Outline on Literary Elements

The literary quality of a fictional book is based not upon its popularity or the ease with which it can be read, but upon the quality of the literary elements found in the book. The following bold-faced terms are ones which should be understood and used in discussing the literary elements. Please note that these elements apply **only to fiction books.**

Character

Character can be revealed through the character's actions, speech, and appearance. It also can be revealed by the comments of other characters and of the author.

Certain types of characters appear in many stories. Describe the following types if they appear in your book:

- The **protagonist** is the central character (person, animal, or personified object) in the plot's conflict.
- The **antagonist** is the force in conflict with the protagonist. It may be society, nature, or fate, as well as another person. It can also be the protagonist's own self, if he or she has an internal conflict.
- A **character foil** is a character whose traits are in direct contrast to those of the principal character. The foil therefore highlights the traits of the protagonist. The foil is usually a minor character, although if there are two protagonists, they may be foils of each other.
- A **stereotype** is a character who possesses expected traits of a group rather than being an individual. Using stereotypes is usually considered an indication of poor quality, especially in cases such as members of minority groups, people with disabilities, or women. However, stereotypes can be useful in furthering the story quickly and are acceptable in minor roles if they do not provide hurtful portraits of the groups in question.

Character development is showing the multitude of traits and behaviors that give the literary character the complexity of a human being. The amount of character development affects the quality of the story:

- A **flat character** is not fully developed; we know only one side of the character.
- A **round character** is fully-developed, with many traits--bad and good--shown in the story. We feel that we know the character so well that he or she has become a real person.
- Character development is a continuum with perfectly flat characters at one end and very round ones at the other. Every character lies somewhere on this continuum. Round characters are usually considered an indication of literary quality. However, characters in folktales are almost always flat, and flatness is appropriate for minor characters in modern literature for children. A character foil is often flat, even if the protagonist is round.

The amount of change in a character over the course of the story also affects its quality:

- A **static character** is one who does not experience a basic character change during the course of the story.
- A **dynamic character** is one who experiences a basic change in character through the events of the story. This change is internal and may be sudden, but the events of the plot should make it seem inevitable.
- There is also a continuum of character change in a story, with very static characters at one end, and very dynamic ones at the other. Every character lies somewhere on this continuum. Dynamism in the protagonist is usually considered an indication of quality, but many characters, especially in stories for younger children, have only the mild amount of change which can be expected from growing and maturing from day to day.
- A character may thus be round and dynamic, round and static, or flat and static. A flat character cannot usually be dynamic, because you do not know enough about the flat character to notice a change. If a character *seems* flat and yet *seems* to change, it is usually because the characterization is not well written.

The following table summarizes how the development and change in characters interact:

Character	Dynamic	Static
Round	**Considered the best type of character development. Usually the protagonist.**	**Development is considered well-done. Often found in protagonists in books for younger children.**
Flat	**Characters cannot be dynamic and flat, because in a flat character we do not know enough about them for them to recognize a change. If a flat character seems to change, it is usually due to poor writing.**	**In very simple books, or in fairy tales, the protagonist may be flat and static. Also appropriate for minor characters in other books.**

Plot

Plot is the sequence of events which involves the characters in conflict.

The sequence of events is called the **narrative order**:

- The most common type of narrative order in children's books is **chronological**. In this case, the events are told in the order they happen.
- A **flashback** occurs when the author narrates an event that took place before the current time of the story. Flashbacks are uncommon in children's literature because the passage of time is difficult for children to understand. The opposite effect, a **flash forward**, is even rarer.
- A **time lapse** occurs when the story skips a period of time that seems unusual compared to the rest of the plot. There is no standard amount of time that might constitute a time lapse; it depends upon the reader's sense that a longer than usual period of time has passed since the previous episode.

Conflict is the struggle between the protagonist and an opposing force. There are several types of conflict:

- **Internal conflict**, or **person-against-self**, occurs when the protagonist struggles within himself or herself. The protagonist is pulled by two courses of action or by differing emotions. This is often considered a characteristic of fine literature because it frequently leads to a dynamic change in the protagonist.
- **Interpersonal conflict**, or **person-against-person**, pits the protagonist against someone else.
- Conflict of **person-against-society** happens when the protagonist is in conflict with the values of his or her society. This is a difficult concept for small children to grasp.
- Conflict of **person-against-nature** takes place when the protagonists is threatened by an element of nature.
- Conflict of **person-against-fate** occurs when the protagonist must contend against a fact or life or death over which people have little control, such as death or disability. Some literary critics, however, see this conflict as a type of person-against-nature.
- Several types of conflict may be present in any one story.
- Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between two types of conflict. If a teenager is arrested by a policeman for breaking a law, the conflict is probably person-against-society. If, however, a personal animosity develops between the two, so that the boy taunts the policeman and the policeman harasses the boy because they dislike each other, the conflict becomes person-against-person. Likewise, if a character is attacked by a strange dog, the conflict is person-against-nature. But if the dog knows and dislikes the character, it could be considered person-against-person. If the protagonist is diagnosed with a fatal disease, he or she has a conflict with fate or nature, but also probably has an internal conflict in learning to accept his or her fate.

Most plots have certain common elements:

- A story commonly begins with **exposition**, an explanation of the situation and the condition of the characters. In children's books, the exposition is usually woven into the action.
- A plot usually begins with a problem which the protagonist must meet or solve. During the story, tension is built through a series of **complications**, incidents which either help or hinder the protagonist in finding a solution. This is the **rising action**.
- The **climax** is the peak or turning point of the action; at this point we know the outcome.
- The **denouement** or **falling action** is the part after the climax. It gives any necessary explanation and ends with **resolution**, the sense of at the end of the story that it is complete.
- The ending of the story may be either open or closed:
  - In a **closed ending**, the most usual one in children's books, readers feel that they know what will happen. The various parts of the plot are tied together satisfactorily, and the reader feels a sense of completion.
  - In an **open ending**, readers must draw their own conclusions; they do not know what will happen.
  - A **cliffhanger** is an abrupt ending at an exciting and often dangerous time in the plot. Its purpose is to keep the reader reading. It is usually found at the end of a chapter, but occasionally a book will end this way. (Not all open endings are suspenseful enough to be called cliffhangers.) Recently, books in some science fiction and fantasy series have ended in a cliffhanger, which encourages the reading of the other books in the series.

Other elements which may be found in plots include:

- **Suspense** is a state of tension, a sense of uncertainty, an emotional pull which keeps the reader reading. All plots need some suspense to sustain interest.
- **Foreshadowing** is the planting of hints about what will happen later in the story. It prepares children for the outcome and reassures them when the suspense is very high. Good foreshadowing is subtle and often contributes to high quality in a story.
- **Coincidence**, the concurrence of events which happen by chance, is a fact in real life. However, real life is not a plot that moves from problem to climax to resolution. In fiction, coincidence seems contrived; it weakens the plot. Coincidence in a plot is acceptable if it is carefully but subtly foreshadowed.

- **Inevitability** is the sense that the outcome is necessary and inescapable. It had to happen, given these characters and this situation; it is not contrived. It is a sign of high quality in writing.
- **Sensationalism** is unrelieved suspense; it often includes violence and may produce fear in the reader. Readers often like it, as the popularity of horror books and films attest, but it is usually considered a sign of poor quality. Even the Disney Studio, known for wholesome entertainment, is guilty of sensationalism. Sixty years ago, many children were frightened by the witch in *Snow White*. More recently *The Lion King* was criticized for excessive violence. In films, suspense is often heightened by cutting quickly between scenes and by the adroit use of background music to create a mood.
- **Sentimentality** is the opposite of sensationalism; it is the overuse of sentiment (a natural concern for another person) that produces a tear-jerker. It is dwelling too much on the "cute" and the "precious." Like sensationalism, it is a sign of poor quality but is often popular. Movies such as *Love Story* and *Terms of Endearment* are examples of sentimentality. Many popular children's books are overly sentimental. *Black Beauty*, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *The Giving Tree*, *I'll Love You Forever*, and the works of Joan Walsh Anglund have all been criticized for this.

Setting

Setting includes the place and the time period in which the story takes place.

Setting may or may not have an important influence on the story:

- An **integral setting** is essential to the plot; it influences action, character or theme.
- A **backdrop setting** is relatively unimportant to the plot; it is like the featureless curtain or flat painted scenery of a theater.
- Readers may interpret the importance of the setting differently; one may say that the setting is integral because the story must happen in a big city; another may say the same thing is backdrop because it may happen in any big city. (The former statement is probably more accurate, but either is acceptable if the meaning is clear.)

Setting can clarify conflict, illuminate character, affect the mood, and act as a symbol. The setting itself can be an antagonist in a person-against-nature conflict.

Theme

Theme is the underlying meaning of the story, a universal truth, a significant statement the story is making about society, human nature, or the human condition.

A book's theme must be described in universal terms, not in terms of the plot. The plot is the way the universal theme is carried out in that particular book. Themes can be applied to the reader's own life or to other literature.

Although themes can convey important messages, they should never be overtly didactic. **Didacticism** is preaching and teaching so explicitly that children lose pleasure in the story and reject its message.

The **primary theme** is most important theme in the story; children's books usually have one primary theme. There may be other **secondary themes** as well.

Types of themes:

- An **explicit theme** is one that is stated openly in the book. It is stated in universal terms in the book itself.
- An **implicit theme** is one which is not directly stated, but which the reader can infer. Many times, readers will not notice that an explicit theme is directly stated, but they can often infer the theme anyway.

Themes must be clearly stated; one word is not usually enough. To say that a book's theme is "friendship" is not clear. It may mean, "Friends are a person's most valuable possession." It may also mean, "Friends can never be trusted if their own interests are opposed to yours."

An understanding of theme is dependent upon one's previous experience of life and literature. At the same time, theme in literature can enlarge one's understanding of life.

Not every good book has a significant theme; some books' value lies in the pleasure they give, rather than the message they bring. Books of humor, for instance, may or may not have a significant theme.

Style

Style is the language used in a book, the way the words are put together to create the story.

- Most children's books use **standard written style**. This style sounds natural, but when carefully analyzed, it is clear that it is more formal than most speech. Sentences are complete; expressions like "um," "you know," and "like--," are avoided; contractions are used less often than in ordinary speech. Lots of conversation may included, but the style as a whole does not sound like speech.
- In **conversational style**, the language is more informal, it sounds more like the way people really talk. The narration as well as the character's speeches sounds conversational.
- **Dialect** is easiest for children to read if word order or a few unusual words and expressions are used to suggest a difference from normal speech. Other languages may be suggested in the same way through speech patterns and foreign words. Foreign and unusual words should be explained naturally in context. An **eye dialect**, in which words are spelled the way they sound, is sometimes very hard to read.
- An **ornate or unusual style** is sometimes used, especially in some high fantasy and historical fiction. Older editions of traditional literature and older poetry may also have such styles.

Writers use many **devices of style** to make stories interesting.

- **Imagery** is the most frequently used device. It is an appeal to any of the senses--taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell. It paints pictures in our mind.
- **Figurative language** uses words in a nonliteral way, giving them a meaning beyond their ordinary one.
    - **Personification** gives human traits to animals, nonhuman beings, or inanimate objects: "The trees bowed before the wind."
    - A **simile** compares two different things, using the words "as," "like," or "than": "The snowbank looked like a huge pile of marshmallow syrup."
    - A **metaphor** is an implied comparison stating the resemblance between two things: "Her presence was a ray of light in a dark world."
- **Devices of sound** can increase pleasure and clarity. Books which use many such devices should be read aloud. Poetry is particularly rich in such devices.
    - **Onomatopoeia** is the use of words that sound like their meaning: a skirt "swishes," a bat "cracks," a hasty eater "gulps" his food.
    - **Alliteration** is repetition of initial consonants: "the soft surge of the sea."
    - **Consonance** is repetition of consonants sounds anywhere in the words: "The sight of the ap*pl*e and ma*pl*e trees *pl*eased the peo*pl*e."
    - **Rhyme** is the repetition of a stressed sound, usually the final syllable: "His *aim* was to bl*ame* the d*ame*."
    - **Assonance** is repetition of vowel sounds in a phrase: The *ow*l swept *ou*t of the woods and circled the h*ou*se."
    - **Rhythm** is the recurring flow of strong and weak beats in a phrase: "Chicka, chicka, boom, boom! Will there be enough room?" **Meter** is the regular rhythmic pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables found in a line of poetry. The less regular rhythm sometimes found in prose is often called **cadence**.
- **Puns** and other **plays on words** add interest and humor: "By the time the milking was finished, the new farmhand was thoroughly cowed." Puns are said to be "the lowest form of wit," but people usually enjoy them even as they groan.
- **Hyperbole** is exaggeration: "He was frightened out of his wits." **Understatement** is the opposite: "He was upset when he learned he had AIDS."
- **Allusion** is an indirect reference to something outside the current literary work: "He was a veritable Hercules." The reference may be to something in literature, history, modern culture, or another area. Allusion is often difficult for children to recognize because they lack the necessary background knowledge. The proponents of "cultural literacy" believe that all children should acquire a common fund of knowledge in order to understand allusions.
- A **symbol** is something--a person, object, situation, or action--which operates on two levels, the literal and the symbolic. For instance, an engagement ring is a real object, but it is also stands for the abiding love of the engaged couple. Symbols add depth and meaning to a story. Symbols may be universal (as the engagement ring) or specific to a particular story.

Qualities which should be avoided in style include **triteness** (dull, stale, overused expressions), **condescension** (talking down to children, making them feel unintelligent or immature), didacticism, sensationalism, and sentimentality. In poetry, avoid a too regular meter which can become a sing-song rhythm.

Point of View

Point of view depends upon who the narrator is and how much he or she knows.

Point of view may be:

- **First person** - uses "I" - A *character is telling* the story.
- **Second person** - uses "you" - The *author speaks directly to the reader*. Second person is seldom used; it is found most often in nonfiction today.
- **Third person** - uses "he," "she," or "it" - The *author is telling about* the characters. There are three third person points of view:
    - **Limited omniscient** - We are told the thoughts and feelings of only one character (sometimes, but very seldom, of two or three characters).
    - **Omniscient** - We are told everything about the story, including the thoughts and feelings of all the characters, and even information in the author's mind which no character knows.
    - **Dramatic** or **objective** - We are told only *what happens* and *what is said*; we do not know any thoughts or feelings of the characters. It is called "dramatic" because it includes the words and actions, just what you would see and hear if it were in a play or film.

Tone

Tone is the author's attitude toward what he or she writes, but it may be easier to understand if you think of it as the attitude that you (the reader) get from the author's words. It is the hardest literary element to discuss; often we can recognize it but not put it into words. The easiest tone to recognize is humor. In describing tone, use adjectives: humorous, mysterious, creepy, straight-forward, matter-of-fact, exciting, boring, etc.