

Unit 6: Literature—Discovering the World, Discovering Ourselves

Overview

Literature—writing that has lasting value—is characterized by its use of elastic and powerful language. Writers can stretch their words into dramas that keep us glued to our seats. They can also squeeze these words into poetic snapshots that cause us to see, touch, and hear beautiful moments in life. Writers and the literature they create have the power to capture the emotions that come with being human. They bring us triumph, passion, or

loneliness. When we read literature we know that we are not alone. We realize that across history others have shared our experiences and emotions.



Becoming a good reader of literature is a no-lose investment of your time.

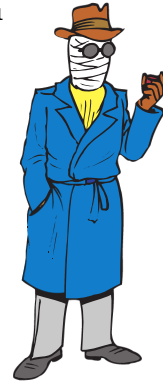
poet chose a particular set of words helps you read better. Mastering the art of seeing the information contained in a dramatic character's dialogue does this as well. The skills you perfect in becoming a good reader serve you well in all areas of life. You can read legal documents more effectively and understand the textbooks required for other classes. Becoming a good reader of literature is a no-lose investment of your time.

Literature also allows us to learn the power of a single word. Writers use language in the same way painters uses a palette of colors. Both artists create exact pictures and feelings that leave no doubt as to their intended meaning. Understanding why a

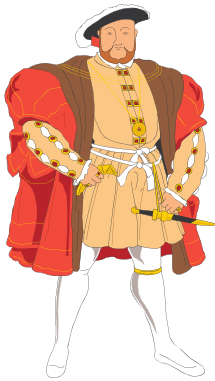
In this unit, you will learn some skills for approaching good literature, and you will practice these skills across several genres. These skills will help you critically analyze the literature you read and understand an author's deeper meaning. This deeper understanding will open new doors of enjoyment and comprehension of everything you read.

Fiction and Nonfiction: The Imagined and the Real

Fiction is writing based on imagination, whereas **nonfiction** is based on real people or events. A work of *fiction* may take many different **forms**. It can be a **short story**, a **novel**, or a tall tale. Regardless of its *form*, a work of fiction tells a story. A story describes an event or a series of events unfolding. Sometimes these events can be dramatic, such as a woman scaling a high mountain to rescue her lost husband. Sometimes the events can be quite ordinary, barely noticeable to an observer, such as a young man shopping at a supermarket. Regardless of whether it is about a high adventure or a common experience, a story that has sprung from the writer's imagination is a work of fiction.



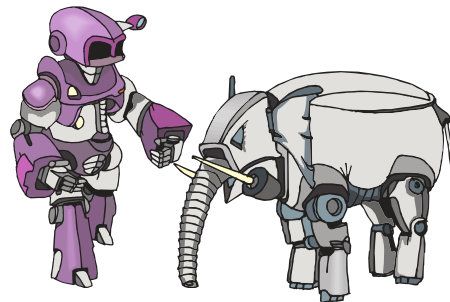
an invisible man—a fictional character



King Henry VIII—a nonfictional character


Like a work of fiction, a work of *nonfiction* may take many different forms. It can be a **biography**, **autobiography**, **essay**, cookbook, newspaper article, or a true-life adventure story. All of these examples are types of nonfiction because they are based on factual information, real people, and real events. Culture and history are both reflected in works of fiction and nonfiction. This influence can often be seen in the attitude of the author, the **setting**, the events, and the **characters**.

Sometimes it is easy to tell the difference between fiction and nonfiction. It is obvious that a story about a super hero or grotesque monster is fiction. We know that it is unrealistic to think that such a tale could be a retelling of factual, real-life events. It is also obvious that a story written by a famous person about her own life is probably nonfiction. We know that the famous person probably wrote about events that actually happened to her. Basing a story on factual, real-life events makes it nonfiction.



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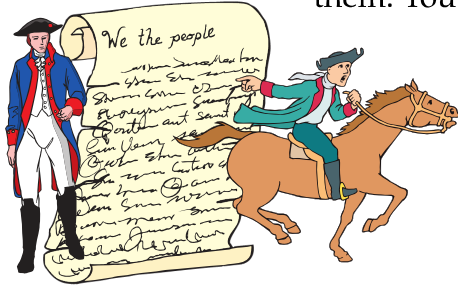
Other times it is more difficult to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction. Because all writing is to some degree inspired by real experiences and requires imagination, how do we know which is real and which is made up? In addition, there are many books featuring real events, such as the Civil War, the sinking of the *Titanic*, and the string of bank robberies by Bonnie and Clyde. Are these books fiction or nonfiction? To answer these questions, it is helpful to consider the author's *purpose* in writing the work. Usually, the main purpose of nonfiction is to inform, educate, or persuade using factual information. The main purpose of fiction, however, is to entertain. Good, thorough nonfiction writers also use reliable sources upon which to base their information.



	Fiction	Nonfiction
Types	short stories, novels, tall tales, some poetry, comic books, some dramas	true-life adventure stories, essays, biographies, autobiographies, cookbooks, magazines, and newspaper articles
Based on	imagination	real people or factual, real-life events
Main Purpose	to entertain	to inform, educate, or persuade using factual information

History and Culture in Literature: Events and Values Depicted in Stories and Reflected through Writers

When you read your history book, you learn about what happened in the past. When you read a work of **literature**, you find out how historical events have shaped the people who experienced them. You also find out how a particular culture influenced the people who lived in it.



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Defining a particular culture is difficult, perhaps even impossible. We can, however, agree on certain characteristics of a culture. We are part of the American culture. This is a culture that admires independence, from the men who declared national independence from England to the men and women who have struck

out on their own and formed successful businesses. We also value the culture of the 1990s. This decade valued information—this period was called the Information Age.

An example of the way history and culture work in writing can be seen in a *novel* about the Depression Era in the United States. The Depression occurred during the 1920s and 1930s. Although the writer herself lived long after this time of extreme poverty and unemployment, she developed an interest in the period. She wanted to show how cultural values affected people during this time. She shows many *characters* in her novel who are extremely bitter because, in spite of their hard work, they are unable to feed and shelter their children. In short, their hard work is not rewarded, and they do not enjoy the American dream.

The writer also shows how events in history contributed to the Depression: how the end of World War I left people with hopes for a comfortable future; and how the hunger for a wealthy lifestyle caused many people to fall into enormous debt. In the novel's last chapter, she shows how, even though the people in the next generation regained some wealth, they lived forever in fear of another depression. This work of fiction shows us a particular history and culture and how they affected people.

The historical period and culture in which a writer lives also influences how and what he or she writes. Certain historical events provide experiences that many writers of a particular culture or time period react to in their work. Careful readers, therefore, can often recognize the *literature* of a particular time, place, or people.

Many southern writers have been affected by slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction after the war. In addition, the South was, for a long time, industrially underdeveloped. This resulted, in small towns and an agricultural lifestyle. As a result, southerners felt close to the land and in tune with the cycles of nature. Southern writers have also been heavily influenced by the myths and stories of the antebellum South—or the South before the Civil War. Most of us are familiar with the stereotypical characters identified with this time period. These characters include the southern belle and the southern gentleman. Even today, more than a hundred years after the Civil War and Reconstruction, many Southern writers are still influenced by these events and the “old” South. These writers often address some or all of the following southern **themes** in their works:

- a strong interest in the past
- love of the land
- the difficulty men and women have in breaking with traditional roles
- racial injustice
- stereotypical characters
- a gap between the rich and poor
- strong family ties
- the will to survive disasters.

Common Literary Elements: The Parts That Make Literature Go

Literature includes certain common ingredients that work together to make a story, poem, **drama**, *autobiography*, or *biography* interesting to read. These common ingredients are called *literary elements*. Not all of these elements appear in every **genre**. Knowing the terms used to talk about literary elements will help you as you study the forms of *genre* in the rest of this unit.

Elements of Fiction

Plot: The *plot* is the skeleton or outline of a literary work; it is the sequence of main events that takes place in the story. In addition, the plot also shows us why things in the story occur. The British author E. M. Forster said that if someone told you the king died and then the queen died, they would be only telling you of two events that happened and be describing only half the plot. However, if they told you that the king died and then the queen died of *grief*, they would be describing the whole plot. In other words, the plot includes the cause (the king's death) and its effect (the queen's death).

The plot of many works of literature follows a structure or order.

The Beginning: Most beginnings give us information. We discover who the main characters are, where and when the

story takes place, and any other information we need to make sense of what follows. The beginning also accomplishes something essential to a good story. The beginning suggests that something will happen to upset the situation presented. So, for example, the beginning of *Little Red*

The beginning of Little Red Riding Hood suggests that the young girl will not just stroll happily to Grandma's house.



Riding Hood suggests that the young girl will not just stroll happily to Grandma's house. No, something will change to upset this lighthearted and innocent picture.

The Middle: The middle is often the longest and most intense part of a literary work. In the middle, **conflict** upsets the picture presented at the beginning. Take the story of Belinda. She left home on a beautiful sunny day to catch the public bus for school. She sat next to her friend Missy, who asked Belinda if she would like to cut school for a day of goofing off at the mall. Thus began the *conflict*: Should Belinda cut school or should she risk Missy's disapproval by going on to class? When the bus reached school, the conflict had reached its high point. Belinda had to choose whether to attend class or skip it. The high point in a story is called the **climax**.

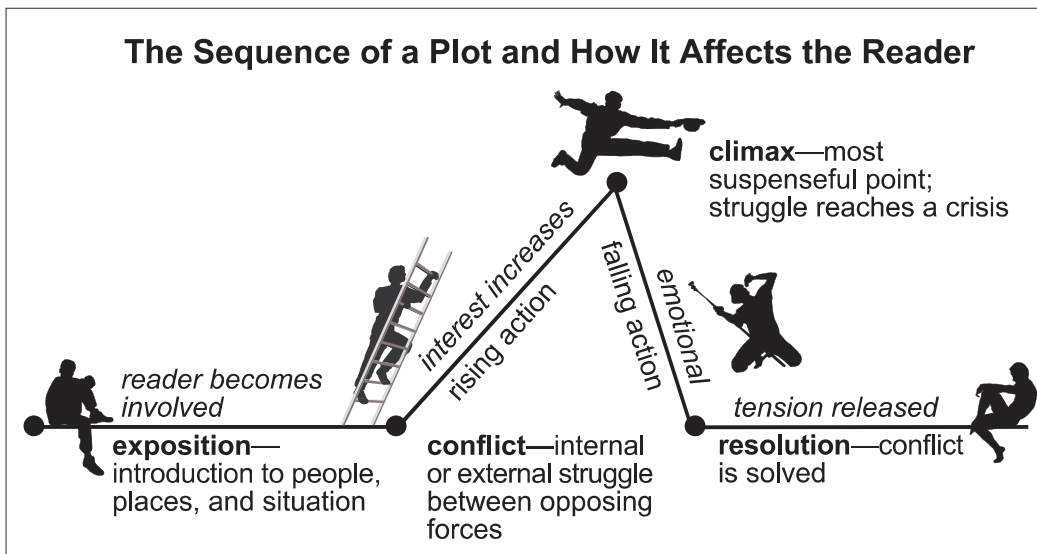
The End: The end of a story is also called its **resolution**. The conflict is resolved, or decided. The ending often also shows the effects of the *resolution*. After deciding to cut class, Belinda faces all the effects of her decision. She has flunked a quiz and lost her purse at the mall. Perhaps worst of all, she felt bad because she was not strong enough to accept Missy's disapproval and go to class.

Every story is told differently. No two plots are developed in the same way. However, most works of fiction contain the following.

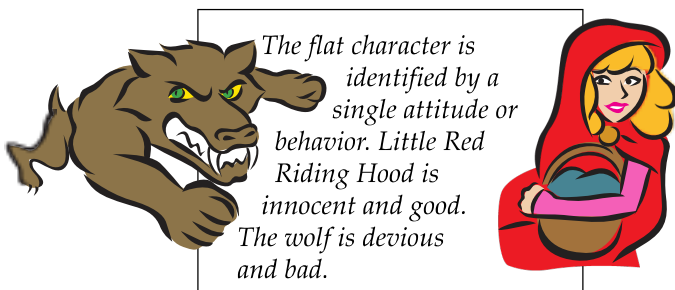
- **Exposition:** This gets us ready for the story. The *exposition* introduces us to the people, places, and situations. We meet the characters. We learn about their lives. We are told about the setting. We see the conflict begin.
- **Complications:** The story continues. Unexpected events happen. The conflict grows more intense. The characters must struggle even more. As they do, suspense builds. We worry whether or not the conflict can be overcome.
- **Climax:** This is the point of no return. An action or decision occurs that changes the lives of the characters. This action or decision points to the story's end. The action usually ends the conflict. Sometimes the ending is happy. Sometimes it is tragic.

- **Resolution:** This ends the story. Remaining questions are answered here. Often, we find out the characters' fates. It is here we learn the results of the climax. We know the consequences of the actions.

The following diagram shows how the elements of a short story work together to make up the plot.



Character: A *character* is a person or creature in a literary work. We generally speak of *round* characters and *flat* characters. We see many sides of a round character. The round character has the ability to grow, in good ways or bad. The character who spends his life making a fortune but comes to see that he has no spiritual wealth is an example of a round

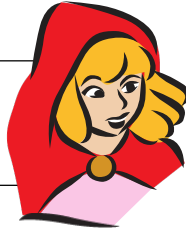


character. Round characters seem more lifelike to readers because they are complex, as people are in real life. In contrast, we see only one

side of a flat character. No matter what happens, he or she responds in the same way. The flat character is identified by a single attitude or behavior. Little Red Riding Hood is innocent and good. The wolf is devious and bad.

Protagonist: The *protagonist* is the main character. The protagonist is the most important character. In many stories, the protagonist is the character readers identify with. A common practice by writers is to use the name of the protagonist as the title of the story or play. Most fairy tales follow this practice, for example, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Snow White*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Shakespeare named many of his plays after the protagonist: *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Othello*.

The protagonist is the main character.



Antagonist: The *antagonist* is the second most important character or characters in a story. The antagonist is in conflict with the protagonist. The antagonist tries to keep

The antagonist is the second most important character or characters in a story and tries to keep the “good guy” from achieving his or her goal.



the “good guy” from achieving his or her goal. The antagonist in the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, for example, is the wolf. The wolf tries to keep Little Red Riding

Hood from reaching her goal—delivering goodies to Grandma. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the antagonists are King Claudius and Laertes. As antagonists, King Claudius and Laertes work against Hamlet’s goal: to avenge his father’s death.

Setting: The *setting* is the time and place in which the work takes place. However, the setting tells us more than just the physical location in which the work is set. If a work is set in New York City, for instance, a whole set of values and expectations will be raised. The characters in this story will move through a city heavily influenced by modern urban life. If a man were to talk to an unfamiliar woman at a bus stop in a large urban city, other people would barely notice. However, if this same incident happened in a small rural town, it could become a major source of gossip and ridicule. The setting of a play not only depends on the environment of the story but also on the stage setting, the lighting, sound effects, and language.

Conflict: The *conflict* is a struggle between opposing forces. The conflict can be internal, within the mind of the character. A woman, for example, does battle with her self-doubt. She either has to persuade herself that she can run a corporation and manage a whole staff of men or she has to turn down a huge promotion. The conflict can also be external, between two characters. A boy, for example, tries to persuade a girl that her boyfriend has cheated on her. She will either dump her boyfriend or realize that the other boy is being devious. Another kind of external conflict occurs between a character and some other force, such as society or nature. A boy lost in a blizzard and freezing will either lie down and freeze to death or use his calmness and cleverness to survive nature.

Climax: The *climax* is the most suspenseful point in a literary work. It is the most important part of the story, such as in *Little Red Riding Hood*, when the wolf leaps out of the bed.

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At the climax, the two opposing forces have reached the high point of their conflict. Something must give. The protagonist will either triumph, fail, or find some condition in between.

Will self-doubt overcome the woman, or will she silence it once and for all? Will the boy lost in a snowstorm lie down and freeze to death, or will he keep calm and endure a blizzard? Will John persuade Lindsay that her boyfriend, Max, has cheated on her, or will she realize that John is being devious? Will the wolf eat Little Red Riding Hood? The climax often reveals the conclusion or how the central conflict will be resolved.

Theme: The *theme* is the central idea or message of the literary work. The interplay of the characters, the plot, the setting, the language, and all other elements of literature can be used by a writer to persuade readers of a message. In

presenting a theme, the author expresses an important idea about life or human nature. Certain themes are universal: They can be true at any time and in any place. Examples of universal themes are *love conquers all*; *hatred is destructive*; and *good triumphs over evil*. Writers do not always use these themes. Rather than present a story or play in which *good does triumph over evil*, they may present one in which the reverse occurs: *evil triumphs over good*. They may also play with universal themes and change *love conquers all* to *love conquers only the lover*.

Suspense or Complications: *Suspense* is a technique used to create uncertainty so the reader will stay interested in the story. Most writers create suspense by leading readers to ask questions. They present an initial picture to us—for example, a happy couple who answers the door to find a stranger. Then they urge us to ask questions: “What will this stranger bring into the happy couple’s life?” When the stranger presents himself as a good and trustful person, the writer urges us to ask: “Is he really to be trusted, or is he deceiving the innocent couple?”

Narrator: The *narrator* is the speaker in a literary work. Two types of narrators are commonly used in literature.

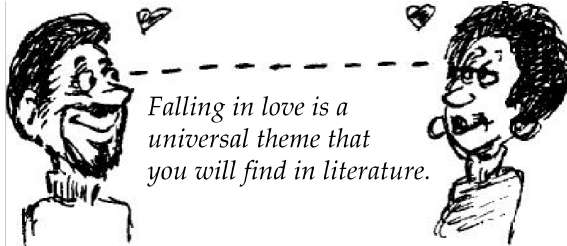
A first-person narrator is the teller of the story and is also a character or observer in the story. (Example: I will never forget the day I met Susan.)

A third-person narrator tells the story but does not appear as a character in the story. (Example: As Tommy walked through the mall, he looked in all the store windows.)

Universal Themes: Ideas We All Live By

As you have already learned, the theme of a piece of literature is the idea the writer hopes to communicate to you. A *universal theme* is one that has generally been accepted by people in any country and at any time in history. Universal themes are those that speak of the human experience: feeling the various kinds of love; coming of age; choosing between right and wrong. You will discover as you read the literature of other cultures that certain feelings and certain situations have always occurred and will probably continue to occur as long as humanity survives.

Take a few minutes to think about the cycle of human life. Also, try to think of certain events and experiences that seem to recur. For example,



countries seem to go to war time and time again, even though history has shown that war is destructive and cruel. Men and women fall in love and, as a result of this love, begin their own families. Parents love their children.

Young people want to be free of their parents. Almost everyone must, at some time or other, test his or her courage. These are some of the universal themes that you will find in literature.

Perhaps one of the most universal of themes is the pain of lost love. Read the two prose poems on the following pages that share this theme. Note how each writer uses this theme in a different way.

Loss Is the Name of My Loss

I had seen it happen to many of my friends. Their boyfriend or girlfriend went off, moved away, across the country or to another continent. I'd seen it happen before and thought, "They'll get over it. It's not the end of the world!"

And then it happened to me.

She was the part that made me whole. Now that she was no longer here, the world looked bleak. I sat in front of the TV for months afterward, feeling like my arm ended at the elbow, like I would be standing on my knees, if I ever got up. Then I forced myself to rise. I began to think that such a love would be tarnished if I let its loss end all worth. So I got up, went outside, day by day. And what I found was her. In the flowers, in the songs of birds, in the cry of a baby.

I made it through months, believing she was everywhere and the world was glorious. Until one day I heard a scream, an ugly scream far off, a scream of pain and loss. And then I knew that what I'd lost could never be replaced, not by flowers or birds or babies.

I knew then that loss is loss. It will not kill me or even tie me to my couch. It will be a pain that will hurt, at times.

And yet, if a wizard appeared and offered to take it away, I would yank his white beard and tell him: Loss is loss, for true loss cannot be lost.

—Unknown

To Wonder Why

I knew it would end before it began. We were young and no matter how often or how intensely we declared our love to be forever, it would not last. No matter that I knew these things, for when it happened, I cried. I cried and I wondered why.

We sat together, my lost love and I, and we talked and even laughed about how high we'd soared on love. We remembered strolling through parks and seeing colors we never knew could exist. We remembered hearing new meanings in songs older than the trees. I asked him why our love had gone.

Suddenly we stopped talking and laughing and remembering. We just sat there in silence, no longer in love. I looked at him and he at me, and we both realized, as the silence spoke to us both, why our love was gone.

One day the colors had changed back. The songs no longer could be stretched to hold new meanings. The days returned to days, the nights to nights. And our love returned to the place it had come from, a dream place that I can no longer live in.

I sit and wonder why, now. Why I can't go and stay there, in that place? I begin to go to that place and something stops me. It is the earth I stand on, telling me my love must live here, where life is real, and I wonder if I should wonder why.

—Unknown

Reread each of the prose poems until you are familiar with what each is saying about the love each writer has experienced and has apparently lost.