a greater potential for truth than works of non-fiction.

Fiction and non-fiction both attempt to portray an accurate and compelling view of reality and the human experience. However, writers of non-fiction are limited to the facts at hand—they do not have the freedom to fill in any gaps in their knowledge. Writers of fiction, however, have the freedom to produce facts as needed. In doing so they are able to create much more complex and coherent views of the world we live in. “Writers of fiction celebrate the separateness, distinctness, and importance of all individuals and all individual experiences. They assume that all human experiences, whatever they are and wherever they occur, are intrinsically important and interesting” (Griffith 28).

We can better interpret works of fiction if we understand the elements that comprise them: Plot, setting, characterization, point of view, symbolism, irony, and theme.

Plot

Plot, at its most basic definition, is what happens, the series of events that make up the story. “A more complete and accurate definition . . . is that plot is a pattern of carefully selected, causally related events that contain conflict” (Griffith 30).

Setting

Setting includes not only the physical world in which the story takes place, it also includes the historical and social environments that the characters inhabit.

Characterization

Characterization refers to the author’s portrayal of the characters and their development over the course of the story. An author can portray a character simply, through one or two key traits, or in a complex manner showing a broad range of traits. These types of characters are called, respectively, *flat* and *round*. Characters who learn and are changed by their experiences are referred to as *dynamic*, those who remain essentially they same are called *static*.

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” (Griffith 44). There are four types of point of view: omniscient, limited omniscient, first-person, and objective.

Symbolism

A symbol is a thing that represents something else. “In literature, a symbol is an object that has meaning beyond itself. . . . Fire, for example, may symbolize general destruction (as in James Balwin’s title, *The Fire Next Time*), or passion (the ‘flames of desire’), or Hell (the ‘fiery furnace’)” (Griffith 52).

Irony

Simply put, irony makes visible the contrast between appearance and reality. It is more complex that, however. Authors use various forms of irony in their work to underscore contrasts: verbal irony, situational irony, attitudinal irony, and dramatic irony. Sarcasm, for instance, is a form of verbal irony where what is said is at odds with what is meant.

Theme

Theme refers to the central idea or truth of the work. “It deals with four general areas of human experience: the nature of humanity, the nature of society, the nature of humankind’s relationship with the world, and the nature of our ethical responsibilities” (Griffith 36).

Works Cited

- Griffith, Kelly. *Writing Essays about Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998.
- Kelman, James. *Busted Scotch: Selected Stories*. New York: Norton, 1998. 43.

Exercise:

Read the following short story and see if you can identify each of the elements of fiction in it.

Acid

By James Kelman

In this factory in the north of England acid was essential. It was contained in large vats. Gangways were laid above them. Before these gangways were made completely safe a young man fell into a vat feet first. His screams of agony were heard all over the department. Except for one old fellow the large body of men was so horrified that for a time not one of them could move. In an instant this old fellow who was also the young man's father had clambered up the gangway carrying a big pole. Sorry Hughie, he said. And then ducked the young man below the surface. Obviously the old fellow had had to do this because only the head and shoulders—in fact, that which had been seen above the acid was all that remained of the young man.

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