Introduction to English Literary Studies
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Introduction

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Welcome to Introduction to English Literary Studies. This is the third edition of a book that began as Selves and Others: Exploring Language and Identity. The first edition was published in 1999 and the second edition, which was called Selves and Others: Language, Literature, and Identity, was published in 2006. The book has always been designed to accompany and guide students as they navigate their way through first-level courses in English literary study.

This is not a literary text, but a companion to your studies in English Literature. If you are registered for a university course in English, you should begin by reading your prescribed literary works, whatever they are. The texts that are quoted in Introduction to English Literary Studies may not be the same as the texts you will need to study for your English courses at university. The principles and practices we are teaching you in this book, though, apply to any literary text you read for study purposes. In this book we explain basic and general approaches to the study, interpretation and analysis of literature.

You should, therefore, not feel that you have to read or study this book from cover to cover. Rather, you should use it when you need to. When you are deciding on a good time to explore this book, you may find it helpful to remember that it contains a chapter on each of the literary genres: poetry, fiction and drama. So, when you are studying poetry, you will find the chapter on poetry useful; and when you study either of the other two genres, you will want to explore the relevant chapter.

Each chapter contains several short texts and extracts from longer texts in order to illustrate the points we make about close reading and analysis of literature. Read the short texts carefully, but note that you do not have to read all the longer texts. The extracts contain enough material to illustrate the skills we want you to acquire.

Literary study is not primarily a process of learning or memorising facts about literature; rather, it involves developing mental skills and habits that will enable you to write intelligently about the texts you read. It is more a skill than a body of knowledge, although there are some facts and terms that will help you considerably when you read. In order to develop the required skills, it is important that you should complete the exercises we have included in each chapter. The exercises are designed to lead you through the process of close reading of literary texts. Write your answers in a journal (buy an ordinary black hardcover exercise book for this purpose). Once you have completed them, you will have produced a considerable body of your own writing as you practise the skills of critical analysis. The exercises will also help you to build up confidence in your ability to express your own views about literature. This will stand you in good stead when you need to write essays arguing for your own interpretation of certain
STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into four chapters, as follows:

Chapter One is an introduction to reading, writing and the self. In this chapter we explore the usefulness of reading and writing in general, and literary reading and writing in particular. We examine the role of the self, or personal identity, in reading and writing. At first glance, it may seem that there is no relationship between the self and the activities of reading and writing. But, because there is always a person (you!) who is doing the reading or writing, your sense of who you are, your identity, is intimately involved in these activities. You respond to the literary texts you read in your own particular way, and you write about them in your own voice. For this reason, we have included a chapter outlining how you can position yourself in relation to the material you are reading and writing.

Chapter Two explores poetry. We provide several poems from *Seasons Come to Pass*, an anthology published by Oxford University Press, for you to explore and analyse. We teach you some of the key concepts and terms involved in reading poetry closely and with attention as we help you work towards a coherent interpretation of the poems. This chapter guides you, step by step, through the process of critically analysing poetry and will be helpful for the study of poetry at all levels.

Chapter Three focuses on the genre of prose fiction. This is an enormous field: people have been writing narratives in prose for more than four centuries, and it remains the most popular genre in bookshops and amongst readers. We cannot hope to do justice to this vast body of writing, so we focus on some of the common features of prose narratives, such as plot, character, setting and theme. Each of these could form the basis for an entire book. As you work through the material in this chapter, be alert to ideas, facts and pointers that you can use in your reading of other novels and short stories.

Chapter Four investigates drama: this is the genre we meet when we read or watch plays, TV programmes and films. These texts share the element of performance: they come alive when they are acted on a stage or on a screen. For this reason, we do not always think of them as being texts on a page, and yet, like poetry or fiction, they begin as written words. This chapter explores what makes drama unique: its use of the stage, the development of the action, the use of dialogue, character, and other features.

As we mention above, this book is interactive. That means you are supposed to respond to it, not merely to absorb everything we tell you. Like a drama, it will only come to life if you are actively involved in your own learning. Read the texts, then write about them; read our interpretations and try to develop your own. In that way you will gain the most benefit from your reading of *Introduction to English Literary Studies*. 

works.
CHAPTER ONE

Reading, writing, and the self
INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins a conversation about reading and writing about written or literary texts which continues throughout the rest of the book. It discusses ideas about reading, why reading is important, and ways to read effectively for study purposes. It also demonstrates skills for writing about literature by exploring how to create effective essays. In addition, this chapter investigates the idea of the self as it relates to the activity of reading and writing, since reading is a procedure normally undertaken alone, and is important to individuals for the purposes of work, study, and pleasure, just as writing also emerges from individual consciousness. Writing, too, is often crucial for success in studies, professions and careers, and perhaps, at times, even in relationships.

READING

In a book about literature and writers, the eminent scholar Harold Bloom writes that his thoughts are partly based on the ‘clarity that comes from a life lived with and through the great works of the Western canon’ (Bloom, 2011:6). He presents detailed explanations of the importance of reading to him, arguing for the way acclaimed writers such as William Shakespeare, for example, have shaped human understanding by presenting situations, characters, and ideas in their works that resonate with, and sometimes even seem to explain, so many experiences that real individuals undergo in their own lives. Harold Bloom also shows that literary texts all inevitably exist in relationship to other works; no book, no poem, no play or script can escape the influence of what has been written before or alongside it.

Bloom’s thoughts about literature raise interesting ideas for the act of reading. If literature can help to explain life to people, or even to bring insight to situations at times, then perhaps reading is itself an act of great value and significance in the world. Often, people express negativity towards reading in a world so full of competing attractions, like movies, television, video gaming, social networking and the Internet. At times, reading is rejected as ‘un-cool’ or simply uninteresting, whereas many people also notice and worry about the absence of ‘a reading culture’ in various societies, including at times in South Africa.

TIME TO WRITE

The Nobel Prize in Literature 2011 was awarded to Tomas Tranströmer ‘because, through his condensed, translucent images, he gives us fresh access to reality’ (www.nobelprize.org).

Does writing help to give us ‘fresh access to reality”? How? Write a sentence or two to express your response to this idea.

Reading and empathy

Steven Pinker researches the field of language and cognition. In an extensive study of the history of violence in human cultures over the last several centuries, he writes that:
The human capacity for compassion is not a reflex that is triggered automatically by the presence of another living thing. ... though people in all cultures can react sympathetically to kin, friends, and babies, they tend to hold back when it comes to larger circles of neighbours, strangers, foreigners, and other sentient beings. In his book *The Expanding Circle*, the philosopher Peter Singer has argued that over the course of history, people have enlarged the range of beings whose interests they value as they value their own. An interesting question is what inflated the empathy circle. And a good candidate is the expansion of literacy.

Reading is a technology for perspective-taking. When someone else’s thoughts are in your head, you are observing the world from that person's vantage point. Not only are you taking in sights and sounds that you could not experience firsthand, but you have stepped inside that person’s mind and are temporarily sharing his or her attitudes and reactions. As we shall see, 'empathy' in the sense of adopting someone else’s viewpoint is not the same as ‘empathy' in the sense of feeling compassion towards the person, but the first can lead to the second by a natural route. Stepping into someone else’s vantage point reminds you that the other person has a first-person, present-tense, on-going stream of consciousness that is very much like your own but not the same as your own. It's not a big leap to suppose that the habit of reading other people’s words could put one in the habit of entering other people's minds, including their pleasures and pains. Slipping even for a moment into the perspective of someone who is turning black in a pillory or desperately pushing burning faggots away from their body or convulsing under the two hundredth stroke of the lash may give a person second thoughts as to whether these cruelties should ever be visited upon anyone.

... Realistic fiction, for its part, may expand readers’ circle of empathy by seducing them into thinking and feeling like people very different from themselves. Literature students are taught that the 18th century was a turning point in the history of the novel. It became a form of mass entertainment ... . And unlike earlier epics which recounted the exploits of heroes, aristocrats, or saints, the novels brought to life the aspirations and losses of ordinary people.

... The ordering of events is in the right direction: technological advances in publishing, the mass production of books, the expansion of literacy, and the popularity of the novel all preceded the major humanitarian reforms of the eighteenth century ... . Whether or not novels in general, or epistolary novels in particular, were the critical genre in expanding empathy, the explosion of reading may have contributed to the Humanitarian Revolution by getting people into the habit of straying away from their parochial vantage points. And it may have contributed in a second way: by creating a hothouse for new ideas about moral values and the social order. (Pinker, 2011: 175–7)

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**TIME TO THINK**

- What is a vantage point? How can reading change a reader’s vantage point? Consider what Pinker is claiming about compassion, empathy, perspective, and cruelty.
- What do you think about the idea that, "It's not a big leap to suppose that the habit of reading other people's words could put one in the habit of entering other people's minds, including their pleasures and pains"? Write a paragraph (400 words) in which you respond to this claim.
- Why is it interesting that literature changed its focus and 'novels brought to life the aspirations and losses of ordinary people'?
- Think about the idea of a humanitarian revolution. How can reading change society or influence politics? Write a paragraph (200 words) to capture your own ideas on this point.

**Experiences of reading**

The importance of reading is promoted by many people, including literacy advocates such as
the South African writer, Zukiswa Wanner, who is a co-founder of the organisation ReadSA. This organisation promotes literacy and encourages South Africans to read by raising awareness of local writing. She has said (www.geosireads.wordpress.com), ‘ReadSA was founded on the premise that when South Africans are aware of books, they will in fact read. And I believe this. While book-buying is still not that great, reading culture has certainly improved from when my first book came out. But there is definitely room for improvement and this is where we come in’.

The following extract is from an online interview she had with Emmanuel Sigauke (www.vasigauke.blogspot.com).

**Brief Interview with Zukiswa Wanner**

**1. You recently announced that you ran out of books to read, that’s really nice to hear. Approximately how many did you read?**

I average about two books a week, more if there is less writing work coming in. [...] There are those who say I need a life beyond books. I say there is no life beyond books. Perhaps after, but not beyond.

**2. What kinds of books do you like to read? Do you choose books by certain authors at specific times or do you read what’s available?**

I do NOT read so-called self-help books. Everything else is game. I am a particular fan of all sorts of fiction and in non-fiction, I love biographies.

**3. Do you read as a writer or just as a reader enjoying (or not enjoying) the books you are reading?**

Both I suppose. I can't divorce one from the other. I find myself admiring the prose of other writers and wishing I could write like them, as well as criticising any editorial or literary mistakes that I may encounter, but as a reader I have an obsession with finishing every book I start reading, no matter what my reservations may be about it when I start reading, because I always think that’s the best way to judge the book fairly. I must say in this regard that I have read many books that have brilliant plots but lousy editing and vice-versa.

**4. What's your balance of books [you have] read, more classics or more contemporaries?**

I am a firm believer in celebrating the living so I tend to read more contemporary stuff, and read classics only when my contemporary books are done.

**5. What is the effect of reading on your own writing? Does it sometimes get in the way of your writing?**

I try not to let my reading get in the way of my writing but alas, every now and again it does. I find it easier to excuse my not writing when I am reading a book than at any other time. On the other hand, I would not have it any other way as I always learn something new from reading – whether I find myself appreciating the book I have just finished reading or not. Forget PhD in Literature or any such thing. The greatest way to improve your writing, in my opinion, is through exposing oneself to as much literature as possible so one can decide what to do/not to do and find their own voice, stylistically.
When reading is popular

Reading can open vistas of thought. Stories seem to bring ideas to life; they give shape to experiences and communicate visions of reality, or insights into characters and situations. Popular books may catch the interest of large numbers of people at a given time, in many societies across the world, and have done so for many years. For instance, *The Hunger Games*, a book written in America for young adults, is an example of one such text which recently achieved global fame as both a book and a movie.

It captures matters of interest in current society, weaving traditional *tropes* from ancient Greece together with historical themes and elements from modern TV reality shows and *post-apocalyptic fiction*. It depicts oppression and violence and touches on current global social and political stresses, including poverty, power, and hunger, while exploring moral challenges, love, and courage. In doing this, the novel seems to strike a chord with young adult readers, but also with older readers.

One of the novel’s appeals for readers is that it mixes strange and sinister events into a story that also expresses some of the typical tensions associated with teen relationships, as shown in the following passage:

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**The Hunger Games**

*Suzanne Collins*

IT DIDN'T OCCUR to me until the next morning that the boy might have burned the bread on purpose. Might have dropped the loaves into the flames, knowing it meant being punished, and then delivered them to me. But I dismissed this. It must have been an accident. Why would he have done it? He didn't even know me. Still, just throwing me the bread was an enormous kindness that
would have surely resulted in a beating if discovered. I couldn't explain his actions.

We ate slices of bread for breakfast and headed to school. It was as if spring had come overnight. Warm, sweet air. Fluffy clouds. At school, I passed the boy in the hall, his cheek had swelled up and his eye had blackened. He was with his friends and didn't acknowledge me in any way. But as I collected Prim and started for home that afternoon, I found him staring at me from across the school yard. Our eyes met for only a second, then he turned his head away. I dropped my gaze, embarrassed, and that's when I saw it. The first dandelion of the year. A bell went off in my head. I thought of the hours spent in the woods with my father and I knew how we were going to survive.

To this day, I can never shake the connection between this boy Peeta Mellark, and the bread that gave me hope, and the dandelion that reminded me that I was not doomed. And more than once, I have turned in the school hallway and caught his eyes trained on me, only to quickly flit away. I feel like I owe him something, and I hate owing people. Maybe if I had thanked him at some point, I'd be feeling less conflicted now. I thought about it a couple of times, but the opportunity never seemed to present itself. And now it never will. Because we're going to be thrown into an arena to fight to the death. Exactly how am I supposed to work in a thank-you in there? Somehow it just won't seem sincere if I'm trying to slit his throat.

The mayor finishes the dreary Treaty of Treason and motions for Peeta and me to shake hands. His are as solid and warm as those loaves of bread. Peeta looks me right in the eye and gives my hand what I think is meant to be a reassuring squeeze. Maybe it's just a nervous spasm.

We turn to face the crowd as the anthem of Panem plays.

_Oh well, I think. There will be twenty-four of us. Odds are someone else will kill him before I do._

Of course, the odds have not been very dependable of late.

(Collins, 2008:31–33)

This is an unsettling passage that leaves the reader with questions and a sense of unease about the world the characters are in and their relationship with each other. Reading it, you will most likely look for understanding in what is said by the narrator, who narrates the events through her eyes and from her point of view. What the reader sees and understands about events is what she sees and understands, and the novel is crafted in first-person narrative style.

In first-person narrative, events are described through the experience and words of a character who uses the personal pronoun ‘I’ and the reader gets to see the observations and thoughts of that character. The reader does not get to see, ‘from the inside’, the ideas or perceptions of other characters.

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**Reading for pleasure or study**

The extract from _The Hunger Games_ can, of course, be read for many different purposes. Reading the novel for personal pleasure and entertainment is one purpose. Another is to read it for study purposes, or perhaps to review and evaluate it for the purpose of a formal, critical
Reading the extract simply for pleasure might be a different experience than reading it for study purposes. Reading experiences generally differ depending on their purpose. For example, it is possible that reading the passage from *The Hunger Games* for entertainment primarily might be a more relaxed, slightly idiosyncratic or swifter process than reading it formally might be.

- If you read the passage for pleasure, what would you be doing? What would strike you as interesting? What is the core impression the passage makes on you?
- Would you read every word, or perhaps skip some of them? Would you wonder what is happening in the extract? Would you look for names, information, or images?
- What might be confusing?

When we read a novel for interest and recreation, we may have personal reading habits such as skimming and even skipping passages, or sometimes names; we may read faster in order to capture the events sooner, or we may even read ahead and then go back if we want to find out ‘what happens’ or predict a plot or character development.

Since tastes in literature differ widely, some people may feel that they read ‘for plot’ while others read ‘for character,’ and novels are crafted in various ways, for target markets, in different genres, for varying purposes, and by uniquely differing authors. What this means for reading for pleasure, often, is that individuals read according to their own tastes and habits.

**Effective reading for study purposes**

Effective reading for study and academic purposes follows specific strategies, since readers often rely on methods which have worked for them on previous occasions or which they have been directly taught. Reading habits evolve for each person over time, and individuals tend to develop their own ‘toolbox’ of skills and beliefs about how to tackle texts. While these strategies can be expressed in many different ways, and you may have already encountered specific strategies or may encounter some in future, let’s examine a few core skills for effective reading for study purposes.

**Reading literature**

Literary texts do not primarily convey knowledge or information about a topic, but are creative works crafted by writers using specific imaginative and discursive techniques. These techniques are the ways in which fiction writers use words (for example, they use characterisation, various narrative styles, imagery, and dialogue) to communicate the story they create and tell within a literary text.

Reading a scientific text and reading a literary text are different experiences; after all, literature does not describe and make claims about data, and so we do not read it to discover facts and objective arguments about the world. Reading literature may be more about imagination than about finding facts and truths, as suggested by the critic Brigid Lowe, who writes that, ‘Imagining the heat of the sun on your back is about as different an activity as can be from believing that tomorrow will be sunny. One experience is all but sensual, the other wholly abstract. When we tell a story, although we may hope to teach a lesson, our primary
objective is to produce an imaginative experience’ (Wood, 2009:179). Literature offers people, places, events, emotions, and ideas for readers to believe in, though the existence of all of these is only in the imagination of both writer and reader. Therefore, reading strategies for literature focus on skills for responding to these specific techniques and conventions. Chapters two, three, and four of this book will explore the skills of reading poetry, novels, and drama in greater depth. You will learn more, in those chapters, about how to apply and polish your knowledge of how to read literature.

### Core skills for reading literature

Notice that these are some core skills for reading literature that readers use when studying:

- **Establish why you are reading.** Often, works of literature are selected for study because they illustrate concepts that are relevant to a specific course. Making yourself aware of the course's key concerns will help you to read your prescribed literature purposefully. Similarly, assignments often require literature students to read a particular portion of a text with close attention to detail. A purpose might be to prepare for an essay assignment, so taking careful note of the essay topic before reading will also be helpful. Be aware of the purpose in this case. Often, you will be asked to relate a smaller section of a text to larger concerns or to the text as a whole; you can read purposefully for information that will help to fulfill this task.

- **Survey the text.** Note the writer; when and where the text was written, consider the title and its possible significances, and observe what the genre is. Genre refers to the type of writing, so noting if the text is poetry, drama, or a novel, for instance, will help you to establish expectations and some knowledge about it. Notice the ‘voice’ too; establish what narrative perspective is being used. (You will find out more about narrative perspective in chapter three.)

- **Consider what you already know.** Bring to mind any knowledge you have about the writer, the setting, the type of text, and the themes of the course.

- **Read the text.** As you read, take note of words that are unfamiliar to you or words that are used in specific ways. Be ready to look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary, or to find out more about a word's possible further meanings and connotations in a dictionary, even if you already know its meaning. Go deeper. Observe who is telling the story; note the events which occur in the story and think about their significance to the overall plot and concerns; pay attention to the place and setting.

- **Break the text into chunks.** Texts are crafted in various ways depending on their genre. Each genre has different forms and conventions. Note the way the writer has created the text, such as in stanzas, verses, chapters, paragraphs, acts, and scenes, according to genre. Take time to look closely at each section; read it in detail. Go deeper, too, by paying close attention to some (but probably not all) specific words and phrases. Notice the parts that make up the whole.

- **Read the text again.** It is important to read shorter texts and complex portions of longer texts more than once. Also, aim to reread by skimming (or reading quickly) through novels and plays before writing assignments and examinations.

- **Consider and observe.** In reading literary texts, readers look for connections between elements in the text and, often, elements outside the specific text which nevertheless connect with it. Readers observe the relationship between events, characters, and images, for instance; they also observe the connection between the text and wider contexts, such as the text’s relationship to other texts, to philosophical, psychological, political, sociological, biographical, or other concerns.

- **Summarise the key ideas.** Expressing in your own words the core ideas in what you have read and studied is a key skill, useful in preparing for examinations and assignments. Write about the text, speak about it, think about it; share ideas and your reactions with someone else who has read it, or explain what it is about, what is interesting in it, and if you enjoyed reading it, to someone who has not read the text themselves.

At times, readers might feel anxious about reading. Many, varied causes can contribute to this. An effect of this anxiety is that readers avoid reading, or they might merely scan and skim a
text, or even choose to memorise ideas about it from notes and guides, rather than engaging with the text itself. Avoidance and memorisation are not effective, but following the strategies described here can be effective when facing the need to read for study purposes.

Expert readers will follow similar practices. They will, ‘read, reread, describe, evaluate, appreciate: that is the art of literary criticism for the present time’ (Bloom, 2011:24).

- What strategies do you already use when you read literary texts?
- How can a systematic approach to reading strengthen your skills?

Now, test the skills for active reading discussed here by applying them to the passage on pages 7 and 8 from *The Hunger Games*.

Perhaps this book captures some readers’ interest because it brings to mind a sense that teens need to conform to inescapable and imposed demands which are brutal and unjust in the novel’s world. Stories generally build around a plot line in which protagonists must face obstacles (situational or relational) that get in their way and prevent them from achieving a desired goal. Overcoming these obstacles provides the texture and interest of the story.

**TIME TO THINK**

In the extract, which elements suggest what the obstacles might be in this story? Apply the skills discussed earlier as you consider this question. That is, establish your purpose for reading the extract; survey it and look for points of interest to you; consider background knowledge that might be helpful; and read it carefully. How would you chunk or break it up for closer study? After reading it again, what do you observe when you look for connections? Finally, write a summary of what you noted when you read and studied the passage.

**WRITING**

A core focus of this book is on sharing skills for reading deeply and effectively in a variety of literary genres (poetry, fiction, and drama). However, understanding and analysing literature is the bedrock for then writing about it too.

Writing has many purposes, and is shaped by varying conventions and expectations. When writing about literature, specific conventions and strategies can be used to create effective expressions of understanding and thought.

**Putting words to paper**

Read the following extract from the work of Jacques Barzun:

“... You want to be a writer, or let us rather say: you want to write. Or, again, you do not want to write but are required to. In any of these cases you face Difficulty. The trouble is not ‘to learn to write,’ because you already know how to form letters and words and you have written prose for years. But you probably need to write better, or would like to – with less pain each time and with fewer faults and errors. Writing always presents problems, dilemmas, some of which beset all writers, even great ones; but there is no need to be baffled by all the difficulties every time you write. The effort ... is to learn the usual pitfalls and how they are avoided, while also learning the devices – tricks of the trade – by which writing can be both improved and made easier than it seems to most people. (Barzun, 2001:3)
Analytical thinking and writing aims to understand something by examining its parts separately and logically. Expository writing aims to explain an idea in a clear, fairly formal way, using details to substantiate and illustrate what is expressed.

What are the key ideas this writer expresses? What is difficult about writing? Consider your own experiences. Are there specific aspects of writing that you find problematic? What aspects do you find enjoyable or know you have mastered?

Writing for literature courses usually requires either an analytical or, broadly speaking, expository approach in which the writer makes, explains, and supports a claim in regard to a literary text or issue. In doing this, the writer is often also required to take a stand or argue for a view. This kind of arguing is all about offering good reasons for an interpretation or an opinion about a text; ideas are supported, and not just stated.

Literary analysis is a traditional feature of writing about literature. Analysis is a form of thinking that seeks to understand and show why and how something is as it is, or how it connects with other facts and ideas. It is a step we take in forming an interpretation. This might mean, for literary studies, that analytic thinking about a text will investigate how it is written (for example its genre, form, narrative style, images, characterisation, and similar aspects).

Analytic thinking will also seek to go beneath the surface; it goes deeper by seeking to understand the parts or elements of a specific text (such as the images and rhythm in a poem, or the irony in a play, or the effect of a specific style within a narrative). It also sometimes aims to understand the relationship of the text to other texts and ideas.

Expository approaches aim to explain (or to ‘expose’ to view). Often, writing about literature will explain an interpretation, claim, or position. Such writing requires analysis of the text before writing and gives you the opportunity to show what you have learned from your analysis by applying knowledge of the text in your essay. An essay might explain what you have understood about a text after you have spent time analysing and thinking deeply about it, often in response to a claim or question about the text.

Writing in literature courses, for example, might explain why a statement or view about a book is true, or why it is false, or maybe only partly true. It might explain how part of a text expresses crucial ideas about the text as a whole, or it might require the writer to explain a character’s motivation, or themes in a text, or the significance of an event or speech, perhaps. These are only some of the tasks that an essay might fulfil. A key point, though, is that the expository approach to writing is founded on showing what, why, and how.

This means that, as you approach writing a literary essay, it is helpful to bear these question words in mind: what, why, and how. They are useful in developing an interpretation of a text, as you will see in the later chapters of this book. They are also useful in deciding what you want to say when you write about a text.

**Writing essays**

Since the key purpose of university essays is to test a student’s knowledge, it is important to remember this purpose. However, an essay is a tool to show both what you know about the
Building content
Since an essay has these dual purposes, it is helpful to develop an approach or strategy which bears this in mind. Essential steps for developing the content of an essay include:

- **Write an introduction and a thesis sentence.** Effective introductions show the reader what the writer intends to say; an introduction is important as it gives direction and focus to writing by showing what the essay is about. Equally, it is important to capture the main thought of your essay in a thesis sentence. Often, writers will choose to place this at either the beginning or end of the introductory paragraph, rather than in the middle, since these are powerful positions that readers instinctively pay attention to. A thesis sentence expresses the main idea of the essay, or the main claim. It shows the direction the essay will take by expressing the position the writer is taking on an issue, and shows why the writer is taking it and what key supporting ideas will be used to explain and sustain this main idea. It also makes a point that is discussible, or which is not simply self-evident. For example, a self-evident statement might be: ‘Macbeth is a play about murder’. An issue or point of discussion might be: ‘Macbeth is a play about an honourable man who changes disastrously under the influence of a toxic relationship’. Here, the statement expresses a claim that the essay can develop; it does not simply point to a plot element.

- **Organise your ideas, using paragraphs to build the sequence of thoughts logically.** Since a thesis sentence gives direction to your essay, a simple and effective way to organise ideas is to pick up the supporting ideas in your thesis, developing paragraphs on each point. Also, the first sentence of each paragraph should express the topic of the paragraph. Further sentences in the paragraph will support, explain, and build on that sentence. Organising is important since it allows you to decide what to say, where to say it, and how important it is in making your point.

- **Create transitions and links between ideas.** To help your reader see the flow of your argument or follow your explanation, it is effective to use words such as ‘therefore’, ‘however’, and ‘similarly’, or phrases such as ‘in addition’, and ‘on the other hand’. These signal connections or can change focus to allow you to introduce a new perspective. They are useful within paragraphs, to build a flow of ideas, and between paragraphs to create a sustained expression of thought and a strong argument.

- **Write about the text, and do not re-tell the story.** The aim of literature essays is to discuss ideas, interpretations and insights, but not to describe the plot in minute detail. Show the reader what the text is about, why things happen or are said, but do not recount each plot...
development. Recounting the plot is a summary. Discussing ideas is essential in an essay.

- **Support your ideas.** Literature essays are strongest when the writer supports their ideas with references to the literary text. It is important to quote from the text, as well as to refer to incidents, characters, expressions and ideas in the text to give support to claims you make in a literature essay. Since interpretation is a key element of writing about literature, evidence from the text is needed to show that any interpretation is sound and reasonable.

- **Acknowledge ideas.** Academic honesty is important, and this means that ideas used from sources such as books or Internet sites need to be acknowledged. Following citation rules is essential.

- **Conclude the essay with a paragraph that recalls the main ideas.** Avoid repeating your thesis sentence in exactly the same words used in the introduction, but round off by mentioning the core ideas again.

- **Revise and review your writing.** Writing is a process of thinking, attempting, revising, and polishing. Few people express their ideas perfectly the first time they try to write on a topic. This means it is important to revise your draft essay at least once, or even more, looking continually at how you have said something to see if it does in fact express what you intended.

Making words work

Important steps for polishing how you express your thoughts in a literature essay include:

- **Use the present tense to write about literature.** This is sometimes called the literary present tense and refers to an important convention in literary studies. When we describe what occurs in real life, or in history, we often use the past tense, but when referring to people or events in a literary text we use the present tense – e.g. ‘Macbeth feels resentment and kills Banquo’.

- **Aim for a more formal tone of language by avoiding contractions, jargon, and slang.** For example, avoid ‘don’t’ and rather use ‘do not’; avoid ‘u’ and ‘ok’ or similar, informal expressions. Academic writing is objective, not subjective, as it aims to express ideas or facts that can be supported by evidence, and not just by feelings and unreasoned opinions.

- **Use language carefully.** Aim to write well-structured, clear, complete sentences without spelling errors, and with correct punctuation.

- **Cite sources correctly,** using inverted commas when you quote and following the correct citation form; for example: (Bloom, 2011:12).

- **Avoid broad and generalised claims,** for example about historical periods that relate to a text, or about moral, philosophical, or political issues. The focus of the essay should be quite specific; it is about the topic, your response to the topic, and evidence from the text that supports your points.

From reading to writing
Cyberjargon is the language used in relation to computers ('cyber-'), usually in the context of social networking and gaming, to express ideas swiftly in these contexts or to describe unique features of computers or their use.

Earlier in the chapter, we showed how reading strategies could help to enrich the process of reading. The information and ideas gleaned in this way have been used in the following example to illustrate an introductory paragraph and organisational outline for an essay. This essay puts into practice the steps for building content and expression discussed above.

**Introduction:** Adolescence is the site of oppression, but also of resistance, courage, and heroism in *The Hunger Games*. Although its world is hostile to adolescents and children, the novel expresses criticism of this world since the protagonist’s opposition to Panem’s brutal political system is expressed in her thoughts and actions, and her perspective reveals anger and confusion, but also hope.

**Body paragraph 1:** The hostility of the world is expressed in the enforced system of the Hunger Games. ... etc.

**Body paragraph 2:** Criticism is clearly evident in the protagonist’s thoughts, since she articulates her outrage and fear for the reader, although seldom voices her ideas out loud for fear of being killed. ... etc.

**Body paragraph 3:** Her actions build firmly towards opposing her oppressors by outwitting them... etc.

**Body paragraph 4:** Throughout, the perspective of the narrator is one of anger at the system, but she is also confused about her own feelings of attraction to two friends... etc.

**Body paragraph 5:** Despite grief and great suffering, optimism and the hope of escape drive the story... etc.

**Conclusion:** Panem’s world is hostile to adolescents and children, but *The Hunger Games* lays bare the cruelty and vulnerability of this system. The protagonist’s opposition is expressed in her thoughts and actions; she is angry, confused, but also a symbol of hope.

This outline provides a framework for an essay. It is incomplete, but notice how the ideas from the introduction are picked up in the body of the paper. Notice, too, how following an approach such as this offers a systematic and effective way to tackle questions for essay purposes.

**THE SELF**

This chapter has explored the importance of reading, a systematic way to read and study literature, and strategies for essay writing. In examining these concerns it has also focused on personal experiences of reading and suggested strategies for building your own skills in studying and writing about literature. Being aware of skills and strategies can be empowering for individual writers.

Beyond that, however, the individual – the self – is an important concept and construction, or figuration, in literature, just as it is in daily life and writing. We create at least part of our identities through our words. Our status updates on Facebook, our tweets on Twitter, our emails, presentations, reports, dissertations, poems, songs, letters, and conversations all offer the world versions of ourselves and our thoughts.

One such expression, **cyberjargon**, has developed both for technical and expressive purposes. Online gaming, for example, is a rich site of identity formation since gamers invent characters and identities for themselves and communication between players often follows unique conventions. As Mark Abley shows, in discussing the online game *World of Warcraft*, ‘it reflects a particular subculture; and over the centuries many subcultures have been fertile generators of words, ... But MMORPGS –
massively multiplayer online role-playing games, that is – rely on a global community that has set itself apart by means of written language. Without a shared lexicon that excludes outsiders, the pleasure of MMORPGS would be much depleted. Their copious vocabulary came to life on fingertips, not lips’ (Abley, 2009:169).

Language adapts to and reflects the inventiveness people bring to different aspects of their lives. It helps to express images and ideas about the self. Blogging is one of the forms in which individuals express their identities. Consider the following extract:

“... The explosion of blogs in the past few years tempts me to use the word ‘incredible’, a bombastic term I normally avoid. But consider: the word ‘blog’ – a shortened form of ‘web log’ – didn’t exist until 1997. Blogs enjoyed a steady increase over the next few years; in 2003, the tracing firm Technorati found about a million world-wide. Their growth became spectacular. By June 2007 the total number of blogs had surpassed 86 million, with about 175,000 new ones emerging every day. Small wonder that on Technorati’s homepage, a question appeared: ‘Is the blogosphere crushing you?’ English accounts for the largest number of blogs, Japanese is not far behind, and together Japanese and Chinese make up more than 40 per cent of the total. (Abley, 2009:180)

What point is the writer making? Why is he not surprised by the idea of ‘the blogosphere crushing you’? Is there an excessive amount of writing available on the Internet? What are your views about the many ways in which people can express their impressions and thoughts on sites such as blogs, social networking (e.g. Facebook, MySpace), and microblogs (e.g. Twitter)?

Blogging continues to grow in popularity among both bloggers and readers. This cultural phenomenon, however, brings into focus interesting questions about the relationship between fiction and life, since the easy access to publication that blogging rests on also offers opportunities for the creation of stories and identities that seem truthful, but are false.

In recent years, for instance, truth, fiction, and ethics came under scrutiny in the controversial case of the ‘Gay Girl in Damascus’ blog. Read the following article to learn more about it:

**Crossing the line: the case of ‘Amina’**

IN THE MIDDLE of 2011 journalists and activists were shocked to discover that a blog supposedly written by a gay woman living in Syria, which described life in Damascus amid the severe political turmoil the country was experiencing, was in fact a hoax.

The blog, ‘A Gay Girl in Damascus’, had a huge following and even major news organisations allegedly followed it for information about Syrian events. It claimed to be written by Amina Abdallah Arraf al-Omari, a Syrian-American lesbian living in the Syrian city Damascus, who went online to document her life and thoughts. She criticised the country’s controversial leader and wrote about uprisings against his repressive government.

‘What a time to be in Syria! What a time to be an Arab! What a time to be alive!’ she wrote on 24 March 2011. However, suspicions arose about the author. According to a posting on the blog, its author, Amina, had been arrested by Syrian security forces. Then she seemed to disappear, and frantic searches were launched by Syrian activists to find her. Outside Syria people also attempted to track down further information about who she was and her whereabouts.
But then the truth emerged. ‘Amina’ did not exist. She was not a gay Syrian woman blogging from a troubled, dangerous city in which speaking one’s mind was risky, and in a country where being gay was also fraught with risk.

‘Amina’ was a middle-aged, heterosexual, married, white American man studying for a postgraduate degree in Scotland. ‘She’ was Tom MacMaster.

Outrage spread across many parts of the world. News agencies were embarrassed; they had relied on an unverified source. Blogging and social media were crucial information sources during the Syrian conflict and many people had been following this blog, with some news organisations even interviewing the gay girl blogger.

Activists were furious. In Syria, they accused Tom MacMaster of trivialising their cause. In Lebanon, a blogger wrote, ‘One day if I’m kidnapped by my government, many readers won’t care because I could turn out to be another Amina.’

In the wake of the scandal, the actual writer published an ‘apology to readers’ in which he admitted to being the only author of the blog. He wanted, he said, to bring the struggles of people in the Middle East into view to ‘illuminate them for a western audience’.

And, he claimed, ‘While the narrative voice may have been fictional, the facts on this blog are true and not misleading as to the situation on the ground.’ He made Amina a gay woman to improve the quality of his creative writing, he said.

‘I do not believe that I have harmed anyone – I feel that I have created an important voice for issues that I feel strongly about.’

Others disagreed. ‘You took away my voice, Mr MacMaster, and the voices of many people who I know,’ retorted Daniel Nassar, an editor of the Gay Middle East blog.

Amid a whirl of claims that MacMaster’s fraud was part of a conspiracy by unknown sources to create propaganda in a volatile context, and claims that what he did was arrogant, colonialist, patriarchal and exploitative, fact and fiction emerged as key terms in a vehement debate.

It didn’t matter that he had lied, some said. What was wrong with drawing attention to a real situation in this way? After all, it worked. People listened to what ‘Amina’ said, and what she wrote about was important, a matter of life and death.

Others, like the person who tweeted on Twitter that, ‘There is no positive side effect of the Amina hoax. It did not bring attention to Syria. It brought attention to a white fantasy,’ were not convinced.


TIME TO WRITE

In literature, readers expect the fictionality of characters, but fact and fiction appear to have blurred in cyberspace when the blogger who created ‘Amina’ used fiction’s tools of characterisation to create a supposedly real person.

• What do you think might prompt someone to select specific characteristics for a false identity? Why did a false identity seem to give the writer more power to tell the story than his own identity gives him? Do you agree with his position?

• What do you think about this use of fiction to create a credible, but false, personality for a real political purpose; does it matter, or not, and why? Write a short paragraph (200 words) about this.

The writer of the blog said this about the fact that he used a stranger’s face, taken from a picture found on Facebook, to represent his fictional identity: ‘I had an idea of what my character should look like and one day I was flipping through something and I saw a picture of her and said “that is the face”. I didn't think anyone would notice’ (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-13747761).

• How do you respond to this comment? What issues come to mind? Write a short paragraph (200 words) to capture your own views on this.
Expressing personal views while writing about oneself is an ancient tradition. In fact, essays began in this way, as the expression of personal thoughts and views about the world. Unlike the academic essays required in university situations, personal reflective essays historically explored issues in the writers’ worlds, as ways to comment on life, much like blogging today. Personal essays and blogs can both be seen as a form of autobiography. Autobiography is a word derived from ancient Greek words, *autos*, *bios*, and *graphos*, and refers to ‘writing about the self’.

In the following extract from the end of Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, personal history provides a starting point for a reflection on South African society:

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**Long Walk to Freedom**  
*Nelson Mandela*

I WAS NOT born with a hunger to be free. I was born free – free in every way that I could know. Free to run in the fields near my mother’s hut, free to swim in the clear stream that ran through my village, free to roast mielies under the stars and ride the broad backs of slow-moving bulls. As long as they obeyed my father by the laws abided by the customs of my tribe, I was not troubled by the laws of man or God.

It was only when I began to learn that my boyhood freedom was an illusion, when I discovered as a young man that my freedom had already been taken from me, that I began to hunger for it. At first, as a student, I wanted freedom only for myself, the transitory freedoms of being able to stay out at night, read what I pleased and go where I chose. Later, as a young man in Johannesburg, I yearned for the basic and honourable freedoms of achieving my potential, of earning my keep, of marrying and having a family – the freedom not to be obstructed in a lawful life.

But then I slowly saw that not only was I not free, but my brothers and sisters were not free. I saw that it was not just my freedom that was curtailed, but the freedom of everyone who looked like I did. This is when I joined the African National Congress, and that is when the hunger for my own freedom became the greater hunger for the freedom of my people. It was this desire for the freedom of my people to live their lives with dignity and self-respect that animated my life, that transformed a frightened young man into a bold one, that drove a law-abiding attorney to become a criminal, that turned a family-loving husband into a man without a home, that forced a life-loving man to live like a monk. I am not more virtuous or self-sacrificing than the next man, but I found that I could not even enjoy the poor and limited freedoms I was allowed when I knew my people were not free. Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me.

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.

When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. Some say that has now been achieved. But I know that is not the case. The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of the journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my
walk is not yet ended.

(Mandela, 1995:750–751)

**TIME TO WRITE**

How does the meaning of ‘free’ change in the course of this passage, and how does it evolve from being a way to capture a sense of childhood and youth to expressing thoughts and insights about more than just ‘the self’?

Recalling that autobiography is the ‘writing of one’s self’, write a short paragraph in which you show how Mandela writes about himself in this passage. What other key images, apart from freedom, does he use to express what he wants to show the reader about his life, and how effective are they, in your opinion?

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**People, places, and story**

The character of people (both the protagonists and minor characters) in a text is crucial and often is expressed in the details that a writer uses to describe them. Likewise, characters often have specific habits and traits. Places are usually characterised too. Be alert, when you read, to the words that describe setting and place.

Stories, too, can be characterised since they are series of events. The plot of a drama or novel, for example, moves forward through things happening; events occur. These events have characterisation too, and can be described in ways that reveal their importance. The selection of images and details, and the tone of words, will often show, for example, the positive, negative, happy, ominous, strange, thrilling, and so on, character of an event.

Writers create versions of the self in writing in various forms, and in studying literature it is generally interesting, compelling characters in a text that engage the reader’s mind. It is also understanding the motives and personality of a character in a book, a play, a movie or television programme, that drives a reader or viewer’s interest, by capturing their sympathy, admiration, or revulsion, for example.
Writers know that novels, plays, and scripts will succeed, and will capture the interest and emotions of readers, when characters are well characterised. That means that the people in books will appear to be believable and psychologically interesting. Motives and reasons are what we read for, not just for what happens. The inner landscape of a character intrigues the reader, as well as the excitement of plot.

The narrative in the following extract from *The Tiger’s Wife*, an award-winning novel by Téa Obreht, is intense and strongly descriptive. Told through the perspective and memories of the young woman narrator, who recalls moments from her childhood in the former Yugoslavia before the Bosnian war of the 1990s, the text here shows how story is driven by the use of detail and characterisation. In it, people, places and events are characterised through details we see of each.

The novelist EM Forster famously wrote that a novel should ‘Show, not Tell!’ Bearing that
The Tiger’s Wife

Téa Obreht

THEN THERE IS the popcorn cart, the umbrella stand, a small kiosk with postcards and pictures. Down the stairs and past the aviary where the sharp-eared owls sleep, through the garden that runs the length of the citadel wall, framed with cages. Once there was a king here, a sultan, his Janissaries. Now the cannon windows facing the street hold blocked-off troughs filled with tepid water. The cage bars curve out, rusted orange. In his free hand, my grandfather is carrying the blue bag my grandma has prepared for us. In it: six-day old cabbage heads for the hippopotamus, carrots and celery for the sheep and deer and the bull moose, who is a kind of phenomenon. In his pocket, my grandfather has hidden some sugar cubes for the pony that pulls the park carriage. I will not remember this as sentimentality, but as greatness.

The tigers live in the outer moat of the fortress. We climb the castle stairs, past the waterbirds and the sweating windows of the monkey house, past the wolf growing his winter coat. We pass the bearded vultures and then the bears asleep all day, smelling of damp earth and the death of something. My grandfather picks me up and props my feet against the handrail so I can look down and see the tigers in the moat.

My grandfather never refers to the tiger’s wife by name. His arm is around me and my feet are on the handrail, and my grandfather might say, ‘I once knew a girl who loved tigers so much she almost became one herself.’ Because I am little, and my love of tigers comes directly from him, I believe he is talking about me, offering me a fairy tale in which I can imagine myself – and will, for years and years.

The cages face a courtyard, and we go down the stairs and walk slowly from cage to cage. There is a panther, too, ghost spots paling his oil-slick coat; a sleepy, bloated lion from Africa. But the tigers are awake and livid, bright with rancor. Stripe-lashed shoulders rolling, they flank one another up and down the narrow causeway of rock, and the smell of them is sour and warm and fills everything. It will stay with me the whole day, even after I have had a bath and gone to bed, and will return at random times: at school, or a friend’s birthday party, even years later, at the pathology lab, or on the drive home from Galina.

I remember this too: an altercation. A small group of people stand clustered around the tigers’ cage. Among them: a boy with a parrot-shaped balloon, a woman in a purple coat, and a bearded man who is wearing the brown uniform of a zookeeper. The man has a broom and a dustpan on a long handle, and he is sweeping the area between the cage and the outer railing. He walks up and down, sweeping up juice boxes and candy wrappers, bits of popcorn people have tried to throw at the tigers. The tigers walk up and down with him. The woman in purple is saying

Sultan is the term for a leader in some Muslim countries, such as the Turkish Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. The Janissaries were the famed soldiers who protected the Ottoman sultans from the late middle ages until the nineteenth century.

altercation
a strong argument or disagreement, usually full of

comment in mind, what does this extract show about the narrator, the place, and the event? Think about this as you read.
something and smiling, and he smiles back at her. She has brown hair. The dustpan keeper stops and leans against the handle of his broom, and as he does so, the big tiger sweeps by, rubbing against the bars of the cage, rumbling, and the keeper puts a hand through the bars and touches its flank. For a moment, nothing. And then pandemonium.

The tiger rounds on him and the woman shrieks, and suddenly the dustpan keeper’s shoulder is between the bars, and he is twisting, twisting his head away and trying to reach of the outer railing so he has something to hold on to. The tiger has the dustpan keeper’s arm the way a dog holds a large bone: upright between his paws, gnawing on the top. Two men who have been standing by with children jump over the railing and grab the dustpan keeper’s waist and flailing arm and try to pull him away. A third man jams his umbrella through the bars and pushes it over and over again into the tiger’s ribs. An outraged scream from the tiger and then it stands up on its hind legs and hugs the dustpan keeper’s arm and shakes its head from side to side, like it’s pulling on rope. Its ears are flattened, and it is making a noise like a locomotive. The dustpan keeper’s face is white, and this entire time he hasn’t made a sound.

(Obreht, 2011:1–3)

TIME TO WRITE

In the extract from *The Tiger’s Wife*, what details give the reader insight into the character, or the self, of the narrator? How does she see the world?

How do you respond to, ‘Once there was a king here, a sultan, his Janissaries. Now the cannon windows facing the street hold blocked-off troughs filled with tepid water’? What does this suggest about the place?

Why does she describe the smallest details of what her grandmother has packed in the bag?

Why does the narrator say, ‘I will not remember this as sentimentality, but as greatness’? What does this show about her grandfather, and about her view of him?

What does the narrator mean when she says that, ‘Because I am little, and my love of tigers comes directly from him, I believe he is talking about me, offering me a fairy tale in which I can imagine myself – and will, for years and years’? How might this belief be affected by, or perhaps contrast with, what happens to the dustpan keeper in the next few moments?

Descriptive writing makes use of the five senses: taste, sight, smell, touch, and sound. Which sensory details are used in these sentences, ‘There is a panther, too, ghost spots paling his oil-slick coat; a sleepy, bloated lion from Africa. But the tigers are awake and livid, bright with rancor. Stripe-lashed shoulders rolling, they flank one another up and down the narrow causeway of rock, and the smell of them is sour and warm and fills everything’? How do sensory details deepen the reader’s perception of this place, the animals, and the day described?

What details does the narrator offer about the ‘small group of people [who] stand clustered around the tigers’ cage’? What is the effect of including these details?

How do you respond to these words: ‘For a moment, nothing. And then pandemonium’? How is the narrator shaping our response and heightening the tension of the moment here?

‘An outraged scream from the tiger and then it stands up on its hind legs and hugs the dustpan keeper’s arm and shakes its head from side to side, like it’s pulling on rope.’ Can the narrator know that the tiger is ‘outraged’? Is this her interpretation of the animal? What does the image show about her reaction, too? What is the effect of the simile, ‘like it’s pulling on rope’?

How does the silence of the man who is attacked add to the scene and characterise it for the reader? What sound images are used, and what is the effect of the contrast between them?

The extract describes a visit to a zoo and an event that occurs during that visit. Is it simply about that event, though? The narrator selects several specific details from her memory to describe it, suggesting it is significant to her. What might the significance of this event be for the narrator? In one or two sentences, explain what this scene is about.
The self who observes and filters experience through their own perspective is fundamental to literature. Responding to literary texts is often, therefore, founded on paying close attention to the perspectives and perceptions of individual characters.

**Story-catching**

The following discussion suggests that the process of creating stories is fundamental to being human. The writer proposes, elsewhere in her work, that story-catching, the recall and writing of personal narratives and reflections based on the events and perceptions of an individual’s life, is an important process and skill in any human culture:

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And what a world we have created through language and consciousness – songs and stories, art and culture, myths and traditions and religions, astounding bodies of knowledge, theories about the nature of the entire universe, science and philosophy, and promises about what we might become. . .

There are many tools we humans have developed for molding and influencing our journey on the earth, many technologies and social experiments: story is the oldest and most consistent survivor of all these tools. Story is the mother of us all, for we become who we say we are.

Individually, we first put our lives into language, and then we act upon what we have said and how we have defined ourselves. Our stories about ourselves become the basis for our identity and the way we hold each other accountable for our individual actions. A man who proclaims himself ‘a good father’ should not be beating his children.

Collectively, the community, tribe, or nation first creates a mythic self-image and then acts to fulfil this declaration of place and promise in the world. A nation that declares peaceful intent should not be running over borders with an army.

When story and behaviour are consistent, we relax; when story and behaviour are inconsistent, we get tense. We have a deep psychological desire for our stories and behaviours to be consistent. We need to be able to trust the story, because it’s the lens through which we see reality. We will go to great lengths in the attempt to make a story that explains an action and supports or restores consistency. If we cannot make story and action fit, we either have to make a new story or change the action. Eventually, the good man either has to change his story of self-proclaimed goodness or stop beating his children; eventually the peace-loving nation either has to admit what it’s up to or stop invading other countries. (Baldwin, 2005:78–79)
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This view of story-making is interesting both for creative writing and for studying literature. It points to the idea that language is a tool. It is a tool both for creativity and for analysis.
TIME TO WRITE

- Write a paragraph (about 200 words) to respond to the idea that ‘Our stories about ourselves become the basis for our identity and the way we hold each other accountable for our individual actions’. Do you think this is correct?
- Do events change the way people define themselves? Consider an example from your own experience, or imagine a situation where this might occur. Write a paragraph (200 words) to describe this change. Think about books or movies you have enjoyed. What events may have caused dramatic changes in the way a character understands themselves in one of those movies or books? Describe this change and its causes in another short paragraph (200 words).
- Harold Bloom, the academic we mentioned at the start of this chapter, has suggested about Shakespeare that the characters he creates are often ways in which human beings understand themselves, others, and emotions. Are there characters in the books you have studied in the past, or may be studying now as part of your literature course, that you see as giving insight into your own life and experience? Can fictional characters explain life to us? Are there any characters who do that, for you? Reflect on these questions and write a short response (300 words).

CONCLUSION

Reading, writing, and some of the ways that language relates to the individual have been the focus of this chapter. We have looked at the importance of these three concepts as they relate to the process of studying literature. Literacy and reading are key issues in development and education in South Africa. Reading opens up new ideas, generates thoughts and insights, and connects people with the worlds they live in.

Essay writing is a place to perform knowledge and show skills. There are specific skills for essay writing, which include the important elements of thesis development, organisation, transitioning, and support, as well as clear expression that conforms to academic writing expectations. Since essays are usually assessed for both their content and the way ideas are expressed, effective writing emerges from attending to both aspects when writing. These are key skills that will help you put into practice and respond to the ideas you will engage with in the rest of this book.
References


CHAPTER TWO

Poetry
INTRODUCTION

Poetry is an important part of all literature courses at school or university level. But many students find it intimidating, if not downright frightening, to approach poetry analysis. In order to remedy this, we are going to explore two things in this chapter. First, we will investigate what you already know about poetry. You may find that you know more than you thought you did. Second, we will show you how you can improve your abilities and confidence in reading poetry. In order to find out what you already know, before we work towards new knowledge, please answer the following questions on your tablet or computer, or in your writer’s logbook. We will return to these questions once you have worked through the chapter.

* I have read 5/10/25/100/more than 100 poems in my life thus far. (Choose one)
* I enjoy reading poetry. (True/False)
* I had to read and study poetry as part of my English curriculum at school. (True/False)
* I enjoy listening to popular music. (True/False)
* My parents sang to me when I was a child. (True/False)
* Poems always rhyme. (True/False)
* Poems are always about subjects such as love, death or nature. (True/False)

Even if you are not an avid or regular reader of poetry, you probably had some experience of it in your childhood. Most children listen to their parents singing to them or reciting nursery rhymes. These songs and rhymes are, in fact, forms of poetry. And even if you did not listen to your parents singing or teaching you nursery rhymes, you probably enjoy listening to popular music, in which the words (or lyrics) are poetic.

For example, the song ‘Sign of a Victory’ by the American artist, R. Kelly, was one of the anthems for the Fifa World Cup that was held in South Africa in 2010. Most South Africans know the song. The words are given on the following page:

Sign of a Victory
R. Kelly

I CAN SEE the colours of the rainbow
And I can feel the sun on my face
I see the light at the end of the tunnel
And I can feel heaven in its place

And that’s the sign of a victory
And that’s the sign of a victory

I can feel the spirit of the nations
And I can feel my wings ridin’ the winds, yeah
I see the finish line just up ahead now
And I can feel it risin’ deep within
And that's the sign of a victory
And that's the sign of a victory

Now I can see the distance of the journey
High and front with all your might
You open your eyes to global warming
Been through it all, you sacrificed your life

And that's the sign of a victory
And that's the sign of a victory

If we believe, we can achieve anything
Including the impossible, this I know
So let's lift up our heads, yeah
And raise the flag, yeah yeah
And scream like you want to win
Now let the games begin!

That's the sign of a victory
And that's the sign of a victory
And that's the sign of a victory
And that's the sign of a victory

When you keep on fightin'
After you lost your strength
That's the sign of a victory

When darkness is all around you
You still find your way
That's the sign of a victory

Come on and sing
Lift up your voice and sing
Stand up, oh yeah, stand up
The sign of a victory
Oooohhh ohh ohhhh
That's the sign of a victory

(http://www.elyricsworld.com/sign_of_victory_lyrics_r_kelly.html)
You have probably heard this song while you were following the 2010 Fifa World Cup tournament. But have you thought about the lyrics, how they are placed and what they mean?

In order to investigate, we can take a closer look at what makes the words in a song lyric, or a poem, different from the usual forms of language that we read every day in newspapers, novels, letters and other texts. We notice immediately that the lines of a song or poem do not extend all the way from the left margin of the page to the right, in the way they do in prose. This is the hallmark of poetry – the feature that makes it distinctive. (If you are reading a text that does not include lines of different lengths, you are reading prose, not poetry.)

Next we notice that the lines contain various other features that do not belong in prose. One of these is **rhyme**, where the final words of one line sound similar to (or the same as) the final words of another. In ‘Sign of a Victory’, the second and fourth lines of the first stanza, which begins with ‘I can see the colours of the rainbow’, repeat the -ace sound. This sound is heard in the words ‘face’ and ‘place’. If you say these words out loud, or sing them, you will hear the similarity in the sounds. Clearly the songwriter has chosen these words carefully to make them rhyme. These are the words that we tend to remember when we listen to the song or try to sing it ourselves. The repeated sounds help us to bring these words together in our minds and
A stanza in a poem is the equivalent of a paragraph in prose. A line is left before and after that section of the text, which is ‘marked off’ from the rest and forms a unit. Poets use stanzas to break up their poems into sections. Different stanzas often deal with separate ideas.

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You will also notice that an entire stanza of the song is repeated: the line ‘And that’s the sign of a victory’ appears ten times in the song. We call this the ‘chorus’ of the song as it is repeated so often.

You will also notice that ‘Sign of a Victory’ creates pictures in words. The main picture is the image of someone on a journey. This is a picture, created by the words of the song, of someone walking through a tunnel to the light at the end of it. The words create an image of a person going through hardships in their life but emerging successful despite them. The singer compares this to a sprinter running a race and seeing the finish line up ahead, or to a soccer player entering the stadium through a dark tunnel as they would have done in the 2010 Fifa World Cup.

The image in ‘Sign of a Victory’ is an example of the way poetry (and literature) uses art in order to ‘deliberately and creatively experiment with language in order to suggest images and ideas which engage the reader’s imagination … and interpretation’ (Goodman, 1996:vii). Poetry’s ability to engage the reader’s imagination and to need interpretation means that:

* Readers should actively imagine what is presented in the poem. The images, figures of speech, sound effects, meaning, and tone of poetry are all designed to stimulate our imagination.

* Because language is open to interpretation (think of an apparently simple utterance, such as ‘thank you’, which can mean various things in different contexts and to different people), readers can expect that their interpretations of poems will differ. This is a logical result of the nature of language.

* There is, therefore, no single ‘right answer’ to questions about the meaning of a poem, although some interpretations may be more convincing, or better supported, than others. Do not be tempted to search the Internet for analyses and discussions of particular poems that you are required to read in your English studies. It is always better – no matter how difficult it may seem and how uncertain you may feel – to work towards formulating your own individual interpretation of the poems.

So far, we have established some interesting things about poetry. We have discovered that poetry uses lines of different lengths. Rhyme depends on lines in poetry being shorter than the length of the page (one cannot use rhyme in prose), and lines of a similar length enable the poet to use both rhythm and rhyme. We have also explored the use of stanzas (or paragraphs in verse), and of images in poetry.

In this chapter we are going to come back to these ideas – line length, rhyme and rhythm, and imagery – and see how they work in several specific poems. (All the poems that appear in this chapter for you to read are published in the second edition of Seasons Come to Pass, edited by Helen Moffett and Es’kia Mphahlele and published by Oxford University Press Southern Africa.) Our approach to each poem will be similar: we will read the poem through carefully,
exploring the way it uses language differently from what we may be used to in our everyday experience.

POEMS FOR DISCUSSION

Poets have been writing poems for as long as language has been available to write them down. For this reason, it is interesting to explore poetry from its earlier forms up to the present.

Poetry from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

Our first poem is ‘My Lute, Awake!’, which was written in England in the sixteenth century. Read the poem carefully before we think about it together.

My Lute, Awake!

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542)

MY LUTE, AWAKE! Perform the last
Labour that thou and I shall waste,
And end that I have now begun;
For when this song is sung and past,
My lute, be still, for I have done.

As to be heard where ear is none,
As lead to grave* in marble stone,
My song may pierce her heart as soon.
Should we then sigh or sing and moan?
No, no, my lute, for I have done.

The rocks to do not so cruelly
Repulse the waves continually
As she my suit* and affection.
So that I am past remedy,*
Whereby my lute and I have done.

Proud of the spoil* that thou hast got
Of simple hearts, thorough* love’s shot;
By whom, unkind, thou hast them won,
Think not he hath his bow* forgot,
Although my lute and I have done.

Vengeance shall fall on thy disdain
That makest but game on earnest pain.
Think not alone under the sun
Unquit* to cause thy lovers plain,
Although my lute and I have done.

Perchance thee lie withered and old
The winter nights that are so cold,
Plaining in vain unto the moon.

*grave
*engrave

*suit
courtship

*remedy
curing or saving

*spoil
prizes or loot

*thorough
through

*bow
Cupid, the god of love,
shoots his victims with a bow and arrow.

*unquit
unrequited
Thy wishes then dare not be told.  
Care then who list,* for I have done.  

And then may chance thee to repent  
The time that thou hast lost and spent  
To cause thy lovers sigh and swoon.  
Then shalt thou know beauty but lent,  
And wish and want as I have done.  

Now cease, my lute. This is the last  
Labour that thou and I shall waste,  
And ended is that we begun.  
Now is this song both sung and past;  
Be still, my lute, for I have done.  

(Seasons Come to Pass, 2002:13–14)

**Line numbers**

Poems are printed with numbers on the right-hand margin every five lines. These numbers mark the line numbers because, when you write about a particular phrase or line in the poem, or when you quote from it, you must always give the line number.

A good place to begin exploring a poem is the title. In this case, Wyatt’s poem is addressed to ‘My Lute’ (a lute was a musical instrument something like a modern guitar). He wants it to ‘awake’ or wake up and do something and the rest of the poem will tell us what that something is.

As you read through the poem (you should do this at least twice), you will also notice the final line of each stanza, which contains the phrase ‘I have done’. In the last three stanzas, the words ‘my lute and I have done’ are repeated exactly. What does this mean? And why is the speaker telling his lute to wake up when, on the other hand, he tells us at the end of every stanza that they ‘have done’ or are finished? We have found a contradiction, or tension, at the heart of the poem, concerning whether the speaker wants his lute to wake up or whether he is finished with it.

**Poet and speaker**

Poetry is meant to be read aloud so that the audience can appreciate the full value of the sound-effects such as rhyme and rhythm. When you talk or write about it, use the word ‘speaker’ to refer to the ‘voice’ in the poem. This may, or may not, be the same as the poet. Poets often create speakers to express feelings or thoughts in poetry that they might not say or think themselves.

The speaker is addressing, or talking to, his lute. On the one hand, he tells the instrument that it is needed to ‘Perform the last / Labour that thou and I shall waste’ (lines 1–2). On the other hand, he repeats the phrase ‘my lute and I have done’; that is, we’re finished. It appears, then,
that he wants the lute to play a song, but that this will be the last time it ever does so. You might also notice how fond he is of his lute, so that they seem to be together, almost like comrades or co-conspirators, in this task. The reason that this is the last song he will ever play on the lute is found in the first three lines of the second stanza, where he tells us that ‘As to be heard where ear is none, / As lead to grave in marble stone, / My song may pierce her heart as soon’ (lines 6–8). We can untangle Wyatt’s word order here and rephrase these lines as follows:

* My song may pierce her heart as soon as (one could) engrave with lead on a marble stone or as soon as (one could) hear without ears.

The sentence above is a **paraphrase** of the original lines. In other words, I have rewritten it in my own words. It is often useful to rewrite difficult lines in poetry in your own words, but whenever you do so, you must say where the original comes from by providing the page number of the text where you found it. In the case of poetry, the line numbers should be provided as well. If you do not, you will be guilty of plagiarism.

Paraphrasing a few lines of the poem allows us to see that the speaker is sure that his song will not pierce the woman’s heart at all, since it is impossible to hear without ears or to engrave with lead (a soft metal) on marble (an extremely hard stone). We are now beginning to understand the speaker’s dilemma: he is singing songs that are not reaching a woman’s heart. We understand, too, that she is ‘deaf’ to his songs and that her heart is hard (like a marble) towards him. At this point you will realise that ‘My Lute, Awake!’ is a poem about a man who loves a woman who does not return his affections, just like so much popular music that one hears on the radio. You will also realise that some themes have an extraordinary ability to last in poetry and music. In fact, the themes of love and death appear in so many texts that we call them **universal**.

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**Universal themes**

Certain ideas and themes appear in many kinds of texts, from all parts of the world and all times in history. They are found in ‘high art’ and in ‘popular culture’, in songs, visual art, films, drama, fiction and poetry. These themes include:

- **Romantic love**: its beginning, the euphoric ‘high’ it brings, and the obstacles to its successful unfolding
- **The passage of time and its consequences**: inevitable change; maturity, ageing, and death
- **The individual’s relationship with the wider society and community**: this may be troubled, complex or filled with conflict
- **Power**: its uses and abuses
- **Spiritual themes such as the existence, nature and actions of a divinity (‘God’)**
- **The meaning of human life (or its meaninglessness)**.

These themes are differently represented in texts from different historical periods, or eras. Look for them as you read magazine articles, novels, poems, as well as when you watch television or films. You will be surprised by how frequently they crop up.

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As we read further in the poem, more images reinforce the original idea of a man singing a song to a woman who does not return his love. The speaker brings a new image to light in each stanza. The first of these images is: ‘The rocks do not so cruelly / Repulse the waves
continually / As she my suit and affection’ (lines 11–13). In this image, it is clear that the woman is being compared, again, to a rock and the speaker to a wave that is trying to wash over it, but is being ‘repulsed’ or rejected. The final two lines of this stanza portray the speaker as ‘past remedy’, which means that he cannot be helped, and offer this as a reason for him and his lute to ‘have done’. They will not sing any more love songs, it seems, even though the speaker will continue to love the woman, since their love songs fall on deaf ears.

The next two stanzas bring about a change in the feeling and subject of the poem. The speaker seems to feel differently in these stanzas about the woman who has rejected him. Stanza 4 addresses her directly in ‘Proud of the spoil that thou hast got’ (line 16). ‘Spoil’ here means the ‘spoils of war’, or the treasures that a victorious army could steal from those it conquered. Here the image is of love as a war, and Cupid, the god of love, is the main figure in this conflict.

In ancient Roman mythology, Cupid was the god of love, who would pierce people with his arrows. Any victim who was pierced in this way, especially through the heart, would fall in love with the first person he or she saw.

By mentioning Cupid indirectly, the speaker suggests, or implies, that the hard-hearted woman has gained her victories (or ‘spoil’) through Cupid’s actions, and not her own. In this way, he takes away some of the woman’s power, saying that it is only because of the god of love ‘by whom’ she has won her conquests. Cupid also becomes an ally of the speaker, who writes ‘Think not he hath his bow forgot’ (line 19). This is a veiled threat. What is he threatening her with?

In the final stanza, the speaker’s disappointment in the woman’s failing to return his affections turns to anger and revenge. He even mentions ‘Vengeance’ in line 21, as he wishes her to experience the same ‘disdain’ as she has shown towards him. We might need to untangle the middle two lines, which read: ‘Think not alone under the sun / Unquit to cause thy lovers plain’. In these lines, the speaker is saying that the woman should not think that she is the only one (‘under the sun’) who can make her lovers complain (or ‘plain’) because they are ‘unquit’ or unrequited: that is, because she does not return their feelings. In the rest of the poem, the speaker gives more detail about the fate that he wishes to befall the woman who has rejected him. What does he hope will happen to her?

We are not going to explore all the details of the speaker’s imaginary revenge on the woman, but one line stands out in stanza 7: ‘Then shalt thou know beauty but lent’ (line 34).

Now that we have explored the poem a little, we can see that it uses a clever strategy: the speaker is apparently writing to his lute, but the poem is actually about a woman who does not love him. The chorus, at the end of every stanza, which says ‘I have done’ or ‘my lute and I
have done’, is a ruse, or trick. The speaker and his lute are continuing to sing a love song even while he says that they do not want to sing any more love songs. This love song, though, is different from many others in that it expresses anger and even threatens the woman with the same fate as the man is experiencing: he hopes that one day she, too, will not have her affections returned.

**TIME TO WRITE**

Answer the following questions:

- What is the effect of the repetition of the last line of each stanza?
- What is the speaker’s feeling towards the woman?
- What is his attitude towards the lute?
- Can you understand, or relate to, the speaker’s feelings?

These questions will direct you towards several important aspects of the study of poetry. First, by exploring the repetition of ‘I have done’ and ‘My lute and I have done’ at the end of every stanza, you will be examining not only what the poem says but also, and more importantly, how it creates meaning. Studying poetry requires you to focus on how language works and how meaning is made. Second, the questions about feeling and attitude (questions 2 and 3) prompt you to explore the poem’s tone, and the final question asks whether you can understand what the speaker is saying in this poem.

**Tone**

*Tone* in poetry is similar to ‘tone of voice’ in that it communicates the speaker’s emotion, attitude and feelings. We speak about ‘tone’ in our analysis of poetry precisely because poetry was originally meant to be spoken or read aloud, and when it is, the reader can add the tone of voice that enables the listener to understand what the speaker is feeling.

It can be intimidating to try to identify the tone of a line or a whole poem. If you are in doubt, it may help to remember that most human emotions are variations on a fairly small range: anger, fear, sadness or joy. So the tone of a line or a poem may well be one of these, or a variation of them.

Next we are going to explore another love poem, this time by William Shakespeare.

**Sonnet: My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun**

*William Shakespeare (1564–1615)*

MY MISTRESS’ EYES are nothing like the sun;
Coral* is far more red than her lips’ red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;*
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked,* red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;

---

coral
- a hard, reddish substance formed by sea-creatures

dun
- yellowish-brown

damasked
- mixed, patterned
The tradition of love à la Petrarch

Petrarch was an Italian poet who lived and wrote during the fourteenth century and who gave his name to the word ‘Petrarchan’ (we speak about ‘Petrarchan sonnets’). Petrarch was said to have seen a woman called Laura walking in the streets of his home town, and to have fallen in love with her on first sight. This passion lasted for decades, but Petrarch was never united with Laura. Instead, his poems about her focus on how beautiful and how unreachable she is. This has given rise to a ‘Petrarchan tradition’ of love poetry, in which the speaker compares his beloved’s appearance, unrealistically, to all kinds of beautiful things, such as gold and jewels. In this tradition, the speaker is always a man, and the beloved is always a woman.

‘My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun’ is a sonnet – a well-known form of poetry. Sonnets have the following qualities:

- They have fourteen lines
- Each line contains ten syllables, arranged in iambic, or groups of two, with the stress on the second syllable (as in the word ‘address’, which is pronounced ‘ad-drès’)
- The pattern of rhyme is very regular. In a Petrarchan sonnet the rhyme scheme is *abab cdcd efg efg*, and in a Shakespearean sonnet, like the one above, the rhyme scheme is *abab cdcd efef gg*. In these rhyme schemes, each letter stands for a different sound. In the poem above, ‘sun’ at the end of the first line contains the sound -un, which rhymes with ‘dun’ at the end of the third line, and is represented by a. The sound -ed, which ends the second and fourth lines, is represented by b.

Petrarch made the sonnet form famous and widely read, but in the sixteenth century, Shakespeare and a few of his contemporary poets adapted it for their own purposes. For example, although Petrarch’s sonnets always concern the speaker’s unrequited love for a woman, the sonnets written by Shakespeare and his contemporaries used the sonnet form for other ideas as well. The final two lines of a Shakespearean sonnet rhyme with each other, and this makes them into a group (or rhyming couplet) by themselves, separate from the other twelve lines of the poem. Shakespeare uses these lines to conclude the poem, often introducing an element of surprise or contrast with what has gone before.

In ‘My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing like the Sun’, Shakespeare undermines the Petrarchan tradition of love poetry by telling us what his mistress, or girlfriend, is *not* like. Fill in the table below by listing these comparisons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image from the poem</th>
<th>What is being compared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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*(Seasons Come to Pass, 2002:25)*
nothing like the sun (line 1)

Coral is far more red (line 2)

her breasts are dun (line 3)

black wires grow on her head (line 4)

No such roses see I in her cheeks (line 6)

in some perfumes is there more delight (line 7)

Music hath a far more pleasing sound (line 9)

My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground (line 11)

Let’s explore one of these images – the first, where the speaker says that his ‘mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun’. This is a **simile**, or a comparison that uses the word ‘like’ or ‘as’. The speaker is comparing his beloved’s eyes to the sun, but in a negative way, so as to say what her eyes are not like. He is referring here to Petrarchan love poems that make extravagant claims for the beloved’s beauty, saying, for example, that her eyes are so bright that they outshine the sun. His beloved, by contrast, does not have such bright eyes; she is more human. The second image is similar. ‘Coral is far more red than her lips’ red’ (line 2) compares his beloved’s lips to coral, but only to say that her lips are not like coral at all.

In line 4, the speaker says ‘If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head’. Here he is denying that his mistress’s hair is as soft as silk, as shiny as a raven’s wing, as lustrous as the moon, or any other such comparison. Instead, he seems intent on disgusting the reader when he says she has ‘black wires’ on her head. This image compares his mistress’s hair to black wires, but without using ‘like’ or ‘as’: it directly says that her hair is black wire. It is a **metaphor**.

**Simile and metaphor**

By now you will have realised that one of the aims of poetry is to make the reader see things (often familiar things) in a new way. In order to do this, poets use comparisons, as Shakespeare does in ‘My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun’, where he tells us exactly what his mistress is not like. There are two major kinds of comparison: simile and metaphor.

**Similes** compare two things by using the words ‘like’ or ‘as’. A well-known poem by Robert Burns begins: ‘My love is like a red, red rose’ and this line clearly compares the speaker’s beloved to a red rose.

**Metaphors** do not use ‘like’ or ‘as’. Instead, they simply say that one thing is another. So Shakespeare’s line, ‘let loose the dogs of war’, uses a metaphor to compare armies and warring forces to fighting dogs. The metaphor does not say that these forces are like fighting dogs: instead, it says they are fighting dogs. Metaphor is a powerful tool to help poets persuade their readers to see things in new ways.

As you explore the images that Shakespeare has used in this poem, you will find that they all work in the same way, with the speaker saying that his beloved, or mistress, is nothing like the extravagant comparisons that are made in Petrarchan poetry. What is the point of this? To answer that question, we need to explore the last two lines of the poem, where the speaker says: ‘And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare’
Thames
a large river that runs through the city of London

manacles
rings of iron or steel, used to handcuff prisoners

harlot
a word for a prostitute or sex worker

hearse
a car that is used to carry a coffin

(lines 13–14). In these lines he tells us what he really thinks about his beloved. He thinks she is ‘rare’ or special: as rare as any woman (‘any she’) who is falsely compared to something she is not, such as the sun, stars or any precious substance. Here the speaker says that he believes his mistress is as special as all the poets do who lie about their beloveds by comparing them to substances that they are not. His mistress is human; she has ‘black wires’ on her head (line 4) and ‘dun’ breasts (line 2), but to him she is as special as if he had made all the exaggerated comparisons between her and other beautiful things that one finds in Petrarchan love poems.

TIME TO WRITE
Write a short paragraph (about 10 lines) giving your response to this poem. Do you think it is a good love poem, or do you think it is not successful? Give reasons for your answer.

Poetry from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marked a period of dramatic social change in England and Europe. The eighteenth century was a time of exploration, which enabled us to understand the geography of the world; and the nineteenth century saw the reign of Queen Victoria over England. It was also the century of the Industrial Revolution, when the main mode of producing goods changed from agriculture to industry. Our next poem, from this period, records one poet’s response to a rapidly changing world.

London
William Blake (1757–1827)

I WANDER THRO’ each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames* does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man
In every Infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles* I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper’s cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro’ midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot’s* curse
Blasts the new-born Infant’s tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.*
William Blake

Blake is one of a group of poets known as the Romantic poets (the others are William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, George Gordon Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley). The Romantic poets wrote in England in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries and they are remembered for changing the form of poetry from a very rigid structure to a freer format, as well as for their interest in the natural world. Blake’s most famous poems are his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, where he contrasts two states of mind. Innocence is the state that he sees in children, who play and are creative without suspicion of others; Experience is a more cynical and fearful state of mind. ‘London’ belongs to the *Songs of Experience* and is one of Blake’s poems that strongly criticise his

The poem’s title, ‘London’, is, obviously, a reference to the capital city of England, with the river Thames running through it. Read the poem through carefully and try to decide what the speaker’s attitude is to the city. Make some brief notes. We will return to your notes when we have explored the poem in more detail.

In the first stanza, the speaker says that he ‘wanders thro’ the charter’d streets’. The word ‘charter’d’ in this sentence is very unusual. What does it mean?

**Dictionaries**

A good dictionary is an essential aid to your studies because it can give you the meaning of unfamiliar words, as well as directing you to the correct spelling of these words and their use throughout history. The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* also provides pages of grammar reference, which will help you to expand your skills in correctly using new or unfamiliar words in your own speech and writing.

The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (which we will abbreviate as OALD) gives the following meaning for ‘charter’:

**Charter noun, verb**

*noun* 1 a written statement describing the rights that a particular group of people should have: *the European Union’s Social Charter of workers’ rights* 2 a written statement of the principles and aims of an organisation 3 an official document stating that a ruler or government allows a new organisation, town or university to be established and gives particular rights: *The Royal College received its charter as a university in 1967.* 4 a law or policy that seems likely to help people do something bad: *The new law will be a charter for unscrupulous financial advisors.* 5 the hiring of a plane, boat, etc: *a yacht available for charter*

*verb* 1 to hire/rent a plane, boat, etc. for your own use: *a chartered plane* 2 to state officially that a new organisation, town or university has been established and has special rights

This definition gives two meanings for the word ‘charter’: as a verb and a noun. Blake uses it as a verb in the first stanza of ‘London’, where he calls the streets, and the Thames, ‘charter’d’. The dictionary definition points us to the word’s meaning as regulated, defined or fixed. It may also refer to the practice of ‘charting’ natural and cultural phenomena by putting them on a map. When we see it like this, we can understand why the speaker says that the streets are ‘charter’d’: they are laid out in a regular, defined pattern. But why is the Thames charter’d?

To answer this question, we have to explore, not only the word’s literal meanings, but also its
Denotations and connotations

Many words have (at least) two meanings. One is the thing or action that the word ‘points to’ or refers to. This is the literal meaning or **denotation**. But beyond denotation, there is a secondary meaning, produced by the meanings we associate with that word, and these are the word’s **connotations**. For example, the word ‘winter’ **denotes** or points to the cold season of the year. The season is its **denotation**. But there are a lot of other meanings associated with winter: for example, we might think of cold, barrenness, aridity and a lack of life. These meanings are the word’s **connotations**.

You can remember the difference between **denotation** and **connotation** by remembering that ‘denotation’ begins with ‘d’, the same letter as ‘dictionary’. So the **denotation** of a word is its **dictionary definition**. **Connotation** refers to all the other meanings of the word.

Poetry is highly condensed – it uses short ‘bits’ of language to convey a great deal of meaning. As a result, it usually makes words work harder, and communicate more meaning, than they do in ordinary language. In poetry, the connotations of words are mobilised to help words, phrases and lines contain more meanings than they usually do.

The connotations of the word ‘charter’d’ include regularity and definition. These connotations evoke an image of being measured and put on a map in the correct place. London, England’s largest city, is a place where things are measured, regulated and defined according to human culture and design. It is an urban centre, which means, for Blake, that it is the opposite of free, unrestrained nature. To ‘charter’ a natural phenomenon such as a river is a human activity, which opposes the way the river would flow freely in the natural course of events.

By using the word ‘charter’d’, the first two lines of ‘London’ ring warning bells in the reader’s mind: something is not as it should be, or as it naturally is. The speaker goes on to explain what is wrong: he observes, or ‘marks’ ‘in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe’ (lines 3–4). You will notice that Blake chooses fairly simple words, which he repeats (such as ‘mark’, which means both ‘observe’ and ‘sign’), and also that the problems he sees are referred to as ‘weakness’ and ‘woe’. Here he has used **alliteration**. This is a sound effect brought about by repeating a consonant sound (here, the ‘w’ sound). It is used to emphasise the point the speaker is making and to bring something forcefully to the reader’s attention. What could the problem be here?

The speaker goes on to explain what is wrong, and what has caused the ‘weakness’ and ‘woe’ in the faces he sees, in the remaining stanzas of the poem.

**TIME TO WRITE**

Write a paragraph (1–10 lines) on each of the following images, saying what you think it means in the poem:

- mind-forg’d manacles (line 8)
- blackning Church (line 10)
- runs in blood down Palace walls (line 12)
- the youthful Harlot’s curse (line 14)
- the Marriage hearse (line 16)

The image of ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ is one of Blake’s most famous phrases, and we are going
to explore it in more detail. A ‘manacle’ is an iron device that is used to imprison or restrict someone (a handcuff is a kind of manacle).

In Blake’s poetry, freedom is important – but mental, not physical, freedom is paramount. Blake sees governments and institutions, such as education and religion, as ways of taking away people’s abilities to think and imagine for themselves. These are the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ that he is referring to in this poem. They are things that are created (or forged) by the mind in order to restrict mental freedom. The speaker associates the city of London with the condition of taking away the freedom to think, imagine and feel.

TIME TO WRITE

How does the image of ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ in ‘London’ apply to twenty-first century society? Is our mental freedom still restricted? Write a paragraph (or two) in your answer.

You will realise by now that the speaker of ‘London’ is concerned about what he sees around him. This alerts us to the tone of the poem: the feelings and attitudes that it conveys to the reader. Understanding tone is an important part of reading poetry as it helps you to pinpoint a speaker’s general attitude towards the subject, or topic, of a poem.

You might not realise, though, why the speaker believes that London is a problematic city. The answer is found in stanzas three and four, where the speaker gives examples of what is wrong in the city. He mentions four kinds of people in these stanzas: the Chimney-sweeper, the Soldier, the Harlot and the Infant (these words are capitalised to make them stand out for emphasis). Let’s explore their social roles. A chimney-sweeper, in Blake’s time, was a child, usually a boy, who was forced to climb up the chimneys in middle-class or rich houses and clean out the soot with a stiff brush so that the owners of the house could continue to make fires in the fireplace to warm their house. Children were forced to work in this way because the job was paid, although poorly, and in this way, they could make money to help support their families if their fathers could not bring home enough money for everyone. But climbing up a chimney was dangerous. Some of the chimney-sweepers were very young (as young as four) and the chimneys were narrow, twisted or forked. In addition, the soot that needed to be removed could cause cancer.

‘London’ tells us that the ‘Chimney-sweeper’s cry / Every blackning Church appalls’, which almost moves the soot from the inside of the chimney to the outside of the church, in contrast to the idea that religion (especially Christianity) takes away sin and makes the believer morally as white and pure as snow. Blake was a Christian, but a very unorthodox one, who used to see visions of saints and angels, and who criticised the church of his day very strongly for its lack of social responsibility in poems such as ‘Holy Thursday II’. The image of the ‘blackning Church’ in ‘London’ means that the Christian Church is tainted by the fact that children had to work as chimney-sweepers to support their families because this ‘blackens’ the Church’s reputation as pure and morally upright.
These questions are not easy to answer, and this is because Blake’s idea of society is particularly complex. He was concerned about the plight of those who were socially disempowered, especially children, whom he saw as being innocent and in need of care. He criticised the authorities (the government and the church) for not taking better care of the poor and of children by sentencing them to miserable lives in poor-houses and orphanages and then claiming to be acting out of charity.

The speaker is particularly critical of the nuclear family, saying in the last stanza that the ‘youthful Harlot’ (who, like the chimney-sweeper, would probably have been forced into having sex for money because her family could not support her) has a bad effect on babies (or having children in general) and on the institution of marriage. This may be a result of Blake’s belief that sexual relationships engage our deepest identities, but also, more obviously, because married men in Blake’s era were engaging in marital infidelity with sex workers. In the poem, the speaker claims that marriage, which is supposed to be a love relationship, becomes a ‘hearse’ or vehicle of death. This may either be emotional death or physical death through the sexually transmitted infections carried by sex workers to their clients.

TIME TO WRITE
How effective do you find ‘London’ as a poem of social criticism? Write a paragraph (10–15 lines) in your answer.

Poetry from the twentieth century

As human society and history moved into the twentieth century, it became much more complex. The century brought World War I (1914–1918) and aggression on a grand scale. It was followed twenty-five years later by World War II (1939–1945). The two world wars made people doubt each other and governments much more than they ever had previously. At the same time, technologies developed rapidly and improved communications shrank the distances between people. Poets of the period registered the dismay that many felt at these rapid and disturbing changes.

In Time of ‘The Breaking of Nations’

* Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

ONLY A MAN harrowing* clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods

* harrowing
Half asleep as they walk.

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight*
Come whispering by:
War’s annals* will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

This poem was written during the First World War (1914–1918), which the poet calls ‘The Breaking of Nations’. This image uses particularly condensed language, which, we are learning to see, is typical of poetry, to represent an idea of what was happening in the war, which was the first large conflict ever to involve so many nations in hostility and violence. Millions of lives were lost amongst civilians and soldiers, and there was a general feeling that ordinary life and relationships could never be the same again after the war ended in 1918. The feeling that the world of human social relationships had been irrevocably altered is at the centre of this poem.

TIME TO WRITE

- Write down three images drawn from ordinary life in the poem.
- What kind of language is used to create these pictures?
- How are these aspects of life going to continue?

You may have noticed that each stanza contains an image of simple, quiet country life: in stanza 1 the speaker draws a picture of a man and a horse quietly ploughing the land for farming; in stanza 2 some dry grass is being burnt; and in stanza 3 two lovers are whispering to each other as they go past. These images are all domestic, comfortable and familiar ‘slices of life’ from Hardy’s home in rural England, as you can see from the picture below.

The language used in ‘In Time of “The Breaking of Nations”’ is very simple, with few words that are longer than two syllables. Each stanza has only four lines, with a regular rhythm and rhyme scheme, where the first and third lines of each stanza rhyme, and so do the second and fourth. This kind of writing appears artless, natural and spontaneous, although the poet has probably spent hours creating this impression! It also gives the idea that what it describes is ordinary and contains no meaning beyond what is present at the surface. Of course, though, the images hold a wealth of meaning. They are connected to the idea of war in subtle ways. The image of the man and his horse ploughing the ground contains two meanings of ‘harrowing’ as both breaking up the ground and severely frightening a person. The grass that is burnt echoes the smoke that was seen rising from the battlegrounds as well as the gas that was used to kill soldiers in the trenches; and the ‘whispers’ of the girl and her ‘wight’ or boyfriend could remind the reader of the rumours of war that
occupied people's minds during the onset and duration of the conflict.

Lines 7, 8, 11 and 12 contain some images that are different from the poem's major focus on rural life. In fact, these images conflict with this general atmosphere. When you read poetry, it is important to pay attention to these instances where a poet seems to veer off from the main direction of the poem in order to say something else altogether. These lines do not focus on the simplicity and directness of rural life. Instead, they focus on the idea of change. Lines 7 and 8 read: ‘Yet this will go onward the same / Though Dynasties pass’. We can understand these lines by looking up the word ‘dynasty’ (the singular form of ‘dynasties’) in a dictionary. If you do this, you will find that a ‘dynasty’ is ‘a series of rulers of a country who all belong to the same family’ or ‘a period of years during which members of a particular family rule a country’ (OALD). The passing of a dynasty is associated with great change in a country, as it brings about a change of government. The speaker says in these lines that rural life, with people ploughing, and cut grass being burnt, will continue for years although dynasties may change and different people take over the countries where they were in power.

Lines 11 and 12 contain a similar idea. The speaker says that the story of the ‘maid and her wight’ (notice that archaic, or old-fashioned, words, have deliberately been used for the lovers in order to emphasise the idea of love as unchanging throughout centuries) will continue after ‘War’s annals … cloud into night’ (line 11). In these lines, the speaker claims that love stories will outlast the ‘annals’ or records of war, and he implies that love is stronger and more durable than war or conflict. Is this true, do you think?

‘In Time of “The Breaking of Nations”’ poses a question through the contradiction (or difference) between its title and the images it contains. The title refers to war, conflict and civil upheaval. But the images in the poem are those of quiet rural domesticity and ordinary existence. The speaker claims that the life that is depicted in these images is more lasting, more important, and stronger than war. Do you agree?

In fact, rural life in England, and in Europe generally, was greatly changed by World War I, although not in the sense that it was all laid to waste by international conflict, as prophets of doom feared. Rather, the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, which had begun during the previous century, sped up after the World War and changed the rural and agricultural pace of country life forever. In the twenty-first century, it is rare indeed to find people ploughing fields by manual labour with only a horse to help.

**Time to reflect: how important is history?**
In exploring Hardy’s poem, we have used a lot of historical information to help us understand the poem. In fact, the poem would not make sense in the same way if we did not know its historical context and the fact that it was written in response to World War I. This may lead you to wonder whether you are expected to research all kinds of historical facts in order to understand poetry. The answer is, unequivocally, no. You are expected to attend to the words on the page and to explore their meanings and resonances. Historical details that are relevant for understanding a poem will be provided for you.

Our next poem also looks at the theme of war, but from a different angle.

**Dulce et Decorum Est**

*Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)*

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But marched on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines* dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.* . . .

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.*

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**Wilfred Owen: A biography**

‘Biography’ means ‘life story’.

Wilfred Owen was the most important poet of World War I. He was born in England in 1893 and died in France in 1918 at the age of 25.
Owen was educated at two schools in England, but his marks were not good enough for him to achieve a scholarship to attend the University of London, as he wished. Instead, he studied botany and Old English part-time at the University of Reading.

When World War I broke out in 1914, Owen enlisted as a member of the Artists' Rifles Officers' Training Corps. His experiences in the war changed him completely from an optimist to a pessimist. He also met another war poet, Siegfried Sassoon, whom he worshipped and tried to emulate. Sassoon's and Owen's poetry about the horrors of war changed people's ideas of war forever.

While trying to cross a canal, a week before the end of World War I, Wilfred Owen was shot in the head and killed. (www.poetryfoundation.org)

Gas warfare in World War I

World War I used two methods of fighting that are no longer employed: trench warfare, where soldiers would dig long ditches or trenches to protect themselves from enemy attacks, and gas warfare.

Gas warfare used poisonous gas, which could be thrown into a trench in canisters, to poison soldiers. Once a soldier had inhaled the gas, there was no remedy for the poison: he would be doomed to die in agony. Many soldiers carried gas masks, which were heavy and cumbersome, that they would have to put on at short notice to protect themselves against gas attacks.

Gas warfare is no longer used because it is too easy for soldiers to defend themselves against it.

TIME TO WRITE

Write a paragraph in response to each of the following questions.

- What is ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ about?
- How did your view of the poem change after you had read the information in the two boxes?

The two boxes above provide brief snippets of historical and biographical information as background to your reading of the poem, but this information cannot substitute for your interpretation and response to it: they are simply meant to inform you of who Wilfred Owen was, and what was happening in World War I at the time when he wrote the poem.

The title of a poem often provides an excellent entry point into the poem, and this is true of Owen’s poem as well. ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ is a quotation from the Latin poet, Horace, meaning ‘It is sweet and fitting’. The rest of the quotation is found at the end of the poem and means ‘Sweet and fitting it is to die for one’s country’. Owen’s use of a Latin title for his poem gives it the weight of history, as though it is an eternal truth. As we work through the poem, we will see how much credence we can give to this quotation.

The poem is divided into four stanzas. The first describes the soldiers as they are heading back to their camp. Copy the table below into your notebook and fill it in to arrive at a better picture of the condition they are in.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image from the poem</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bent double (line 1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like old beggars under sacks (line 1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knock-kneed (line 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You will notice immediately that the soldiers do not show even the slightest signs of looking like a glorious cohort of strong, manly conquerors, although this is the image of soldiers that is found in popular thinking. They are in much worse shape than this, and seem to have lost most of their physical strength. The image in line 5 of the ‘blood-shod’ soldiers who have lost their boots but wear blood instead of shoes is particularly striking. What is the effect of these descriptions of physical distress? How does it make the reader feel about the soldiers?

In stanza 2, the speaker changes the tone of the poem slightly with the opening words, ‘Gas! GAS!’ This refers to the use of poisonous gas, described earlier, which was used as a weapon in World War I. It was a very effective weapon because once gas was released into a trench where enemy soldiers were marching, they would not be able to escape. The soldiers in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ are suddenly energised into putting on their gas masks in an ‘ecstasy of fumbling’. The word ‘ecstasy’ calls to mind intense happiness, reflecting the soldiers’ happiness that they are not going to die from inhaling the gas; but there is one soldier who does not manage to put his gas mask on in time. He is described as a ‘man in fire or lime’ (line 12), where the fire burns away the flesh while the lime sticks to him and does not allow him to move. The speaker then describes how he sees this unfortunate soldier ‘drowning’, although he is not under water at all. Why, do you think, is he ‘drowning’?

The answer lies in the fact that the soldier who has inhaled the poisonous gas is unable to breathe, just as though he were drowning in water. The other reason for the word ‘drowning’ is that the gas masks used heavy glass to cover the eyes, as you can see in the picture.

The speaker is looking at the poisoned soldier through the thick glass of the gas mask, that covers his eyes, and he is also looking through the gas fumes that cover the area, which explains why he says there are ‘misty panes and thick green light’ (line 14).

The third stanza is very brief: only two lines, telling us how the speaker feels about the poisoned soldier now that the incident is over. His comrade continues to haunt him ‘in all my dreams’ (line 14) and he sees the man ‘guttering, choking, drowning’ (line 15). Why do you think he continues to dream of the poisoned soldier?

The answer lies in the fact that the sight of this man who has inhaled the poisoned gas is so traumatic for him that he is unable to forget it. It has become a part of his unconscious mind and feelings, and he continues to re-experience it whenever he goes to sleep (‘in all my dreams’).

The final stanza brings you, the reader, into the poem and speaks directly to you (or me). It imagines how we would feel if we were in the same situation as the speaker, pacing ‘behind the wagon that we flung him in’ (line 17). What would we see?
You probably noticed all the images of sickness that the speaker uses to describe the poisoned soldier, complete with ‘cancer’ (line 23), ‘froth-corrupted lungs’ (line 22) and ‘vile, incurable sores’ (line 24). All these images compare the effect of the poison to an incurable illness, so that we realise the soldier is dying in terrible pain and suffering.

The final lines of the poem turn to the reader with the words ‘My friend’ (line 25) and explain earnestly what the effect would be of having seen the soldier dying of poison from the gas. The reader would not tell anyone what the speaker calls ‘the old Lie’ (line 27). The capital L in ‘Lie’ makes it a more important lie than if the poet had used a small letter. The poem’s final statement is that the saying, ‘Sweet and fitting it is to die for one’s country’, which has been repeated ever since Horace’s time in the first century BCE, is a lie. It is neither sweet nor fitting: rather, dying for one’s country in war is a painful torture, without dignity or glory.

Finally, it is time for us to explore the way the poet uses language in this poem. I’m sure you remember noting at the beginning of this chapter that poetry uses language in unusual ways. One reason for this is that poems are generally shorter than other kinds of writing, but are often written to communicate facts and details that cover a wide range of subjects. The effect of using language in a way that is different from what we are used to in our everyday conversation, reading, and writing is that poetry attracts our attention. It makes us stop and think.

**TIME TO WRITE**

‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ is one of the most famous anti-war poems ever written. What makes the poem ‘work’ as a protest against war? Are you convinced by the point of view that the speaker expresses in the final five lines? Why? Write a paragraph of 10–15 lines in response.

Go back to pages 61 and 62 and reread ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’. Write down any words and phrases that you thought were strange or unusual.

You might have noted any of the following words and phrases:
Let’s explore one of these phrases. The line ‘His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin’ is worth looking into in more detail. This line is not presented in the usual word order at all; if it were, it would read very differently. Why is the poisoned soldier represented as having a ‘hanging face’ which is ‘like a devil’s sick of sin’? How does a person look when he or she has been, or is being, hanged? And what connotations attach to the idea of ‘a devil’? How could a devil (who, in Christian thinking, is supposed to thrive on sin and wrongdoing) become ‘sick of sin’? What would that look like?

One idea that comes to mind when this line is read is the idea of things being wrong. The soldier is not meant to be ‘hanged’, because hanging is a punishment for crime, and he is a young man (probably the same age as Owen, in his late teens or early twenties) who still has a long life ahead of him. In the same way, for a devil to become ‘sick of sin’ it would have to have been sickened by being what it is and doing what is in its own nature. The line implies, then, that poisoned soldier dying in agony from inhaling poisoned gas is unnatural and wrong: the opposite of ‘decorum’, which means ‘doing what is proper’.

Now explore the other lines and images you noted in a similar way. Examine how they use connotations to create meaning in the poem.

Now that you’ve read and studied the poem, what do you think of its title? Do you think the speaker is using it in sincerity?

The answer to this question is clearly no. The speaker does not believe at all that it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country. He has shown us the ways in which death in war is neither sweet (‘dulce’) nor appropriate (‘decorum’). This means that the saying from which the poem takes its title is ironic.

**Irony** noun (pl. –ies) 1 the amusing or strange aspect of a situation that is very different from what you expect; a situation like this: *The irony is that when he finally got the job, he discovered he didn’t like it. It was one of life’s little ironies.* 2 the use of words that say the opposite of what you really mean, often as a joke and with a tone of voice that shows this: *‘England is famous for its food’, she said with heavy irony.*

We can say something is ironic when there is a difference between what we expect and what actually happens or is said. Irony is often identified when people say something very different or even the opposite of what they really mean, such as ‘“England is famous for its cooking,” she said with heavy irony’. Poetry frequently uses irony, and you will encounter it again when you study drama.

In ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, Owen uses the idea that it is good to die for one’s country in an ironic way, so that the whole title is an example of irony.

We have noted that irony revolves around difference. There is a dramatic difference in the tone and meaning of Horace’s words (‘Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori’) and the speaker’s experience of watching a soldier, poisoned by lethal gas, unable to help him as he
dies in terrible suffering and agony. More importantly, though, there is a difference between people’s ideas of war (especially those that are taught to children who are ‘ardent for some desperate glory’) and the reality of people marching for days through hostile landscape, risking and often losing their lives for their country’s victory. The individual who dies in pain and suffering, as the soldier does in ‘Dulce et decorum est’, does not do so thinking that his life is lost in a good cause, and neither does the speaker of the poem. This is why it is a ‘Lie’ that it is good to die for one’s country.

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**In a Station of the Metro**

*Ezra Pound (1885–1972)*

THE APPARITION OF these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

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This poem is probably different from any other poem you have read in your life. You may be asking questions like, ‘How am I supposed to make sense of a poem that is only two lines long?’ and ‘What on earth is this poem about?’ Read the historical information below and see if it helps you to feel more confident about this poem.

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**Haiku**

*Haiku* is the name of a special form of poetry, which originated in fifteenth-century Japan. A haiku has only three lines, with five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second, and five in the third. Haiku writers spend several years perfecting their technique so that they can master this demanding poetic form. Two examples appear below (the number of syllables in each line has changed in the translation, so they do not adhere to the strict five-seven-five structure):

I thought those birds
were leaves
in the winter moonlight
CHIYOJO
(Lowenstein, 2006:122)

Summer grass:
That’s all that remains
Of warriors’ dreams.
BASHO-
(Lowenstein, 2006:12)

At the end of either the first or second line, a haiku poet places a ‘cutting word’ (some examples in Japanese are ya, kana and keri). This word has no particular meaning, but it gives the reader a pause to reflect on the previous line. This gives us a clue to what makes haiku poems work. The force of reflection, meditation and thinking about the natural and human worlds gives a haiku poet the ability to crystallise the essence of something into only three lines, seventeen syllables in all. Indeed, haiku is supposed to contain yugen, which means the impression of something unseen, beneath the surface, which can move the heart of the reader. In trying to encapsulate this elusive quality, a haiku should also do away with all that the poet has read, heard or thought about the thing that...
Imagism

Imagism is a name given to a poetic movement in the early twentieth century. Two of its most famous members were Ezra Pound (whose poem ‘In a Station of the Metro’ appears on page 68) and Amy Lowell. The Imagist poets reacted against what they saw as a lack of discipline in poetry. They wrote a manifesto, in which they explained what they believed about the poetry they wanted to write. Some of these beliefs are given below:

• To use the language of common speech, but to employ the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word.
• We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free verse than in conventional forms. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.
• Absolute freedom in the choice of subject.
• To present an image. We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art.
• To produce a poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite.
• Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry.

From these principles you can gather that the Imagist poets focused on perfecting images in poetry. Indeed, they believed that ‘an exact visual image’ could make a ‘total poetic statement’ and, to that extent, they tried to make the images in their poetry as precise and as visually evocative as a painter would when working with great attention to detail (Imagism defined, 2007).

The two boxes above provide information about Haiku and Imagism, which are two of the influences on Ezra Pound’s poem ‘In a Station of the Metro’. Now that you have read them, you should find the poem (which is one of the most famous Imagist poems) easier to understand.

**TIME TO WRITE**

Write a paragraph (about 10 lines) in which you explore the way Pound uses a single image in ‘In a Station of the Metro’ to capture and portray something essential about the way faces appear on the platforms of the underground train station. Remember what you read in the beginning of the chapter about poetry engaging our imagination and interpretation. In a poem as brief as ‘In a Station of the Metro’, the reader has to engage imagination very energetically.

**Constantly Risking Absurdity**

*Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919–)*

Constantly risking absurdity
and death
whenever he performs
above the heads
of his audience

(1919–)
this means that the poet is
still alive
the poet like an acrobat
  climbs on rhyme
    to a high wire of his own making
and balancing on eyebeams
  above a sea of faces
paces his way
  to the other side of day
performing entrechats*
    and sleight-of-foot tricks
and other high theatrics
  and all without mistaking
any thing
  for what it may not be

For he's the super realist
  who must perforce perceive
taut truth
  before the taking of each stance or step
in his supposed advance
  toward that still higher perch
where Beauty stands and waits
  with gravity
    to start her death-defying leap
And he
  a little charleychaplin* man
    who may or may not catch
her fair eternal form
  spreadeagled in the empty air
of existence

[charley chaplin]
Charles Chaplin, known as 'Charlie', was a famous comedian who made black and white films in the early part of the twentieth century. He was known for his ability to make the main character in his films look ridiculous: this technique is called 'slapstick' humour.

(Seasons Come to Pass, 2002:152)

This poem looks different from any other poem we have read so far. What makes it different?
If you said that the lines of the poem are laid out in a different way from what you are used to, you were right. We have already noticed that poems present lines of literature differently from prose: a line in poetry generally begins against the left margin of the page. This means that the poet can control where a line – which usually expresses a thought, or part of a thought – begins and ends. This is not the case in prose. In ‘Constantly Risking Absurdity’, the lines begin and end in various places across the page. The spaces between the lines look like ‘steps’ between them, as though someone were stepping with great caution from one line to the next, in the same way as a tightrope walker would. This may seem obvious, but its effect is to create space within the poem’s format, and this becomes appropriate for the subject of the poem, as we shall see when we explore further.

Another striking feature of this poem is that it does not contain any punctuation. It is difficult to divide the poem into sentences: does one sentence end at ‘above a sea of faces’ (line 10) or at ‘for what it may not be’ (line 18)? (There is a capital letter after ‘for what it may not be’ in line 19, which, we know, signals a new sentence.) What is the effect of this? How does it make
you feel that the experience described in the poem is being stretched out, across, and down the page?

There is only one person in this poem: ‘the poet’ (line 6). Let’s explore how this person is described by completing the connotations and denotations of some important images in the poem. Please write these in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image from the poem</th>
<th>Connotation and denotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constantly risking absurdity (title)</td>
<td>(connotation) The poet risks being absurd or ridiculous (denotation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like an acrobat (line 6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>climbs on rhyme (line 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a high wire of his own making (line 8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>balancing on eyebeams (line 9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>performing entrechats / and sleight-of-foot tricks / and other high theatrics (lines 13–14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the super realist (line 19)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who must perforce perceive / taut truth (lines 20–21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a little charleychaplin man (line 29)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I’m sure you found this exercise challenging: it is designed to be so. I hope you also found that it gave you some clues to understanding the poem.

Possibly the most important image in ‘Constantly Risking Absurdity’ is the image of the poet ‘like an acrobat’ (line 6). This simile compares the poet to an acrobat.
TIME TO THINK

Refer to the definitions of simile and metaphor on page 50 and explore the comparison of the poet to an acrobat. What similarities are there between writing poetry and walking a tightrope or performing on a trapeze?

The picture shows the difficult balancing act that is involved in performing as an acrobat or a trapeze artist, who might fall to the ground at any time and be seriously injured. How is this similar to the act of writing poetry? And how is it different?

The first aspect of the comparison that strikes me is that an acrobat uses his or her body for performance, while a poet uses his or her mind. So these two things – a poet and an acrobat – are quite different. On taking a closer look, though, there are important similarities. Both a poet and an acrobat are artists, and they both perform. In a sense, they both need audiences. Imagine how sad an acrobat without an audience would be! A poet without anyone to read his or her poetry would be just as sad. And both of them take great risks, as the title of the poem reminds us. An acrobat risks serious injury, perhaps even death, when balancing on a high wire; a poet risks ‘absurdity’ or looking ridiculous. There is, the poem suggests, always something to lose when the poet sits down to write.

An acrobat balances on a high wire far above the audience; a poet, the poem says, ‘climbs on rhyme’ (line 7) and balances ‘on eyebeams’ (line 9). ‘Eyebeam’ is not an English word; the poet has created it for this poem. The reader has to explore its meaning by using imagination; for example, we might imagine the movement of a reader’s eye across a line of poetry as a ‘beam’, or we might think about the reader’s eye creating a beam on which the poet-acrobat can balance.

Just like an acrobat walking across a tightrope or high-wire, a poet also progresses. The speaker says that the poet must walk ‘to the other side of day’ (line 12). What could this mean? Could it mean that the poet is like a trapeze artist where the end of the tightrope is in shadow? If so, what would this imply?

As the poet moves across the tightrope, he perceives ‘taut truth’ (line 21) on his way to catch
‘Beauty’ (line 25). The speaker also claims that a poet does not mistake ‘any thing / for what it may not be’ (lines 17–18). The idea that a poet is a ‘super realist’ and must perceive reality accurately if ‘he’ is to catch Beauty runs against some of the common ideas of poets as unrealistic or fantastical dreamers who are not in touch with reality, or who spin untruths in their poems. It is much closer to the haiku poets’ belief that one must directly confront a thing’s true nature in order to write successfully about it.

TIME TO WRITE
The last eight lines of the poem bring the figure of ‘Beauty’ into the scene. Write a paragraph in which you describe the scene as you imagine it. Explain where the poet is and how he moves, as well as the position and actions of Beauty.

Then write another paragraph in which you explain how the poem depicts the relationship between the poet and Beauty. Do you think this is a valid comparison? Do poets try to catch Beauty? If so, how?

Poetry and power in the late twentieth century
Near the beginning of this chapter, we mentioned that power is one of the universal themes of literature and culture. Human relationships always involve power, which makes it a fascinating subject to write about. In our era, gender, race and class provide three dimensions of power that compel our attention. The poems in this section protest against the way people are disempowered on the basis of their gender, race and/or class.

A note about gender
You may have noticed that ‘Constantly Risking Absurdity’ represents the poet as male and ‘Beauty’ as female. This is because of preconceived ideas about poetry as somehow belonging to men, who derive their inspiration from women, or from feminine figures such as the goddesses of Truth and Beauty (Memory was also seen in ancient Greek times as a goddess).

It is patently not true that ‘the poet’ is always a man, since there are numerous successful women poets; neither is it true that ‘Beauty’ is female, since it is an abstract noun. By describing the poet as male, though, Ferlinghetti implies that it is only male poets who take creative risks in the same way as an acrobat; and he also implies that the abstract quality of beauty is, in some way, feminine. Both of these implications can be questioned. Further, it is worth noticing that, when we turn our attention to the way gender is represented in the poem, we discover interesting dimensions, which we might not have noticed otherwise.

Coal
Audre Lorde (1934–1993)

I
IS THE total black, being spoken
from the earth's inside.
There are many kinds of open
how a diamond comes into a knot of flame
how sound comes into a word, coloured
by who pays what for speaking.

Some words are open like a diamond
on glass windows
singing out within the passing crash of sun
Then there are words like stapled wagers
in a perforated book – buy and sign and tear apart –
and come whatever wills all chances
the stub remains
an ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.
Some words live in my throat
breeding like adders. Others know sun
seeking like gypsies over my tongue
to explode through my lips
like young sparrows bursting from shell.
Some words
bedevil me.

Love is a word, another kind of open.
As the diamond comes into a knot of flame
I am Black because I come from the earth's inside
now take my word for jewel in the open light.

(Seasons Come to Pass, 2002:187)

Up to now we’ve been looking at the details of language in poetry: images, irony, similes and metaphors. Our previous poem, Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s ‘Constantly Risking Absurdity’, was a poem about writing poetry: that is, about the creative act itself. We have explored poems about war, about rural life, and about love and loss. The subject of Audre Lorde’s ‘Coal’ is completely different from any of these.

**TIME TO WRITE**

Write a paragraph in your journal outlining what you think ‘Coal’ is about.

You may have noticed that the poem is full of images concerning darkness, underground objects, and their opposite: light. The title of the poem – always a good place to begin our interpretation of any poem – calls to mind a lump of coal. Coal is a hard black substance that is produced under the ground by compressing organic material (vegetable and animal remains) for millions of years until it becomes solid and hard. Its main element is carbon and it is used across the world to make fires.

**Audre Lorde: a biography**

Audre Lorde was a black lesbian poet who lived in the United States. Her parents immigrated to the US in the 1930s from the Caribbean in search of a better life for themselves and their children. Lorde attended the prestigious Hunter College after school, where she developed her love of writing, and especially poetry. In her autobiography, Zami: A New Spelling of my Name, she recounts how difficult it was for her to be both black and lesbian, and to be disempowered on both counts. Her poetry covers more than three decades (30 years) and she uses poetry to protest against the discrimination she experienced as a black lesbian. Lorde published seven volumes of poetry, two memoirs and several non-fiction works before her death after a long battle with cancer in 1993.
Make a list of all the images in ‘Coal’ that have associations with light, and those that have associations with darkness. Use a table like the one below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Light’ image</th>
<th>‘Dark’ image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>diamond (lines 5, 8 and 24)</td>
<td>Coal (title)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a knot of flame (lines 5 and 24)</td>
<td>the total black (line 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glass windows (line 9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The speaker uses these images to highlight the difference between black and white people in the United States (and in other countries too). In Western tradition, the colour black has connotations of evil, lowness and of being less valuable than the colour white, which has connotations of purity and goodness. ‘Black’ is a word used for people who are ‘not white’ (these days the word ‘person of colour’ is used more often in the US than ‘black’), while ‘white’ is a word that is used for people of Caucasian origin. In fact, of course, so-called ‘black’ people are not black in colour, and so-called ‘white’ people are not white either. The words are used to create differences between black and white people and cultures, and to make those who are labelled ‘black’ feel inferior.

The two substances in the poem are coal and diamonds. Many people believe that diamonds are formed when coal remains in the earth for millions of years, and, although this is not true, it forms a background to Lorde’s poem, which draws the similarity between coal and diamonds (which are both formed in the earth and both made of carbon) to our attention. In line 25, the speaker says ‘I am Black because I come from the earth’s inside’. This line may mean several things, and their meanings may even overlap. It may mean that the speaker identifies herself with ‘Mother earth’, emphasising that she has her roots firmly in the earth and is part of it. In this way, the line may also mean that the speaker identifies with the ‘total black’ of the coal in line 2. By using ‘I’ on its own in the first line, the speaker makes it clear that the poem is about her, and especially her sense of identity. The verb that follows it, though, is ‘is’. ‘I is’ is not grammatically correct, but here the speaker might be saying that her ‘I’, her self, is a thing that must be taken seriously. She could also be deliberately using Black English Vernacular. This is a dialect of English spoken by some black people in America. One of its hallmarks is that it does not follow standard English subject-verb agreement, so ‘I am’ is the correct form of the verb.

**TIME TO WRITE**

Write a page explaining how the poem ‘Coal’ looks again at the meanings of ‘blackness’ and revalues this quality.

In answering this question, you would probably have noticed that in the first three lines of the poem, the speaker identifies herself with coal, but the coal changes into ‘diamond’ in lines 5 and 24. The poem does not say that the speaker turns from a lump of fuel (coal) into a valuable jewel (a diamond), but this is strongly implied or suggested. In this way, the quality of being ‘black’, which the coal possesses and shares with the speaker, turns into a positive aspect of
the speaker’s being.

The poem also focuses strongly on language and words. This focus begins in stanza 1, line 6, and continues throughout the second stanza as the speaker talks about ‘open’ words and (she implies) ‘closed’ ones. For her, some words are involved with money (the ‘stapled wagers’ or bets of lines 11 and 12). These words are also coloured by ‘who pays what for speaking’ (line 7), which implies that some people are richer than others and so have a more powerful command of words.

**TIME TO WRITE**

- Do you have any experience of words being used to label people (either negatively or positively)?
- Give a list of 10 words that are used to label people based on their appearance.
- How do these words ‘open’ or ‘close’ others’ attitudes to the people who are being labelled?
- How can a poet use words to change people’s perceptions?

Your answer to the final question should have led you to explore the way Lorde uses language in ‘Coal’. Language has many features that are related to racial identity. People who belong to a particular racial group frequently use words with negative connotations to label people from other racial groups. A poet, though, is able to turn the power of language to her own advantage and to re-label herself in a positive way, so that her words can become ‘jewel in the open light’ (line 26); in other words, so that the poem we are reading can be valuable and precious to its readers, and can help people to develop openness towards others.

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**they call you mister steve biko now you’re dead**

*Shabbir Banoobhai*

they call you mister steve biko now you're dead
and though your death
may leave them cold,* may leave them cold
they who tormented you when you were alive
call you mister steve biko now you're dead

so many garlands others have placed
around your neck, around your neck
and you've been given coverage
the size of a rugby field
now you're dead, but you're dead

the best advocate in the land
was your voice, was your voice
and what does it matter what was said
at an inquest the best advocates in the land
may speak for the dead, but they're dead

they call you mister steve biko now you're dead
and though your death
may leave them cold, may leave them cold
they who tormented you when you were alive
call you mister steve biko now you're dead

---

"Dit laat my koud" (it leaves me cold) when he was told of Biko's death.
Steven Bantu Biko: a biography

Steven Bantu Biko was born in 1946 in King William’s Town in the Eastern Cape. From his teenage years, he wanted to oppose the apartheid system that prevented black and white people from sharing the same living areas and resources. Biko became one of the founders of a movement known as ‘Black Consciousness’, which aimed to promote the identity of black people in South Africa. His famous book, *I Write What I Like*, published in 1986, contains his philosophy of Black Consciousness, which holds that black thinkers and writers need to think for themselves and not feel in any way inferior to white thinkers.

Biko’s habit of speaking out against apartheid made him an enemy of the South African government of the day, and in 1977 he was arrested and taken to Room 619 in a Port Elizabeth jail. Biko was interrogated for twenty-two hours and beaten severely. He sustained severe injuries to his head and brain. Three weeks later he was taken to a prison in Pretoria, where he died of the injuries he had suffered in Port Elizabeth.

Steven ‘Steve’ Biko is now recognised as a *martyr* in the struggle for democracy in South Africa.

Think about the information you have just read. How does it change your understanding of the poem ‘they call you mister steve biko now you’re dead’?

You should have realised that, as you learn more about what happened to Biko, your image of him changes from one more person who has died in the struggle against apartheid to an appreciation of who he was and the enormous waste of his life. His loss to the country (and, naturally, to his family) has been enormous (Biko was only 31 years old when he died), and now that he is dead, we treasure his legacy all the more.

Peter Gabriel is an internationally famous artist who wrote a song for Steven Biko. The lyrics are:

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**Biko**

*Peter Gabriel*

SEPTEMBER ’77

Port Elizabeth weather fine
It was business as usual
In police room 619
Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko
Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko
Yihla Moja, Yihla Moja
–The man is dead

When I try to sleep at night
I can only dream in red
The outside world is black and white
With only one colour dead
Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko
Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko
Yihla Moja, Yihla Moja
–The man is dead

---

*martyr*

someone who gives their life willingly for a cause they believe in
A requiem is a ceremony for a person who has died, although this word is also used to mean a piece of music that is performed at such an event.

An elegy expresses sadness for someone's death.

This song, like Banoobhai’s poem, ‘they call you mister steve biko now you’re dead’, is a requiem or elegy for Biko. Both the song and the poem dwell on Biko’s death: but, in both, the event holds more significance than a mere individual’s passing. In the final verse of Peter Gabriel’s song, Biko is compared to a candle in the metaphor ‘you can blow out a candle’. What is the fire that cannot be extinguished?

Pronouns are important in ‘they call you mister steve biko now you’re dead’. Who are ‘they’ and who is ‘you’ in this poem? Clearly, ‘you’ is Steve Biko himself, while ‘they’ are the forces of the repressive apartheid government, who tortured and killed him. ‘They’ are now showing respect by using the title ‘mister’: when Biko was alive, they did not show such respect. There has been a change in ‘their’ way of speaking about Biko, because now that he is dead, and apartheid has ended, Biko has been recognised as a hero of the struggle and ‘they’ cannot oppose this view of him (even if they secretly harbour racist views of black revolutionaries). What is the tone of this line (which is repeated in the title, the first and the last stanzas)? Use the information box below to help you answer this question.

The tone of ‘they call you mister steve biko now you're dead’ is one of scepticism, or disbelief. The speaker does not believe that ‘they’ have had a change of heart at all. At the same time, there is a tone of sadness (after all, this is an elegy for someone who has died).

The poem contains two unusual usages of language. Write a paragraph on each of them and say what effect they have on the meaning of the poem.

The first unusual use of language in ‘they call you mister steve biko now you’re dead’ is the lack of punctuation, and particularly capital letters. Because there are no full stops or capital letters, the poem reads as one long extended sentence. It is almost like a chant, in the same way as mourners might chant a requiem at a funeral. In addition, not using capital letters for Biko’s name is a form of disrespect, showing the disrespect that he experienced at the hands of brutal apartheid police officers. Can you think of other meanings?
The second unusual usage of language is the repetition of certain words and phrases. The second line of each stanza consists of a small phrase that is repeated twice. Repetition is always used in order to stress or emphasise a point. Read the poem aloud now and see how these repetitions sound and what they emphasise.

You may have noticed how often the word ‘dead’ is used in the poem. It appears no less than seven times. It is as though the speaker wants to drive the finality of Biko’s brutal death home to the poem’s readers and audience. The fact of his death overrides his status as a hero, everything he wrote and in fact, everything else. It reminds us that, once a person is dead, his or her legacy may last, as Biko’s does, but they cannot return to life.

TIME TO WRITE

Look for images in the poem that convey positive connotations that have no value now that Biko is dead. Write them down and explore the pictures they create in your imagination. Write a paragraph (about 10 lines) about each of them.

At least one of these images, in the third stanza of the poem, is particularly poignant in capturing the finality of death. Once Biko had been declared dead in police custody, a formal investigation, called an inquest, was held to find out the cause of his death. The advocate who represented Biko’s family was Sydney Kentridge, one of the best legal practitioners in South Africa at the time (Seasons Come to Pass, 2002:216). Even he, the poem explains bitterly, cannot change the fact of death.

We noted earlier that both ‘they call you mister steve biko now you’re dead’ and Peter Gabriel’s song, ‘Biko’, present Biko’s death as an important event. What does it mean and why is it so important for South Africans?

If you answered the last question thoroughly, you would have been offering an explanation of how effective these two pieces of writing are as protest art. They were both written in protest against an inhuman system of government that could imprison, torture and kill people without reason and without warning.

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**Say No**

_Gcina Mhlophe (1958 – )_

SAY NO, BLACK Woman
Say No
When they call your jobless son
a Tsotsi*
Say No

Say No, Black Woman
Say No
When they call
Your husband at the age of 60
a boy
Say No

Say No, Black Woman

---

*Tsotsi* township slang for young men, usually criminals or gangsters
You will remember that, when we explored Shabbir Banoobhai’s poem, ‘they call you mister steve biko now you’re dead’, we mentioned that repetition is used in poems to emphasise a point or an idea. Bearing this in mind, what is the role and effect of repetition in ‘Say No’?

‘Say No’ differs from ‘they call you mister steve biko now you’re dead’ because it has a much more regular structure. Each stanza begins and ends with the same lines; in fact, the first two lines of each stanza are the same. These lines ‘Say No, Black Woman / Say No’ and ‘Say No’ become a chorus, as we would expect in a song where the same lines are often repeated at the end of a verse. Because they are written as instructions, they become orders addressed to any ‘Black Woman’ in South Africa.
Another feature of the language that may strike you is the use of capital letters. In contrast with ‘they call you mister steve biko now you’re dead’, ‘Say No’ uses capital letters even when we do not expect them. The phrase ‘Black Woman’ has two capital letters. What is the effect of this? How does it relate to the practice of using capital letters for people’s names?

The poem mentions six specific situations where a ‘Black Woman’ should ‘Say No’. Can you make a list of these situations?

We are going to explore just one of them. In the third stanza, the speaker says that the ‘Black Woman’ should ‘Say No’ when her daughter is raped in detention and called a whore. This stanza very concisely reminds us of the violence that is frequently practised on young black women in South Africa. They become targets of aggression and desire from men who think they can simply take what they want. This was even more widespread in the apartheid era. The detention laws allowed the police and military forces to take many women and men to prison without giving reasons. Once they were in prison, their guards were men, who frequently abused them, often sexually. The stanza goes on to say that the black woman’s daughter, who has been raped, will be called a ‘whore’ (a slang word for a prostitute or sex worker). This means that although she has been a victim of sexual violence and abuse, she will be labelled as guilty. Somehow it will be her fault that she has been raped. This situation reminds us of all the rape cases throughout history where male perpetrators have blamed their female victims because ‘she was asking for it’ or ‘she was dressed provocatively’. The speaker’s anger in this stanza, on behalf of the black woman whose daughter has been abused both physically (through rape) and verbally (through being called a whore) is powerful.

At this point you may begin to wonder why the speaker addresses the poem to ‘Black Woman’ (instead of to a representative of another group, such as ‘Black Man’). Is it because the poet herself is a black woman? Surely not. The reason is to be found in the fact that black women are often seen to be the most oppressed group in human society. They are ‘triply’ oppressed: by their gender, as women who are subservient to men; by their race, because black people are frequently seen to be less powerful than whites; and by their class, because they are often lower paid than black men, white women or black men. By addressing ‘Say No’ to a ‘Black Woman’, using capital letters to indicate the respect that is due to someone’s proper name, the speaker is trying to mobilise this most oppressed group of people in society.

**TIME TO WRITE**

‘Say No’ mentions all the categories of race and gender: black women, black men, white women and white men. Write a paragraph describing how the poem represents each of these groups.

You will have noticed that members of each of the above groups are represented in the poem. The ‘Black Woman’, to whom the poem is addressed, is instructed to respond to each of these groups in certain ways. We are only going to explore stanza four here. In this stanza, the ‘Black Woman’ is told to say no when her ‘white sister’ is called a ‘madam’. This refers, obviously, to the many black women who do domestic work in white women’s houses. The white employers are seen as ‘madams’ and sometimes insist on being called ‘madam’ by their black domestic workers in order to emphasise the power inequality between the two women. Stanza four of ‘Say No’ refuses this unequal relationship. Instead, it suggests that a white woman is the ‘sister’ of the black woman and is her equal. There is no need, the poem implies, for a black woman to have to bow down and accept being inferior to a white woman. If the black and
white women are sisters, this means that there can be no inequality based on race and that racism is not valid. Here the speaker is imagining a society that is not racially divided (which, unfortunately, we have not yet achieved).

The repetition of the word ‘No’, with a capital letter, in this poem, emphasises the power of refusal. The Black Woman to whom the poem is addressed has a number of indignities imposed upon her and her family. She cannot take these away, but she can refuse to accept the way these things position her and her family as less powerful and valuable than others in her society.

TIME TO THINK

Is ‘Say No’ an effective protest poem? Why?

Once you have answered the question above, take a few minutes to reflect on what you said. You will see that answering a question about whether a particular poem is effective or not covers a great number of features of the poem: its sounds, images, colours and the way it represents people and characters. (The people who are mentioned in ‘Say No’ have been carefully chosen to include the members of the black woman’s family and to include members from all race and gender groups in South Africa.) In order to give a good answer to the question of whether a poem is effective, you have to consider whether it communicates well or not. This means that you have to understand what the poem is trying to convey to the reader, and you have to assess whether it succeeds in doing so.

WRITING ABOUT POEMS

At the beginning of this chapter, I said that there is no single ‘right’ answer to what a poem means or how it creates meaning, and that this is because of the way language always evokes many meanings instead of one single meaning. This is certainly true, and one reader will always have a slightly different interpretation or view of a poem than another. But it is also true that you cannot write anything that comes into your thoughts when you are writing about poetry. Your writing about poetry must meet certain criteria:

* You must offer an interpretation of what the poem says
* You must provide a discussion of how the poem creates and conveys meaning (that is, the way the poet has used language to get the meaning across to the reader)
* Your remarks, observations and claims about the poem’s meaning must be supported by referring to the poem and to particular uses of language within it.

The last point is absolutely essential for any analysis of poetry. If, for example, you decided, fancifully, that ‘Say No’ was a poem that gave advice to someone not to eat too much when they were having dinner at a restaurant, you would need to quote from the poem to back up your opinion. You would soon (if not immediately) find out that it is impossible to do this because the poem does not even mention eating. You would then go on to read what the poem does say, and you would find out that it is addressed to a ‘Black Woman’ and advises her to refuse all the labels that white people use to distance themselves from black people and to make black people feel inferior.
In examining ‘Say No’, you might approach it from different angles. You might decide that the stanzas dealing with the black woman’s family are the most important and that the poem is primarily aimed at instructing the black woman to protect her family from dangerous and bruising labels such as ‘boy’ and ‘whore’. Or you might decide that the following two stanzas are the most important, and that the speaker’s vision of a non-racial society, where black and white people are truly equal, as brothers and sisters, is the goal of the poem. In this case you would see the stanzas dealing with the black woman’s family as merely steps towards achieving what the speaker really wants: a society that is racially fair and equal. You would be able to quote from the poem to support either of these two interpretations: the conflict between them would concern the relative importance of the stanzas, and not the overall meaning of the poem.

**FINAL THOUGHTS: HOW TO WRITE ABOUT POETRY**

**Steps in analysing poetry: a guide for the perplexed**

If you are daunted or intimidated by the study of poetry and the requirement to write coherent analyses of it, *don't panic*. Above all, *don't look for answers on the Internet*. A Google search can provide you with background information (such as the poem’s historical context, or the poet’s biography), but using these answers, which others have devised, will not help you to develop the skills you need to analyse poetry. Instead, follow these steps:

- **Begin with the title.** A poem’s title can often tell you a great deal about what the poem is going to be about and the approach the poet has taken to the poem’s theme. As you explore the title, you are likely to look more closely at the poem.
- **Look for unusual uses of language.** Unfamiliar words, or words that are used in unfamiliar ways, are clues that the poet has placed in the poem for you to unravel and to startle you into perceiving something in a new way. Take time to puzzle over what they mean.
- **Look at the images.** Figurative language – such as similes, metaphors and personification – creates images or pictures in words. What do these pictures look like? Use your imagination to re-create them and enjoy their details. How do they contribute to the poem’s meaning?
- **Explore repetition.** Any words, phrases or lines that are repeated in the poem are there for a reason. What do they emphasise?
- **Examine the sound of the poem.** Read the poem aloud, paying particular attention to rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia. These are five of the most common sound-effects used in poetry. How has the poet used these techniques?
- **Look for contrasts.** Poems frequently place concepts together that we would think are contrasts or opposites. Sometimes this produces irony, which is the effect of disappointing the reader’s expectations. (For example, in Wilfred Owen’s poem, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, much of the impact comes from the irony of the title. Apparently this phrase glorifies death in war, but as the poem progresses, it is shown to be untrue given the horrors of death by gas.)
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CHAPTER THREE

The novel
INTRODUCTION

In this chapter our first purpose is to introduce you to the wonderful world of literary fiction and to the joys of reading ‘good’ literature! We would like you, the student, to enjoy your encounter with the books we have chosen, and hopefully, the books we will inspire you to read. We would wish that reading becomes a habit, something you do every day, not because you have to but because you want to. Of course, for many (we hope, the majority) of the students reading this book, this is already the case. You will always have a book ‘on the go’, you will probably read in bed before you turn off the light at night, you will keep abreast of the new books being published, the prizewinners, but you will also be interested in reading the ‘classics’. This is our fervent hope, at any rate.

In this book we will be introducing you to some novels we believe are ‘worth studying’ – for various reasons, of course, and you may not always agree with our judgement. But what we do hope to achieve is that you become discerning readers, readers who understand the difference between ‘literary fiction’ and ‘popular’ writing. This is not to discount the latter – most people are eclectic in their tastes and read across the spectrum – but we do want you to know the difference between literary ‘fast food’ and fine dining.

We hope that by the time you have worked through this chapter you will have gained useful insights, which you can apply throughout your life, not just in your studies of English literature. We hope that, by highlighting some of the elements and workings of the novel, you will gain so much more from your reading and develop your ability to appreciate good literature. We aim to show you, too, that ‘good’ literature doesn’t have to be difficult or dry or boring. We think that you will see from the works we discuss here that these novels, despite the dates of their first publication, remain as fresh and relevant to us today as they were to their first readers.

This chapter refers in some detail to four novels: The Catcher in the Rye by JD Salinger, The Great Gatsby by F Scott Fitzgerald, Nervous Conditions by Tsitsi Dangarembga, and When Rain Clouds Gather by Bessie Head. We have chosen these novels, not only because we believe that they are wonderful stories, beautifully written, but because we are not alone in thinking so. The fact that they have endured and are as relevant and engaging today as they were when they were first published bears testimony to this. Some of you will have read these novels in the course of your studies, or simply for pleasure; but even if you haven’t, we hope you will find this chapter useful and informative. Remember that these novels are used only to provide examples. The aspects of the novel and literary fiction which are discussed here can be applied to any novel you read, to a greater or lesser extent.

Getting to know you, the reader of this book

Before we get started, we’d like to learn a little bit about you and your reading habits. Take a moment to respond to the following questions, either on your tablet or computer, or in your writer’s journal.

* I have read 5/10/50/more than 100 novels (fiction, storybooks) in my life.
GETTING STARTED

We said in the introduction that our aim in this chapter is to help you to appreciate good literature. How do we hope to achieve this? Of course, the first thing we would like you to do is simply to read, and hopefully to enjoy it. But our primary goal in this chapter is to assist you to read novels critically.

The first step is self-explanatory – you cannot think intelligently about a novel if you haven’t read it thoroughly. Unless you have a good idea of the plot (the storyline, what happens and why, and what the consequences are) you cannot begin to think about the actions and motivations of the characters. So you need to read the novel through at least once, preferably over a fairly short period. If you dip into it only now and then, over a long period, you will find that you have to keep going back to things and rereading to remind yourself of the content. Try, then, to read the novels that are prescribed for the course you are doing within a week – this will allow you to immerse yourself in the narrative and to appreciate and enjoy the writing as well as the story. At this point there is no need to take any notes – simply read for enjoyment.

The second point above is more complex, hinging on a solid and thoughtful reading of the text but going far beyond this – with the result, we truly believe, that you will enhance your enjoyment of reading tenfold. This step involves a critical reading of the novel. But what does this mean?

Critical or close reading

‘Critical’ in the sense of close, careful reading does not mean ‘censorious, fault-finding’, as defined in the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary. Rather, it means reading to gain a deeper ‘understanding [of] what the author has written and evaluating the success of the work as a whole’ (www.enotes.com/topics/how-read-literature-critically). In a sense it means reading between the lines, and reading with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of the text. This process is often referred to as ‘analysing literature’ although this does suggest a rather clinical approach. We prefer the term ‘close reading’ which suggests a deeper immersion in, and investigation of a text, with the emphasis always on ‘reading’ – in other words, this process cannot work if you do not read and reread the given text carefully.

Now read carefully what John Lye, Professor of English at Brock University in Ontario, Canada, has to say in his A Guide Designed for His Year 1 Students:

“This is a guide to what you might look for in analyzing literature, particularly poetry and fiction. An analysis explains what a work of literature means, and how it means it; it is essentially an articulation of and a defence of an interpretation which shows how the resources of literature are used to create the meaningfulness of the text.
There are people who resist analysis, believing that it 'tears apart' a work of art; however, a work of art is an artifice, that is, it is made by someone with an end in view: as a made thing, it can be and should be analysed as well as appreciated.

Lye believes there are several important reasons why we should analyse literature:

• Analysis provides us with a deeper understanding and a greater appreciation of the literature. Analysis teaches the student to delve more deeply into the text and in this way to reveal the deeper, richer meaning.
• Analysis teaches the student to look more closely at the way in which literature uses language and imagery to create meaning.
• Literature is situated in a particular historical, social, intellectual and ideological context, and has particular cultural, personal, gender, racial, class and other perspectives. Literature can help us to understand our own culture and time, as well as having historical applications.
• Through close reading and through reflection, we begin to understand the way ideas and feelings are talked about in our culture or in other times and cultures; to have a sense both of communities of meaning, and of the different kinds of understanding there can be about matters of importance to human life. (Lye, 1996 & 1997)

All this encourages the reader to look closely at the language the writer has used, specifically at expressive language, or poetic or figurative language – similes, metaphors, sound devices etc. – which he or she has used to create images, or word pictures, which enhance the meaning and effect of the text. You will remember that these examples of figurative language were introduced to you in chapter 2. Refer to the explanations provided there if you need to.

Then, close reading helps us to gain a better understanding of the context of the novel, what Lye calls the ‘cultural’ and ‘ideological’ aspects. In order to gain a richer understanding of any work of literature, the reader must be aware of the social, historical and ideological background of the text. This allows us to ‘place it in context’ and provides us with another dimension of understanding.

If we know something about the historical and cultural background of novels such as *The Catcher in the Rye* or *When Rain Clouds Gather*, for instance, it gives us much more insight into the characters of Holden Caulfield and Makhaya Maseko and their words and actions. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden is portrayed as a ‘rebel against the status quo’ (Graham, 2007:9). In the 1940s and 1950s (this novel is set in 1949), American society became conservative in its attitudes and reactions to the fears aroused by the Cold War. This conservatism went hand in hand with an economic boom, which especially favoured white, middle-class America. Knowing something about Holden’s own affluent and privileged background, and the fact that he has never really had to think about money or about where it comes from, but that he is intensely aware of the trappings of wealth and social privilege even though he pretends to disparage them, adds to our understanding of his fixation with class and appearance. This helps us to understand his character better. Without this knowledge we would still be able to read and enjoy the novel, but only on a very superficial level.
In the same way, in *When Rain Clouds Gather* we read the following passage early on in the novel:

**When Rain Clouds Gather**  
*Bessie Head*

FOR ALL HIS strange new ideas, the family had not wanted to part with him. In fact he had left his mother in a complete state of collapse, and though at the time he had pretended to be unmoved by all the tears and sighs, it was all this that had made him drink brandy throughout the afternoon. His reasons for leaving were simple: he could not marry and have children in a country where black men were called ‘boy’ and ‘dog’ and ‘kaffir’. The continent of Africa was vast without end and he simply felt like moving out of a part of it that was mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false beliefs.

(Head, 1972:16)

Our understanding of this passage is enriched if we know something about the historical and political background: Makhaya is a young South African man who flees his country to escape the oppression of the apartheid regime. In Botswana he eventually finds peace of mind and a sense of fulfilment in a rural village peopled by an odd assortment of characters, many of whom are also seeking a release from some inner turmoil. His experiences in Botswana and his feelings about his homeland are closely based on the life of the author of the novel, Bessie Head.

Close reading allows us an insight into how people thought about issues in times different from our own, but also how these ideas can relate to our own ideas and lives today. So, even if a novel is set in the nineteenth century, such as Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, we can still read it and appreciate its meaning and even relate it in some ways to our own lives. This is what is meant by the **universality** of certain issues.

But how do we apply all this to the novels you will be reading in your literature courses? Lye (1996 & 1997) puts it this way:

“\The analysis of fiction has many similarities to the analysis of poetry. As a rule a work of fiction is a narrative, with characters, with a setting, told by a narrator, with some claim to represent ‘the world’ in some fashion.\n
This certainly puts it very succinctly, and pretty much sums up most of the novels the average reader encounters in his or her studies. It is certainly true of novels such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Great Gatsby*, *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Nervous Conditions*. What you as reader need to focus on, then, in your close reading of the text and in order to gain a deeper insight into any novel you read, is:

- plot
- characterisation
- setting of the novel
- language used, particularly figurative language
Before we look more closely at each of these aspects of the novel, this is a good place to think about the concept of the novel itself. Some novels, such as *Nervous Conditions* and *When Rain Clouds Gather*, may be or may appear to be based on the author’s own life, or to draw very closely on it in certain aspects. These are **autobiographical** novels. Simply put, an autobiography is the story of a writer’s own life. The word is a combination of words derived from Greek, *autos* (self), *bios* (life) and *graphos* (writing). But an autobiographical novel is *not* an autobiography – rather, it is a fictionalised account of the writer’s life, or a story that is based, closely or loosely, on the author’s own life or experiences. In this sense, of course, it is clear that most, if not all, novelists will use aspects of their own experiences to inspire their writing.

**Fiction** is another important term that you will encounter in your studies. Fiction, as Abrams (1971:59–60) puts it, ‘is any narrative which is feigned [imagined, made up] or invented rather than historically or factually true’. Today the term ‘is applied mostly to prose narratives (the novel or the short story), and is sometimes used simply as a synonym for the novel’. This is what sets an autobiographical novel such as *Nervous Conditions* apart from an autobiography such as *Call Me Woman* by Ellen Kuzwayo. The former takes elements from the author’s own life and weaves them into the narrative of the novel. But these elements are not necessarily strictly factual, nor does the author claim that they are. Sometimes a character is closely based on the author (in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, for instance, the main character, Makhaya, though a man, can be closely identified with the author, Bessie Head: there are elements of Head’s own life in this complex character. His feelings about South Africa, and his experiences there, echo Head’s own feelings and experiences, for instance.

Like Head, Makhaya finds peace in the rural community in which he settles in the novel). In *Nervous Conditions*, on the other hand, we can see aspects of the author in all the women she portrays in her novel. And in many ways it would appear that the character closest to the real Tsitsi Dangarembga is probably Nyasha, and not Tambu. Nyasha is the character who, through the illness anorexia nervosa, reflects the dislocation or ‘nervous conditions’ which Dangarembga herself experienced in her own struggle for education as a young black Zimbabwean woman during in the sixties. As Dangarembga said in an interview with Seal Press,

> Tambu and Nyasha represent different kinds of girlhood or young womanhood. Yet whatever the class and/or cultural difference there are between them, they still have to struggle with becoming a person given the common constraint of being a woman. Tambu tells the story for two reasons: Firstly, it is easier for her to tell her story honestly as her psychological condition is not as contorted as Nyasha's. Secondly, I wanted more Zimbabwean and other African women to be able to identify with the narrator than would have been the case if the anglicised Nyasha had been narrating. (2004)

The author of an autobiography such as Ellen Kuzwayo’s *Call Me Woman*, on the other hand, professes to have presented a fairly accurate and truthful, if subjective, account of her own life, and as such it would be regarded as non-fiction.

This talk of fiction and non-fiction leads logically to a brief discussion of the term **genre**. The word genre refers to the categories, or
literary forms, based on form, style, or subject matter, into which artistic works of all kinds can be divided. The three main literary categories are poetry, drama and fiction, or narrative (including the novel and the short story). But these categories can be broken down further: for example, the detective novel is a genre of fiction, while the sonnet would belong to the genre of poetry. *Nervous Conditions, When Rain Clouds Gather, The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Great Gatsby* are all novels, belonging to the genre of fiction, though they are different in style and approach.

But let’s start now with a closer look at the workings of the novel itself. We will begin with **plot**.

**PLOT**

The plot of a work of fiction is more than simply ‘the story’. Certainly, the events make up the story, but plot includes the way these events relate to each other, and the ‘cause and effect’ elements of the story. When you first started writing narratives at primary school, you probably related events chronologically – that is, from the first incident to the last. Many works of fiction employ this method too. However, you are just as likely to encounter texts which start at the end and work backwards, using a retrospective method of narration and including flashbacks, or novels which start in the midst of events – *in medias res*, to use the Latin term, meaning literally ‘in the middle of things’ – where the narrative begins by plunging the reader into the midst of the action. Novels may be **episodic**, or have plots and **subplots** – there are as many variations as there are writers.

As a start, let’s think about the novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, one with which many of you will be very familiar. This novel plays out over a very short time, only three days, in the life of the main character, Holden Caulfield – but it is packed with incidents and dominated by dialogue. In the opening passage of the novel, it becomes clear to the reader that Holden is relating his experiences of six months before and that the narrative plays out in a series of flashbacks.

This is a technique with which we are quite conversant these days as it is often used in films. The action begins at the end, as it were, and flashbacks, or scenes or events from the past
appear in a narrative, often out of chronological order, to fill in information or explain something in the present.

This technique allows the author to provide details of the background story, allowing for the introduction of important details from the past without having to tell the whole story from beginning to end – this is very skilfully done in *The Catcher in the Rye*, in particular where Holden says he won’t mention something or tell the whole story but then goes on to do just that, as in the opening pages of the novel. Read the first paragraph of the novel and then the passages on pages 5 and 6.

These are very rich passages in many ways: they introduce us to Holden’s idiosyncratic manner of speaking, his tendency to digress, and his habitual exaggeration. These early paragraphs of the novel provide several clues to what the novel is about. It is clear to the reader that the narrator is looking back over something that has happened in his past, and there are several elements of foreshadowing, i.e. references to people, objects, and incidents which the reader may think little of at the time but which will emerge later as crucial to the action of the story.

**TIME TO WRITE**

We would like you to look closely at the first paragraph of *The Catcher in the Rye* and pages 5–6 of the novel. See what you can discover about what is to come. What do you think the author is able to achieve by using the technique of the flashback? If you have read the novel already, this will be a most rewarding exercise, but even if you haven't, you can achieve something by it. Look very closely at what Holden says and make a list of things that strike you as interesting, odd or intriguing. Then refer to this list as you read the novel – you will soon begin to see how these ideas are developed and woven into the fabric of Holden’s tale.

Although Holden says that he will not tell the reader his whole life story, he does in fact relate a story, even if he does not abide by the conventions of the autobiography. We learn several important details in this first passage: Holden is in some sort of rest home or sanatorium; he is in California, on the other side of the continent from where the action of the novel plays out. In this opening passage, Holden mentions people who do not feature very much in the narrative – his parents and his older brother, D.B. It is a reminder that the story is told from the perspective of a child or adolescent, and adults are often on the periphery, or seen as disappointing, even corrupt or not to be trusted. We are also introduced to Holden’s tendency to digress – to wander off the point and to talk about seemingly unrelated matters, to make what are apparently non sequiturs, a term from Latin which means simply to say things that don’t seem to follow from what has gone before. But this is one of Holden’s idiosyncrasies with which the reader soon becomes familiar, and we realise that these digressions tell us a great deal about Holden, his preoccupations, and his character. So, as early as the first page of the novel, the reader begins to form a picture of the main character, in this case the narrator, and the plot – what it will be about.

A second novel with which many of you will be familiar and which also employs the technique of flashbacks is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. This novel is told from the
For the perspective of the narrator, Nick Carraway, and, again, one of the very first passages reveals that this is a story which the narrator is looking back on:

**The Great Gatsby**
*F. Scott Fitzgerald*

WHEN I CAME back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever: I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction – Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the ‘creative temperament’ – it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No – Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.

(Fitzgerald, 1980:7–8)

Much of the reading process involves prediction, guessing (making an educated guess, that is) what comes next. This habit of human nature allows authors to frustrate our expectations as readers and to create all manner of plot twists and ironies. Now that you have read the passage, write a short, predictive paragraph in which you spell out what you expect from *The Great Gatsby*, based on this opening paragraph. We hope that this exercise will encourage you to read the entire novel at some point – if you haven’t already done so.

### Keeping a reader’s log

It is very useful to keep a record of what you read – if you can, try to make a few notes about each book when you have finished reading it. This helps you to become a more critical and discerning reader, and will also allow you to map your progress. By this we hope that, even if you are fairly new to the pursuit of reading for pleasure and have as yet only really read books you have had to, by the time you have worked through this book you will have a considerable list of books in this logbook, diary or journal, which you have read because you wanted to! It is also interesting to note why you read the book in the first place – did someone tell you about it (word of mouth), did you read about it (a book review in a magazine, newspaper, on the internet in a blog, or an email) or did you just happen to come across it in a shop or in the library (the jacket caught your eye, you’d heard the author’s name somewhere)?

Recently we discovered a website called www.goodreads.com which allows you to keep a list of books you’ve read as well as a wish list of those you would like to or plan to read. This is something you could use your book journal for, too – I always have a notebook with me in which I jot down names of books, authors, or topics that would be interesting to read about. Then when I am in a library or a bookshop or just browsing one of the myriad sites on the Internet which sell or talk about books, I can refer to this list. If you have access to the Internet, there are also many podcasts available in which various people talk about and review books. This is a wonderful way of finding out about what is out there to read.
Narrative (or story-telling) is part of the human experience. Think for a moment about how you use narrative to remember things in your life, to relate to and communicate with other people and to make sense of your experiences. Now write a very brief introductory paragraph to the 'story of your life'. You can employ any style of narrative you like. For instance, you could write a first-person autobiographical account, or you could write from the point of view of someone close to you, or an objective third-person narrator. The choice is yours ... there are all sorts of ways you could do this.

How would you make sense of a novel in which there was no discernible order to the events? Have you ever read a novel like this, or perhaps seen a film in which events seem to be completely disjointed and unrelated, until perhaps the last few moments? What were your reactions?

Conflict in plot

The plot of a novel will often feature points of conflict or tension, which form the very foundation or heart of the story. Many works of fiction depict a character at odds, or in conflict, with his/her society, which s/he feels is hostile or antagonistic. It is this tension which drives the action. It may be, however, that this conflict is an inner conflict; consider Holden’s state of inner turmoil. He longs to belong (most especially to those he loves such as his sister and his parents) but he rejects conformity (expressed in things like his habit of wearing a red hunting cap) and all that he sees as ‘phoney’. It is this inner conflict that drives the action.

In the novel When Rain Clouds Gather by Bessie Head, the main character, Makhaya, is conflicted by the pain and grief he endured in South Africa and the circumstances that have driven him to flee to Botswana.

When Rain Clouds Gather

Bessie Head

MAKHAYA’S OTHER GRIEFS were more difficult to resolve, as these turned inward to his own life and his own need to attach a meaning to it. It was because his inner life had been a battle ground of strife and conflict that made him attach such importance to its meaning. There was something in this inner friction that had propelled him, all by himself, along a lonely road, and he could not help noticing its loneliness because everything he desired and needed seemed to be needed by no one else in his own environment, among his own people and clan. This was aggravated by the fact that he had been born into one of the most custom-bound and conservative tribes in the whole African continent, where half the men and women still walked around in skins and beads, and even those who had moved to the cities moved with their traditions too. ... There was some woman he had to buy at some stage, the way you bought a table you were going to keep in some back room and not care very much about. It was only once his father had died that he was able to come forward with his own strange Makhaya smiles and originality of mind. It was a new man who stood there, quiet and dignified, gentle and relaxed, but there was nothing in his own environment to account for all the secret development that had taken place in him.

Things wouldn't have been so bad if black men as a whole had not accepted their oppression, and added to it with their own taboos and traditions. Once he had pulled away from these taboos, he found the definition of a black man unacceptable to him. There were things like Baas and Master he would never call a white man, even if they shot him dead.
Makhaya thinks of his inner life in warlike terms as a ‘battleground of strife and conflict’. In his new life in Botswana he attempts to move beyond this. Although he resolves his crises in a very different way from the way Holden tackles his own demons, the basic situation of inner conflict is the same in both novels.

TIME TO WRITE

Look carefully at the language in the passage above. Write a paragraph about what you can gather about Makhaya’s character and his circumstances from this passage.

In Nervous Conditions, the narrator and main character, Tambu, is a young girl growing up in Zimbabwe (then known as Rhodesia) in the sixties. She finds herself in conflict with the two forces of patriarchy and colonialism: in addition to the injustices inflicted on her because of her femaleness (‘but what I didn’t like was the way the conflicts all came back to the question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness’ (Dangarembga, 2004:118)), she also experiences a growing realisation of the African woman’s double oppression under the colonial system.

In a telling comment, Tambu sums up the circumstances against which she found herself pitted as a child:

Nervous Conditions
Tsitsi Dangarembga

MY MOTHER WAS too old to be disturbed by my childish nonsense. She tried to diffuse some of it by telling me many things, by explaining that my father was right because even Maiguru knew how to cook and clean and grow vegetables. ‘This business of womanhood is a heavy burden’, she said. ‘How could it not be? Aren’t we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can’t just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy: you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easier later on. Easy! As if it is ever easy. And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength.’

(Dangarembga, 2004:16)

Note how this example of a flashback allows the author to present the older Tambu looking back on her childhood self with a sense of irony at the way in which the child Tambu took these words of her mother as the truth. This is set against the implied reminder of the way the older and adult Tambu has rebelled against these constraints.

Irony in its simplest form consists of saying one thing while meaning the opposite (Mikics, 2007:160). For instance, in Nervous Conditions, it is ironic when Babamukuru praises Tambu’s father Jeremiah for the excellent work he has done mending the roof of the homestead; we the readers, together with Tambu, know full well that he did nothing but sit and drink and watch Tambu and her siblings doing all the work.
Tambu experiences internal conflict in her quest for a better life through education, and the realisation that much of what she has been striving for has alienated her from her own culture. This cultural alienation is an important theme in the novel, and Nyasha warns Tambu of this: ‘It’s bad enough ... when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That’s the end, really, that’s the end!’ (Dangarembga, 2004:150). She continues, referring to Tambu’s enthusiastic embrace of the European convent school and all it represents for her:

**Nervous Conditions**

*Tsitsi Dangarembga*

THE PROCESS, SHE said, was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves, whereas the others – well really, who cared about the others? So they made a little space into which you were assimilated, an honorary space in which you could join them and they could make sure you behaved yourself. I would be comfortable in such a position, she remarked nastily, because look how well I had got on with Babamukuru. But, she insisted, one ought not to occupy that space. Really, one ought to refuse. In my case that meant not going to the nun’s mission. ‘You’ll fall for their tricks,’ she said, pointing out that I would obtain a much more useful education at the mission.

*(Dangarembga, 2004:182)*

All these ideas are at the core of Tambu’s resentment and refusal to accept her situation: they are at the core, then, of her conflict and her battle against her circumstances. The tribal society she is born into is strongly patriarchal; as noted above, patriarchy is a term which means ‘a society ruled or controlled by men’, simply by virtue of the fact that they are men, and not because they necessarily have the ability or moral rectitude to be in a position of superiority over women. In fact, most of the men in Tambu’s life provide most inappropriate and unworthy role models. Her father is a no-good lay-about, her brother is arrogant and uncaring towards his sisters and mother, and even her uncle Babamukuru, whom at first she reveres almost as a god, turns out to have feet of clay. Ironically, it is the women she is closest to who earn her greatest respect.

It is these conflicts which are summed up in the metaphor of escape which runs through the whole novel – an example of a motif or theme which occurs throughout the novel and one of the ways in which the author conveys the central message of her story.
This escape can in itself be seen as a kind of conflict, a rebellion against the constraining forces of Tambu’s life.

**TIME TO THINK**

Thinking back on what we have covered so far in this chapter, consider the tensions and points of conflict which confront Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Tambu in *Nervous Conditions*, and Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

Are these tensions and conflicts in any way similar? How do these characters attempt to resolve these tensions?

**SETTING**

The next important aspect of the novel we will discuss is its setting. The setting of the novel refers to where – the general location – and when – the historical time – the action or the narrative takes place.

By now you will have realised that the setting of the novels discussed here is pretty varied. Think about the effect of the setting, and the author’s purpose in choosing this particular location and time in each case. Could the setting be said to be a character in its own right in some of these novels? *The Catcher in the Rye* covers a mere three days. Much of this time Holden spends wandering through Manhattan in New York, where his family apartment is. He spends a night in a hotel, reluctant to go home and face the music – having to admit to his parents that he has yet again been expelled from school. On the Sunday he wanders the streets, meeting a series of characters on his way, and is eventually drawn inexorably to the apartment, and a **cathartic** meeting with his younger sister, Phoebe. But he doesn’t stay, and ends up visiting one of his teachers, Mr Antolini. On the Monday afternoon, he meets Phoebe at the carousel in Central Park. The last chapter brings us back to the starting point of the novel, six
months after the events of the main narrative.

*When Rain Clouds Gather* is the story of Makhaya, a young South African Zulu and political prisoner. Unable to endure the miseries which apartheid has inflicted, he flees South Africa and crosses into Botswana in the dead of night. Eventually he finds himself, with the help of the old man Dinorego, in the village of Golema Mmidi.

Here he becomes part of the village community, made up of an odd assortment of exiles and refugees, and through his involvement in the activities of an agricultural cooperative started by Gilbert Balfour, an Englishman, Makhaya begins to recover his perspective on issues such as power, race and oppression, and to find peace at last. He finds fulfilment and happiness in the relationships he forms in this village, in particular those with Gilbert, who becomes his closest friend, and with Paulina, with whom he falls in love. These relationships and his success in teaching the women of the village to grow tobacco and in this way to improve their quality of life are hugely instrumental in restoring his faith in humanity and allowing him to recover from the suffering caused by apartheid.
So, almost all day long, Golema Mmidi rocked to the blast of dynamite charges, and huge quantities of earth and rock were hurled high into the air. Makhaya, who buried and set off the charges, was often near enough to be splattered by rock and earth. He liked the drama and the irony, for not so very long ago he had come out of jail for wanting to use this very dynamite against the enemies of human dignity. It was like a self-mockery, this splattering of rock and earth, to realize that he was indeed powerless to change an evil and that there were millions and millions of men built differently from him who enjoyed inflicting misery and degradation on a helpless and enslaved people. By contrast, Golema Mmidi seemed a dream he had evoked out of his own consciousness to help him live, to help make life tolerable. But if it was a dream, it was a merciful one, where women walked around all day with their bare feet and there were no notices up saying black men could not listen to the twitter and chatter of birds.

(Head, 1972:136–7)

**TIME TO WRITE**

Now make some notes in your journal on the effects of the setting on the character of Makhaya in When Rain Clouds Gather, as implied in the passage above.

How does the landscape and the community of Golema Mmidi reflect and affect his very nature? Think of the irony in the meaning of his name, which is ‘one who stays at home’. Consider, too, the implications of the fact that he has escaped from one ‘setting’, namely South Africa and imprisonment there, and now finds himself in a strange but ultimately embracing community in a neighbouring country, in another similar, yet in many ways very different, setting. Does setting take on political and historical dimensions here?

In *Nervous Conditions*, by a trick of fate – the untimely death of her brother, Nhamo – Tambu is taken from her rural homestead to attend school on the mission where her uncle is headmaster. As a child, she regards her uncle as her salvation, sweeping her away from the poverty and daily drudgery of rural life to the glamour of the mission. As she grows older and wiser, she begins to see her uncle in a different, more critical light: but here she is still mesmerised by his powers to transform her life and what she sees as his magnificent generosity.

**Nervous Conditions**

*Tsitsi Dangarembga*

THEN I DISCOVERED that Nhamo had not been lying. Babamukuru was indeed a man of consequence however you measured him. The old building that had disappointed me turned out to be a garage. It was built to shelter cars, not people! And this garage sheltered two cars. Not one, but two cars. Nhamo’s chorus sang in my head and now it sounded ominous. Its phrases told me something I did not want to know, that my Babamukuru was not the person I had thought he was. He was wealthier than I had thought possible. He was educated beyond books. And he had done it alone. He had pushed up from under the weight of the white man with no strong relative to help him.

(Dangarembga, 2004:64)

**TIME TO THINK**

What are the effects on Tambu of the differences between the rural setting of the homestead and the westernised mission school? Think about her description of her uncle’s house on the mission the first time she sees it. Consider, in particular, the irony of this description, told from the child’s perspective but with the adult voice very clear. What does it tell about the inner conflicts the character of Tambu faces? How does the author create a sense of irony here?
The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald

IT WAS A matter of chance that I should have rented a house in one of the strangest communities in North America.

It was on that slender riotous island which extends itself due east of New York – and where there are, among other natural curiosities, two unusual formations of land. ... Twenty miles from the city a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. They are not perfect ovals – like the egg in the Columbus story, they are both crushed flat at the contact end – but their physical resemblance must be a source of perpetual confusion to the gulls that fly overhead. To the wingless a more arresting phenomenon is the dissimilarity in every particular except shape and size.

I lived at West Egg, the – well, the less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them. My house was at the very tip of the egg ... the one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard ....

Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water, and the history of the summer really begins on the evening I drove over there to have dinner with the Tom Buchanan...

(Fitzgerald, 1980:10–11)

Of these two communities, East Egg is populated by people like Tom and Daisy Buchanan, who are representative of snobbish, and in Tom’s case, bigoted, idle, rich people who believe that inherited money one has not had to work for is better than money one has earned – and especially money earned by shady means as Gatsby appears to have done. This, in a sense, is the fundamental truth that Gatsby never realises and which belies the promise of the

The American Dream

The American Dream is the dream of being wealthy and having all the possessions that demonstrate that wealth. It is the dream that if you have financial success you will have happiness, and that anyone can achieve this, regardless of their origins, with enough hard work and effort. But in this novel the purity of the dream is seen to be tarnished by relentless materialism, by the desire for money above all else, no matter how it is gained. To Gatsby, the American Dream and 'having' Daisy as his wife are inextricably linked.

Gatsby’s past, however, is shrouded in mystery and he is the subject of much gossip and conjecture. Years ago he fell in love with Daisy Fay, now married to Tom Buchanan. He has come to New York with the explicit goal of winning her back, of ‘reliving the past’:

Of these two communities, East Egg is populated by people like Tom and Daisy Buchanan, who are representative of snobbish, and in Tom’s case, bigoted, idle, rich people who believe that inherited money one has not had to work for is better than money one has earned – and especially money earned by shady means as Gatsby appears to have done. This, in a sense, is the fundamental truth that Gatsby never realises and which belies the promise of the

bigot
a person with very strong, unreasonable beliefs or opinions about race, religion or politics and who will not listen to or accept the opinions of anyone who
American Dream – that anyone can achieve anything through hard work. It does not matter that Gatsby has money, a huge ostentatious mansion to rival the Buchanans’ house, and smart cars – all this counts for nothing to the established wealthy and he will never be part of their social and economic circle. To them Gatsby will always be nouveau riche, ‘meretricious’, an interloper.

This is symbolised by the setting and the division of this part of Long Island into the two Eggs: fashionable East Egg where those with ‘old money’ and the socially powerful live, and the less fashionable West Egg where the nouveau riche like Gatsby and the less successful and wealthy like Nick are forced to live. These ‘eggs’ are all but indistinguishable, superficially ‘identical’, separated by a ‘courtesy bay’ and yet, as Gatsby and Nick discover, they are worlds apart in many ways. Despite his plans and ‘schedule’ for self-improvement, despite the denial of his name and origins, Gatsby can never escape his past and his humble background. He will never be accepted in East Egg – he has to settle for an ostentatious mansion across the bay in West Egg, across the bay from the Buchanan’s home in fashionable East Egg, tantalisingly close across the water but miles apart in class and social standing. Gatsby’s failure to win Daisy is part of this: Daisy marries Tom and stays with him because of the life of privilege he represents, a life in which she can continue to be decorative and childlike, one in which she never really has to grow up or face the realities and responsibilities of adulthood.

Between the two Eggs and New York lies the Valley of Ashes:

ABOVE HALF WAY between West Egg and New York the motor-road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens, where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud which screens their obscure operations from your sight (Fitzgerald, 1980:29).

TIME TO THINK

This is a description of the stretch of land between West Egg and New York, where George Wilson, the husband of Myrtle who is Tom’s lover, has his garage. What do you suppose the Valley of Ashes represents? Might it be the ashes of the American Dream, a graveyard of broken dreams which, for so many, like George Wilson, has burnt out and come to nothing? Look at the highlighted words in the passage above – and note the difference in the imagery the author uses here and in the passage above this. In the first passage the metaphor of the Eggs as ‘perfect ovals’ suggests something natural, beautiful and harmonious. The setting seems safe and nurturing – the water is ‘domesticated’ like a ‘great wet barnyard’. But, notice the use of the word ‘sinister’ in the second paragraph: does this introduce a change of tone, a hint at something lurking beneath the surface? Contrast this to the impressions created in the second passage – how do you feel about the Valley of Ashes?
Pastoral in literature means the depiction of rural life or the countryside in romantic terms. As we know, in our modern world, rural life is often very far from being gentle, simple and romantic.

Characterisation

Characters in literature are as diverse as the human beings on whom they are modelled. While they are like ordinary human beings because they are modelled on people, they differ from ordinary human beings in that the author may use characters to explore or highlight certain elements of human experience. This means that characters often represent certain traits or characteristics of human nature – and of course the details that an author chooses to focus on are significant in themselves. Consider Holden Caulfield, for instance: what traits or characteristics has Salinger focused on in this character? And how does Holden differ from what we learn about his younger, dead brother, Allie? What traits does Tsitsi Dangarembga focus on in her portrayal of Tambu’s brother, Nhamo? What is the author saying about men in her society through her depiction of the characters of Nhamo and his father, for instance?

The fact is that characters in literature are not ‘real’ people but rather a construction created by a particular author. They come to life in the pages of that particular novel, but do not have an existence beyond the book. As Baruch Hochman (1985:60) puts it,
Indeed, if the characters in literature are like people at all, in the ordinary sense, they are like dead people.

The characters in literature, once they are 'written', are finished like the dead.

The character is created by the author to serve his or her own imaginative purpose and intentions – in other words, to convey what the author wants to in that particular work of fiction. The reader, through the act of close reading, understands and interprets these characters and their actions and in this way, too, the writer’s intentions. But despite their ‘unreality’, literary characters may be complex, just like real people, revealing both good and bad qualities and not always behaving as we expect them to. This is what makes well-drawn characters engaging and believable, and allows us to identify with them, to empathise and feel drawn to them, or perhaps even to positively dislike them.

**TIME TO WRITE**

Many of you will probably enjoy watching soap operas on television. Why is it, do you think, that we get so ‘hooked’ on these dramas? What is it about them that draws us to them? Think about the degree to which we identify with the characters in these dramas. Are they always ‘real’? Or do they tend to be exaggerated caricatures, one-sided stereotypes? In your journal, write a paragraph about your favourite soap opera character, and try to explain why you identify with this character.

Just as people change and develop as they grow and mature, so characters in literature change over time. This change and development as we grow up has become one of the great themes in modern literature, and such ‘novels of development’, charting a character’s development from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, are often referred to by the German term Bildungsroman. This term denotes a novel of all-around self-development or ‘coming of age’. *Bildungsroman* is a German term which means the ‘development of self through knowledge’ (Mikics, 2007:40). The word *bildung* means education, and these stories usually show the character finding his or her way in life through a combination of learning, often about him or herself, and experience. This is usually a story which centres on a young person. In a way, this sort of story is also the story of a quest, ‘a hero’s journey that involves various trials’ (Mikics, 2007:252).

The protagonists (the main character or ‘hero/heroine’) will in many cases suffer a loss or experience some form of crisis, which initiates their journey away from their home or familiar setting early on in their development. They move from a state of ‘innocence’ (in childhood, adolescence) to one of ‘experience’ (in approaching adulthood).

A very famous example of this genre or type of writing is one of the novels we focus on in this chapter, *The Catcher in the Rye*. In this novel, the young narrator, Holden Caulfield, is looking back on three days spent wandering New York after suffering a crisis: he has – yet again – been expelled from school. Over the course of the novel we see how he moves from a state of innocence to one of experience.

At a point in the novel, late on the Sunday evening after wandering the city all day, Holden’s thoughts turn to being dead himself, and the pain this would cause his sister Phoebe (and, by implication, his mother), so he decides to go home before he dies of pneumonia from the cold winter night. With a sense of relief he reaches the turning point in the novel. Refer to page 163
in your copy of the novel to read his words.

But facing Phoebe means admitting to being expelled from school (read pages 171–172). Having made peace, this conversation ends on a sombre note (read pages 179–180).

This is a turning point in the novel, one which marks a move away from childhood and innocence and inexperience towards adulthood and experience: Holden wants to ‘catch’ the children he pictures playing a game in a field of rye, or to prevent them from falling in the first place – he wishes to preserve the innocence of childhood, represented physically by Phoebe but also implicitly by his own childhood. He is frightened of growing older, of crossing the divide into adulthood, with all its attendant responsibilities and challenges, not least of which are relationships and sex.

_Nervous Conditions_ also falls into the category of the _Bildungsroman_. Tambu is launched on her quest for education through the unfortunate but, for her, providential death of her brother Nhamo. In his place, she is given the chance to attend her uncle’s mission school. But her journey, or what she terms her ‘escape’, is fraught with problems and her freedom to be educated is hard won. When she wins the battle and finally attends high school at the Sacred Heart convent, she begins to question the very nature of her escape, and again we observe a move from a state of innocence and an approach to adulthood and all the questions and responsibilities it brings with it. Towards the end of the novel, there is a crisis – Tambu’s cousin, Nyasha, succumbs to anorexia nervosa and is rushed to Salisbury (Harare). The events that follow cause Tambu to question her own situation:

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**Nervous Conditions**

_Tsitsi Dangarembga_

IT WAS DIFFICULT to accept this thing that had happened, particularly difficult because I had no explanation. If you had asked me before it all began, I would have said it was impossible. I would have said it was impossible for people who had everything to suffer so extremely.

I may have had no explanation, but my mother had. She was very definite.

‘It’s the Englishness,’ she said. ‘It’ll kill them all if they aren’t careful,’ she snorted. ‘Look at them. That boy Chido can hardly speak a word of his mother’s own tongue and, you’ll see, his children will be worse .... ’

... She went on like this for quite a while, going on about how you couldn’t expect the ancestors to stomach so much Englishness. She didn’t mention Nhamo, but I was beginning to follow her trend of thought. I knew she was thinking about him and I could see she considered me a victim too: ‘The problem is the Englishness, so you just be careful!’

It was a warning, a threat that would have had disastrous effects if I had let it. When you’re afraid of something it doesn’t help to have people who know more than you do come out and tell you you’re quite right. Mother knew a lot of things and I had regard for her knowledge. Be careful, she had said, and I thought about Nyasha and Chido and Nhamo, who had all succumbed, and of my own creeping feelings of doom. Was I being careful enough? I wondered. For I was beginning to have a suspicion, no more than the seed of a suspicion, that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the ‘Englishness’ of the mission; and after that the more concentrated ‘Englishness’ of Sacred Heart. The suspicion remained for a few days .... But term-time was fast approaching and the thought of returning to Sacred Heart filled me with pleasure. ... I told myself I was a much more sensible person than Nyasha, because I knew what could or couldn’t be done. In this way I banished the suspicion, buried it in the depths of my subconscious, and happily went back to Sacred Heart.

I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow. Although I was not aware of it then, no longer could
I accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise on my horizon. Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion.

(Dangarembga, 2004:207–208).

TIME TO WRITE

Both The Catcher in the Rye and Nervous Conditions feature the developing consciousness of the main characters through the experience of various trials and sometimes tribulations. From what you have learned so far about these novels, write a paragraph explaining what you understand by the genre of the Bildungsroman, or coming of age story.

Characters in literature may be very similar to real people, but they cannot reveal themselves to us in the same way a real person would. We have to rely on the information we are given about them in the text. Sometimes we are given detailed information; in other novels we have to make some (educated) guesses. This information may be directly conveyed by what they say, and by what others say about them, or less directly through what they do, or their actions (Abrams, 1970:21).

As to what characters say, novels are usually full of dialogue – characters speak to each other, or to themselves. Sometimes the narrator is the one speaking. But whoever it is, the speaker will express in his or her words the preoccupations and attitudes and feelings of that particular character and of the novel as a whole. As a critical reader you need to identify and interpret the information that these words are conveying. As noted above, we learn about characters in literature from what other characters say about them. We can also gather a great deal of information about characters from what they look like (how their physical appearance is described, and how this may affect or reflect their behaviour), and from what they do or how they behave (their character traits or peculiarities and actions). In other words, just as in real life, we learn about characters from observing how they interact with and relate to others, how they behave, what they say and what others say about them.

Consider the following passage from The Great Gatsby, in which Nick attends a party at Gatsby’s house. He says, ‘I believe that on the first night I went to Gatsby’s house I was one of the few guests who had actually been invited. People were not invited – they went there’ (1980:47). There he bumps into Jordan Baker, and they start a conversation with a group of people:

The Great Gatsby
F. Scott Fitzgerald

‘DO YOU COME to these parties often?’ inquired Jordan of the girl beside her.

‘The last one was the one I met you at,’ answered the girl, in an alert confident voice. She turned to her companion: ‘Wasn't it for you, Lucille?’

It was for Lucille, too.

‘I like to come’, Lucille said. ‘I never care what I do, so I always have a good time. When I was here last I tore my gown on a chair, and he asked me my name and address – inside of a week I got a package from Croirier’s with a new evening gown in it.’

‘Did you keep it?’ asked Jordan.
A foil is a character who contrasts with, and therefore emphasises, the qualities of another character.

Time to Think

Can you think of other flat characters in novels you have read? Jot down a few ideas about these characters in your journal — what makes them ‘flat’, particularly? Are they stereotypes, or caricatures? Are they believable even though they are not fully developed by the author? You could think about characters in the soap operas you watch here, too: are some of them two-dimensional? Are you able to identify with characters like this?

Round characters may also represent certain aspects of human nature, however, and so-called ‘good’ characters are often pitted against or in conflict with ‘bad’ characters. In fact, as noted in the section dealing with plot, much of literature involves some sort of conflict, and the ‘bad’ characters are used to highlight the strength and virtue of the ‘good’ characters, or as foils. This can have both serious and comic effect.
Another way we as readers find out about characters is through what they say (or think) about *themselves*, mostly of course in novels with a first-person narrator (discussed in the next section), although novels written from the perspective of a third-person narrator, such as *When Rain Clouds Gather*, can also reveal a character’s thoughts. In fact, a great deal of this novel is made up of Makhaya’s innermost thoughts and feelings.

In the midst of a devastating drought, Makhaya, Paulina and Gilbert travel out to the cattle post to check up on Paulina’s son Isaac. They discover that both he and Paulina’s cattle have perished, starved to death. It is at this point that Makhaya realises that he wishes to form a lasting relationship with Paulina. Here we are privy to his innermost feelings:

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**When Rain Clouds Gather**

*Bessie Head*

ALL HIS LIFE he had wanted some kind of Utopia, and he had rejected in his mind and heart a world full of ailments and faults. He had run and run away from it, but now the time had come when he could run and hide no longer and would have to turn round and face all he had run away from. Loving one woman had brought him to this realization: that it was only people who could bring the real rewards of living, that it was only people who give love and happiness.

(Head, 1972:163)

We read the character’s thoughts and find out about his feelings and emotions, from the inside as it were. This does not, of course, mean that the picture we form of the character is any more reliable than one which comes from other characters’ observations; both what is said about a character by others and what a character says about himself or herself can be equally misleading and untruthful or unreliable.

Think about the character of Holden Caulfield, for instance – would you regard him as a reliable witness of his own character? We as readers have to read between the lines to form our own, more reliable, interpretation of this character based on all the evidence – the said, the unseen and the observed.

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**TIME TO WRITE**

Read the opening words to chapter 3 of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden opens with a description of his own habit of lying (page 20). He goes on to describe an address by one of his school’s benefactors, an undertaker who had made a great deal of money, some of which he donated to the school to build a new dormitory (read this on pages 20–21).

What do these two paragraphs suggest about Holden’s character? Look carefully at what he says. Is there a contradiction between the two passages, do you think? Note, too, the use of the word ‘phoney’ – this is a word Holden uses very often. One could even say it is a central theme or motif in the novel.

Write a few paragraphs in which you discuss what you learn about Holden from these paragraphs.

The three main ways we learn about characters in literature, then, are through what others say about them, through what they do (their actions) and through what they say or think about themselves. How a character’s physical appearance and mannerisms are described can also
tell the observant reader about his or her nature and motives. Consider this passage from The Great Gatsby where Nick describes his meeting with his cousin Daisy when he goes to visit her and her husband Tom at their East Egg mansion:

The Great Gatsby
F. Scott Fitzgerald

THE ONLY COMPLETELY stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few minutes listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out in the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor.

The younger of the two was a stranger to me. She was extended full length at her end of the divan, completely motionless, and with her chin raised a little, as if she were balancing something on it ...

The other girl, Daisy, made an attempt to rise – she leaned slightly forward with a conscientious expression – then she laughed, an absurd, charming little laugh, and I laughed too and came forward into the room.

'I'm p-paralysed with happiness.'

She laughed again, as if she had said something very witty, and held my hand for a moment, looking up into my face, promising that there was no one in the world she so much wanted to see. That was the way she had. She hinted in a murmur that the surname of the balancing girl was Baker. (I've heard that Daisy's murmur was only to make people lean toward her; an irrelevant criticism that made it no less charming.) ...

I looked back at my cousin, who began to ask me questions in her low, thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered ‘Listen’, a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour.

Later on in the novel, Nick remarks to Gatsby:

‘She’s got an indiscreet voice,’ I remarked. ‘It’s full of – ’ I hesitated.

‘Her voice is full of money,’ he said suddenly.

That was it. I’d never understood it before. It was full of money – that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbal’s song of it …. High in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl … .

(Fitzgerald, 1980: 14–15 & 126)
Read these passages carefully. How do they suggest Daisy’s essential superficiality? Think particularly about the references to colour and to Daisy’s voice, and the terms in which they are described. Write a paragraph in which you discuss this.

**Methods of characterisation**

Methods of characterisation are sometimes broadly distinguished as ‘showing’ and ‘telling’. Showing is also called ‘the dramatic method’ – the author presents his characters speaking and acting, and it is left up to the reader to infer what motivates the character to speak and act in this way. In telling, the author’s voice intervenes to describe and sometimes evaluate or judge his characters (Abrams, 1970:21). Jane Austen’s opening chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* is a good example of this technique, one which some of the greatest novelists of English literature have employed, though it is today regarded as rather old-fashioned.

Consider this passage from the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*:

**Pride and Prejudice**  
*Jane Austen*

IT IS A truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

‘My dear Mr. Bennet,’ said his lady to him one day, ‘have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?’

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

‘But it is,’ returned she; ‘for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.’

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

‘Do not you want to know who has taken it?’ cried his wife impatiently.

‘You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.’

This was invitation enough.

‘Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week.’...

‘But consider your daughters. Only think what an establishment it would be for one of them. Sir William and Lady Lucas are determined to go, merely on that account, for in general, you know they visit no new comers. Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for us to visit him, if you do not.’

‘You are over-scrupulous, surely. I dare say Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying which ever he chuses of the girls; though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy.’

‘I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving her the preference.’

‘They have none of them much to recommend them,’ replied he; ‘they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters.’

‘Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such way? You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves.’

‘You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you
mention them with consideration these twenty years at least.'

‘Ah! you do not know what I suffer.'

‘But I hope you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousand a year come into the neighbourhood.'

‘It will be no use to us if twenty such should come, since you will not visit them.'

‘Depend upon it, my dear, that when there are twenty I will visit them all.'

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develop. 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.

(Austen, 2003)

**TIME TO WRITE**

How has Austen's voice 'intervened' here to tell the reader about the characters and to evaluate them? Write a short paragraph in which you explain this.

**TIME TO THINK**

Consider the novels you are reading for study purposes. Are there examples of characters who act as foils, helping to show off or foreground a 'good' character? Which character do you find more appealing, the 'bad' one or the 'good' one? Why is this so?

**Interrogating characterisation**

John Lye (1996 & 1997) suggests some questions, which an analytical reader can ask about the characters encountered in a particular work of literature. Read them carefully. Choose a passage from one of your novels, in which a character is speaking, and then try to answer each question, referring to the passage you have selected.

* What ideas are expressed in the passage, and what do they tell you about the speaker?
* What feelings does the speaker express? What does that tell you about him/her? Are his/her feelings consistent?
* Does the character belong to a particular character type or represent a certain idea, value, quality or attitude?
* What is the social status of the character, and how can you tell this from how he/she speaks and what he/she speaks about?
* What is the sensibility of the speaker? Is the person ironic, witty, alert to the good or attuned to evil in others, optimistic or pessimistic, romantic or not romantic (cynical, or realistic)?
* What is the orientation of the person – how aware is he/she of his/her own and others’ needs, and of his/her environment?
* How much control over and awareness of his/her emotions, his/her thoughts, his/her language does the speaker have?
* How does the narrator characterise the character: through comment or through description?
The next section deals with the narrative techniques used in novels, also called point of view.

POINT OF VIEW OR PERSPECTIVE

Point of view or perspective is the way a story is told – the perspective or perspectives through which an author presents the characters, actions, setting and events of the narrative of a novel. Authors have developed different ways to tell a story, and sometimes novelists will use more than one of these ways within one narrative. Simply put, there are two main ways or techniques employed to present a narrative: first-person and third-person narratives. A third-person narrative may be related by someone who is outside the story. The characters are referred to in the third-person, that is by their names or by the third-person personal pronouns ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’. In a first-person narrative, on the other hand, the narrator is a character in the novel and refers to him or herself by the personal pronoun ‘I’ (Abrams, 1971:133–4).

Now that we have a general idea of the meaning of point of view or perspective, let’s look more closely at the two techniques described above.

Third-person narratives

The narrator tells the story. The word ‘narrator’ itself derives from the Latin word narrare, which means to tell a story. In third-person narratives, the narrator may be outside the action (‘external’), telling the story from a (supposedly) objective perspective or point of view. Such a narrator is referred to as an omniscient narrator. Omniscient is another ‘academic’ word, derived in this case from two Latin words, omnis meaning all or everything and scire meaning to know: omniscient thus means ‘all knowing’. An omniscient narrator is privy to things which in real life would be concealed or secret, such as a character’s inner thoughts. Such a narrator is able to move between characters, telling or concealing as he chooses. He has what Abrams (1970:134) calls ‘privileged access to the inner workings of characters’ minds’.

A third-person narrator may relate the story by telling or showing the reader what happens. Such a narrator would be what Abrams (1971:134) calls an ‘intrusive’ narrator, and may provide the reader with an ironic relation to the events in that the reader will know things that the characters do not. Jane Austen makes particular use of this device, with her ‘dear reader’ interjections and ironic comments, which add much to the subtle humour of her novels. This is also sometimes referred to as ‘breaking the fourth wall’, although this is an expression taken from drama, where the ‘fourth wall’ refers to the imaginary wall separating the audience from the actors on the stage: sometimes an actor will turn to the people in the audience and directly address them, ‘breaking the fourth wall’. In novels, when an author does this is has the effect of reminding readers that they are in fact reading fiction, or conversely, creating the illusion that they are part of the story. Such a narrator may be external, or outside the story, and for this reason apparently objective, though this may not always be the case. Such a narrator may also keep the reader in suspense, revealing no more than what the characters themselves know.

What Abrams (1971:135) calls a ‘limited point of view’ occurs when the story is told in the third-person, but through the experiences, thoughts and feelings of a single character, or a limited number of characters only.
When Rain Clouds Gather
Bessie Head

THE LITTLE BAROLOG village swept right up to the border fence. One of the huts was built so close that a part of its circular wall touched the barbed-wire fencing. In this hut a man had been sitting since the early hours of dawn. He was waiting until the dark when he could try to sprint across the half-mile gap of no-man's-land to the Botswana border fence and then on to whatever illusion of freedom lay ahead. It was June and winter and bitterly cold, and his legs were too long to allow for pacing in the cramped space of the hut. Every half hour the patrol van of the South African border police sped past with sirens wailing, and this caused an unpleasant sensation in his stomach.

I'll soon have a stomach-ache if I go on like this, he thought. ...

Makhaya sauntered out, uncertain of what to do next. Quite near the railway station was a post office. Around the post office was a fence, and an old man sat outside the fence, squatting very low on his haunches. He sat quite still, staring ahead with calm, empty eyes, and he looked so lordly for all his tattered coat and rough cowhide shoes that Makhaya smiled and walked up to him and greeted him. The old man withdrew his abstracted gaze and turned a pair of keen friendly eyes on Makhaya.

‘You are a sociable man,’ he said, smiling. ‘Are you a stranger here?’
‘Yes,’ Makhaya said and hesitated, not knowing what to say next.

The old man nodded his head although he understood everything.

‘Perhaps you are stranded?’ he queried.
‘Yes,’ said Makhaya again.

‘But you look and sound like a well-educated man,’ he said in surprise.

Makhaya laughed. ‘Well-educated men often come to a crossroads in life,’ he said. ‘One road might lead to fame and importance, and another might lead to peace of mind. It's the road to peace of mind I'm seeking.’

The old man kept silent but he was thinking rapidly. The young man was very attractive, and he had a difficult daughter whom he wanted married before he died. The man's speech and ideas also appealed to him.

(Head, 1972:7 & 20)

TIME TO WRITE

These passages come from the first chapter of the novel, and introduce us to the characters of Makhaya and the old man, Dinorego. Makhaya has been hiding out on the border between South Africa and Botswana, waiting for nightfall and the chance to cross the border unseen by the border police. Having made it safely into Botswana, one of the first people he encounters is the old man, Dinorego. He invites Makhaya to go with him to his village, Golema Mmidi. Now, keeping in mind the information about point of view discussed above, write a paragraph in which you explain the technique of narration used in this novel. Make references to the passages to support your claims.

TIME TO THINK

Although brief, the passages provide a great deal of information about these two characters and their circumstances, and about the reasons for Makhaya's illegal entry into Botswana. Can you list what you have learned about these two men? Write this list in your journal where you can refer to it later if you need to.

First-person narratives

The second type of narrative technique is what is called first-person narration, and this can be easily recognised by the use of the first-person pronoun, ‘I’ or ‘we’. This means that the story is told as if a character is speaking directly to us in the first person (I said, we thought)
and such a technique allows us to read both the character’s words and his or her thoughts. But of course it also limits the point of view to what this narrator knows, experiences, infers, or can find out by interaction and dialogue with other characters (Abrams, 1971:135). There are various types of first-person narrators: such a narrator may be the main character of the novel, or may simply be a witness by chance of the story being told, or a relatively minor participant in the story who narrates things from the periphery.

You would, of course, expect a first-person narrator who is the main character of the novel, such as Holden in The Catcher in the Rye, to be a reliable narrator in that we are privy to his innermost thoughts and feelings, but this is not always the case. Some characters may prove to be distinctly unreliable, whether by design because they choose to obscure the truth, or by accident because they lack insight into their own nature, or self-knowledge. You as the reader need to exercise your own judgement and powers of perception when reading, and to read between the lines, as it were! Take nothing at face value and think carefully about a character’s words and deeds. In the case of The Catcher in the Rye, for instance, Holden may in fact be regarded as an unreliable narrator, often inaccurate in his judgements of both himself and others in the novel. His narrative is also a mass of contradictions – for example, he claims to be an atheist and that most of the religious people he has come across are insincere, and yet he has a preoccupation with religion and is surprisingly well informed about it.

**TIME TO THINK**

Read pages 111 and 130–31 of The Catcher in the Rye which describe the telephone call Holden makes to Sally Hayes and his meeting with her that afternoon. Think about the claim above that Holden’s narrative is a mass of contradictions.

How does he contradict himself in these excerpts? What does this suggest to us about his state of mind, do you think? Write down your thoughts in your journal where you can refer to them if you need to at a later stage.

In The Great Gatsby, Nick Carraway is a relatively minor character and relates the story of Gatsby and Daisy from the sidelines. The novel opens with these words spoken by Nick:

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**The Great Gatsby**

*F. Scott Fitzgerald*

IN MY YOUNGER and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.

‘Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,’ he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.’

He didn’t say any more, but we’ve always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I’m inclined to reserve all judgements, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought – frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of fundamental decency is
parcelled out unequally at birth.

(Fitzgerald, 1980:7)

TIME TO THINK

Read the passage above and refer to the passage from this novel on pages 7 to 8, starting with ‘And after boasting this way about my tolerance…’ and ending ‘the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men’. Do you think that Nick Carraway is being entirely honest here when he says that he always reserves judgement, and treats the failures of others with tolerance? You can provide evidence for your answer from both passages – if you have read the novel, though, you will have greater insight into Nick’s character and the truth or reliability of his claims here. Make some notes in your journal in response to these questions.

TIME TO WRITE

Consider the novels you are studying. Think about and make notes on the narrative technique each author employs. Do you think the narrators are reliable or not? Support your answer, whatever your opinion, by making references to the text. This is an instruction you may already be familiar with from assignment and examination questions – what it means is that you should always try to provide evidence from the text you are discussing to bolster your argument or justify your claims. In this context, evidence means the mention – preferably by means of a quotation – of something that is said or done in the novel which proves your point. It is crucial that you get into the habit of doing this whenever you are writing about literature – fiction, drama, or poetry – as this is really what ‘close reading’ means. You should train yourself to look very closely at the text, at the very words the playwright, author or poet uses to express each character’s thoughts and actions.

As you are making notes about each novel you should think, too, about the effects of the narrative technique the author employs. Does the narrator try to make us sympathise with a particular character? Does the first-person narrator tell the whole truth? Do you have to look elsewhere in the text for clues to his or her real motives?

Now choose one of these novels and write an essay in which you discuss the narrative technique, making sure to keep in mind the writing guidelines provided above.

LANGUAGE, STYLE, AND TONE

You will have learnt already from the chapter on poetry that poets choose to use specific words and expressions – the language they use is rarely unconsidered or random. And so it is in the novel. Writers use particular words, diction and styles for effect – and it is your task as a critical reader to study how their language is employed to achieve these effects.

A discussion of the language and style of a novel includes its tone, diction, and style. This is not exhaustive, as there are many other points which we do not have the space to address here.

Tone

The tone of a novel is the author’s attitude towards the subject matter, and how he uses language to convey this attitude. Sometimes this means that the author may be gently ironic, as Jane Austen tends to be, or more satirical, as Zakes Mda is in The Madonna of Excelsior, or more harshly critical and satirical as in Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. Irony and satire are difficult concepts, which you have already encountered in your study of poetry, and they are just as important in reading novels as they are in poetry and drama. As we have said before in
this chapter, irony is the technique of implying the opposite of what is being said. In other words, the meaning of something differs from what it appears to be and the reader is sometimes taken by surprise at how things turn out. Satire is the technique of mocking the follies or faults of someone or something by exposing them to ridicule. Both these devices can result in humour, but this type of humour may well be what is known as ‘black’ humour, or humour that rests in a **juxtapositioning** of dark, morbid or negative elements with amusing ones. This sort of writing is often cynical and bleak in tone, although it is strangely funny at the same time.

Think about one of the last passages in *The Great Gatsby*. Myrtle, Tom’s mistress, is dead, knocked over by Daisy, who was driving Gatsby’s car. Daisy does not stop the car, and collapses onto Gatsby’s lap. He drives her home. Now Gatsby is keeping a vigil outside Tom and Daisy’s house, frightened that Tom will harm her, when Nick finds him. Gatsby tells him the truth of what happened:

---

**The Great Gatsby**  
*F. Scott Fitzgerald*

‘I TRIED TO make her stop, but she couldn’t, so I pulled on the emergency brake. Then she fell over into my lap and I drove on.

‘She’ll be all right to-morrow,’ he said presently. ‘I’m just going to wait here and see if he tries to bother her about that unpleasantness this afternoon. She’s locked herself into her room, and if he tries any brutality she’s going to turn the light out and on again.’

‘He won’t touch her,’ I said. ‘He’s not thinking about her.’

‘I don’t trust him, old sport.’

‘How long are you going to wait?’

‘All night, if necessary. Anyhow, till they go to bed.’

A new point of view occurred to me. Suppose Tom found out that Daisy had been driving. He might think he saw a connexion in it – he might think anything. I looked at the house; there were two or three bright windows downstairs and the pink glow from Daisy’s room in the ground floor.

‘You wait here,’ I said. ‘I’ll see if there’s any sign of a commotion.’

I walked softly back along the border of the lawn, traversed the gravel softly, and tiptoed up the veranda steps …

Daisy and Tom were sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table, with a plate of cold fried chicken between them, and two bottles of ale. He was talking intently across the table at her, and in his earnestness his hand had fallen upon and covered her own. Once in a while she looked up at him and nodded in agreement.

They weren’t happy, and neither of them had touched the chicken or the ale – and yet they weren’t unhappy either. There was an unmistakeable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together.

(Fitzgerald, 1980:151–152)
Read this passage carefully. How would the average reader expect Daisy to behave at this point: she has just killed a woman in a hit-and-run accident, a woman who happens to have been her husband's lover? That very afternoon, she had a flaming row with her husband about another man, Gatsby, who has declared his love for her to her husband, Tom. Consider the vigil Gatsby is holding outsider her house. What does this suggest about his feelings for her?

Keeping all these questions in mind, and considering in particular the picture conjured up in the last paragraph, discuss how the author has used irony to frustrate the reader’s expectations in this scene. You should write a paragraph or two. Try in particular to look very closely at Fitzgerald's diction, or his choice of words (discussed in the next section).

Language and style

A second, very important aspect of literature is language and style. Diction and style are inextricably linked – style is how a writer expresses himself, and this he does through his choice of words, or diction. Again, from your study of poetry you will know that word selection is vitally important to a poet because of the very economy of poetry. By its nature, poetry demands that the poet thinks about each and every word he uses, as there is no room for excess or explanation. The writer of a novel has more leeway, and styles vary from authors who write tightly wound concise novels (sometimes even novellas) like The Great Gatsby and Heart of Darkness, or more recently the winner of the 2012 Man Booker prize, The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes, to those who write tomes of hundreds of pages. But if the book is worth reading and is readable you can be sure that the author has thought very carefully about his choice of words, no matter what the length of the final work.

As we have seen, in The Catcher in the Rye the text is dominated by the use of dialogue. The setting is secondary and not always described in detail. Holden’s language is typical of Salinger’s style in that it is colloquial, humorous and intimate. Note how Holden’s language takes on a particular intimacy in the way he addresses the reader as ‘you’, constantly drawing us into his experiences and his thoughts. Read the closing passages of the novel. Notice how Holden draws the reader in once again, as Salinger creates a confiding, almost conspiratorial tone.

TIME TO THINK

How does this final passage of the novel encapsulate the character of Holden with all his idiosyncrasies and contradictions, do you think? Write down your ideas in your journal.
the cab driver, for instance. Read the passage on page 64 in which Holden tries rather unsuccessfully to engage this cab driver in conversation.

And in another episode, he arranges for a prostitute to come to his hotel room. When she arrives, he behaves in what he thinks is a very adult and suave manner, introducing himself by a false name (pages 99–100).

**TIME TO WRITE**

Think about how Salinger (the author) shows us the class differences between Holden and these two characters through their use of language.

Write a paragraph in which you discuss the idiosyncrasies of the cab driver’s speech and the prostitute’s that set their language apart from Holden’s. How do you think these differences might reflect the fact that they are from a different social class from Holden?

**TIME TO WRITE**

Think about the language use in one of the other novels you are reading this semester. Write a paragraph or two about what makes it particularly distinctive, different or interesting. Consider the aspects of style and language use which have been discussed above, but try also to look beyond these. Look at the following aspects of the author’s style and diction:

- Does the writer use many adjectives, or not many at all?
- Does the writer make use of very long sentences, or are sentence lengths varied?
- Does the author use punctuation in unusual ways?
- Is the novel dominated by dialogue?
- Is the novel made up predominantly of descriptive passages?

Other aspects you could consider are the author’s use of connotation and figurative language.

You may find examples of **intertextuality**, which is a feature of Salinger’s writing and the writing of many other authors. This is the direct reference or the **allusion** to other literary texts in such a way as to shed more light on the themes and issues of the novel.

You may find that the **syntax** (sentence structure, sentence variety, repetition, punctuation patterns and so on) of the particular novel you are discussing is unusual for some reason.

You could also comment on whether the themes of the novel (the main ideas or message of the novel) are stated directly (explicitly) or indirectly, say, through symbolism. Does the author use motifs or recurring images to convey these themes?

Try to identify such characteristics of the author’s writing, but also try to explain the effect these aspects and idiosyncrasies of style have on you as a reader and on your understanding and enjoyment of any novel you are reading.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we have introduced you to the features that are common to most novels: these are the elements of **plot**, **setting**, **characterisation**, and **language and style**. Understanding these elements and some of the techniques which writers may employ when dealing with them
in their writing will, we hope, enhance your understanding of the workings of the novels you read, not only in your university studies but throughout your lifetime. We hope that the added insight which a knowledge of these elements and techniques affords you will increase not only your ability to think critically about the novels you encounter, but also, after careful thought and analysis, to articulate your thoughts about them in writing.
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CHAPTER FOUR

Reading drama
Theatre is the space, or physical area, where drama is performed. The word 'theatre' is used to refer to plays in performance, because plays are usually performed on stages and in theatres. We talk of 'theatre studies' when we want to discuss the way actors move across the stage, the props that are used in producing a play, or any other stage effects.

amphitheatre
a round building with no roof and with rows of steps that rise around a central stage
After watching a performance, people (especially those who considered themselves to be ‘cultured’) would discuss the performance’s strong and weak points in detail, and in this way the tradition of critical analysis of the theatre was fostered.

The fact that all societies have a tradition of performance and theatre means that a taste for drama is universal: it is something people have always enjoyed and still do, irrespective of their historical, geographical or cultural location.
The proscenium arch is the arch over the front of the stage. This term is sometimes used to refer to the separation between the action on the stage and the audience.

As you were answering the previous question, you might have noticed the important role played by the stage in drama. Actors – and the characters they are pretending to be – only ‘exist’ on the stage, since acting is really pretending to be someone one isn’t. The famous playwright, Tom Stoppard, wrote ‘We’re actors – we’re the opposite of people!’ in a play called Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead (1967:47).

Although Shakespeare wrote that ‘All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players’ in As You Like It, the stage in theatre is a space that is set apart from what we think of as ‘real life’. In most stage arrangements, three sides of the stage are bounded by walls and the fourth faces the audience and so becomes the front. The arch over the front of the stage is called the proscenium arch and when the audience enter into the action on the stage imaginatively, we say they cross the proscenium arch.

In other stage arrangements, the audience may be seated all the way around the stage (in ‘theatre in the round’) or partly around it. The producer of a play will arrange everything on the stage, including the lights and props (the objects on the stage) so that a good impression is created for the audience. For example, the action of Athol Fugard’s play, The Road to Mecca, takes place in Helen Martins’s house in Nieu Bethesda. Even if you do not know what the house looks like, you can imagine how a director would arrange a stage to make it look like the interior of a house.

The stage set is a term we use for the way the stage looks in a play. It is designed to look like a particular place in human existence, such as a royal court, a dining room, a wilderness, or any other location where the action of the play is to take place. In recreating a specific location for
Now I'd like to return to what we've observed so far in our study of poetry and the novel. In Chapter 2 on poetry, we discovered that literature concerns and engages our imagination and that it requires interpretation. This means that:

- literature comes from the imagination of writers
- reading literature is an act that requires the imagination of the reader to be active
- there is no single and indisputably correct interpretation of a literary text
- readers and critics will inevitably differ in their interpretation of what a text means. (Some critics might even say that the idea of a fixed ‘meaning’ of a literary text is unhelpful.)

These principles are true of all forms of literature, whether you are reading poetry, prose or drama. But while we can accept this, we also need to note that each genre has its own features, or **conventions**. We’ve seen that poetry uses lines of differing lengths and that this is what makes it different from prose or drama. Poems are usually shorter than other forms of literature, such as novels and short stories, but this is not necessarily the case: some poems are as long as novels. We have also noticed some of the usual features of prose fiction: for example, it generally contains a plot and characters; and there is always a narrator. **Drama** has its own conventions, too. The following terms refer to different aspects of drama.

---

The word **drama** means ‘literature that is written to be performed’. A text in drama is a play or a play script. This aspect makes drama unique; the text is only half the play, and only comes fully to life when it is performed on the stage.

A **play** is a written text and is also called a script. It contains all the lines that are to be spoken in the play, as well as stage directions telling the actors what actions to perform at each point in the play. Stage directions may also include details such as who is on the stage in each act or scene, how they look, and which physical objects (called ‘theatre property’, abbreviated as ‘props’) are on the stage.

**Performance** refers to the fact that plays are designed to be acted on stages. A performance makes the play real through the process of acting it. A performance is usually a single occasion on which a play is put onto a stage for the benefit of the audience.

**Production** is the process of creating a performance out of a play. A single set of performances of a play, all directed by the same director, is called a production. The same play may be produced in different ways by different producers; and different actors will act the same play in different ways. This means that there is a great deal of interpretation in the production and performance of plays.

**Audience** means the people who are watching the play; that is, you! You might be sitting in a theatre, watching a film or a play, or you might be sitting on your couch at home. As you experience the play, you are giving it an audience, or hearing.

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Now let’s explore a real play or two. The following pages contain the opening of a play called **Macbeth** by William Shakespeare, which you might know from your English studies at school.
THE TRAGEDY OF MACBETH

ACT 1

SCENE 1 [An open place.]

Thunder and lightning. Enter three WITCHES.

1 WITCH: When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
2 WITCH: When the hurlyburly's done,
   When the battle's lost and won.
3 WITCH: That will be ere the set of sun.
1 WITCH: Where the place?
2 WITCH: Upon the heath.
You will notice immediately that these pages do not look like what we are used to reading. We encounter a list of people under the heading ‘Dramatis personae’, which is Latin for ‘characters’ (in the play: you will recognise the word ‘drama’ in the first word ‘dramatis’). The characters are listed, with a description of each one’s position and relationships to other key characters in the play. For example, the list tells us that Fleance is Banquo’s son and that both Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, have people ‘attending on’ or serving them.

Characters in a play are different from either real people, or actors. The producer of a play has to find actors to play (that is, to pretend they are) each of the characters in the list of people in the play. You might find it easier to understand this if we consider films. The following insert lists who was involved in making the blockbuster film *Twilight*, which was released in 2008:

### Twilight

Directed by Catherine Hardwicke  
Writing credits Melissa Rosenberg (screenplay)  

Stephenie Meyer (novel ‘Twilight’)  

**Credits**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kristen Stewart</th>
<th>Bella Swan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Billy Burke</td>
<td>Charlie Swan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor Lautner</td>
<td>Jacob Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki Reed</td>
<td>Rosalie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kellan Lutz</td>
<td>Emmet Cullen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley Greene</td>
<td>Alice Cullen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Pattinson</td>
<td>Edward Cullen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Facinelli</td>
<td>Dr Carlisle Cullen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Reaser</td>
<td>Esme Cullen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For a film or television show, the list of people who contributed is called *credits*. I’m sure you know that this list can go on for several minutes at the beginning or end of each film you watch, telling the audience who acted in each role in the film and who performed each job, such as make-up, stunts, editing and so on. We need to note, here, that the list of characters in a play (or the list of credits in a film) both sets up and maintains the difference between the play (or film)
and ‘real life’. When we see a list of credits or characters, we know that they are not real people, but fictional characters, acted by actors, who probably have no relation to the kinds of people they are acting, or pretending to be.

A famous South African play, *The Road to Mecca* by Athol Fugard, begins with very different pages from *Macbeth* or the cast list from *Twilight*. In the opening pages of that play, there is ‘A Note on Miss Helen’ by the author, which explains how Fugard based his play on a real person called Helen Martins. Then there is a list of characters, as we expect from our reading of the list in *Macbeth*. In *The Road to Mecca*, though, the list contains only three names: ‘Miss Helen’, ‘Elsa’ and ‘Marius Byleveld’. Just by reading the list, we can tell that there are no crowds in *The Road to Mecca*; the interactions in the play are limited to only three people. We can expect, then, that the interactions will be fairly intense, and indeed, this proves to be true.

TIME TO WRITE

Read the following list of characters from the play, *Oedipus the King* (or *Oedipus Rex*) by the Greek playwright, Sophocles. Then write a page describing how Oedipus, Creon, Teiresias, Jocasta, Antigone, and Ismene are related to each other.

Oedipus the King

*Sophocles*

**Dramatis Personae**

OEDIPUS: king of Thebes
PRIEST: the high priest of Thebes
CREON: Oedipus’ brother-in-law
CHORUS of Theban elders
TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet
BOY: attendant on Teiresias
JOCASTA: wife of Oedipus, sister of Creon
MESSENGER: an old man
SERVANT: an old shepherd
SECOND MESSENGER: a servant of Oedipus
ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child
ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child
SERVANTS and ATTENDANTS on Oedipus and Jocasta

(http://www.records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/oedipustheking.htm)

As you can see from the preceding exercise, the list of characters that opens a play is a guide, not only to the fictional people who will take part in the play, but also to their relationships with each other. The director and actors must take care to make these relationships come alive in the performance of the play.

STAGE DIRECTIONS

Imagine a playwright (that is, a person who writes plays) as he or
she begins writing a new play. One of the first considerations is, surely, how the stage should be decorated in order to make it look like a house, a cliff, a moor or any other location. This is known as the **setting** of the play. Then the playwright would think about how to divide the play into sections (larger divisions of a play are called **acts**, while smaller divisions are called **scenes**). Each scene would have certain characters on the stage and they would perform certain actions before moving on to the next scene. But how can the playwright tell them what to do? This is the function of stage directions. Stage directions are usually printed in italics and between square brackets to show that they are not part of the dialogue (or spoken words). They are there to tell the director and actors how to act the play; they are not meant to be spoken aloud.

Here are some examples of stage directions in *Macbeth*. In Act 3, scene 3, Macbeth has realised that his friend, Banquo, knows too much about how he became King of Scotland. Banquo, therefore, cannot live, and Macbeth employs three murderers to kill him. The following mini-scene describes how the act is done:

Enter BANQUO, and FLEANCE, with a torch.

2 MUR. A light, a light!
3 MUR. 'Tis he.
1 MUR. Stand to't.
BAN. It will be rain to-night.
1 MUR. Let it come down.

[The First Murderer strikes out the light, while the others assault Banquo.]

BAN. O, treachery! Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly!
Thou may'st revenge — O slave!

[Dies. Fleance escapes.]

The stage directions, such as ‘The First Murderer strikes out the light, while the others assault Banquo’ and ‘Dies. Fleance escapes’ tell the actors what their characters must do and how they must move around the stage.

**TIME TO THINK**

When you are reading a play, you can imagine the actions and movements on the stage by following the stage directions. In a way, these directions describe what is happening. How is this done in prose fiction?

In thinking about the question above, you may have noticed that drama contains no narrative, in the way novels and short stories do. It has only spoken words (known as dialogue) and stage directions to convey the action of the story to the audience. Stage directions, then, perform the same function as narrative sentences do in prose fiction: they move the action along.

**The stage**

In ancient Greece, a theatre consisted of a number of stands and a stage. The stage was a raised
platform, with walls at the back and sides. The side walls usually included entrances so that the actors could walk onto the stage. The front of the stage was open to the audience. Nevertheless, this is sometimes called ‘the fourth wall’, framed by the proscenium arch, of the stage: it is the invisible barrier that separates the actors on the stage from the audience. At times, an actor may ‘break the fourth wall’ and speak directly to the audience. This happens quite frequently when a character is alone on the stage, apparently speaking to himself or herself, in a **soliloquy**.

**soliloquy** noun (pl. –ies) a speech in a play in which a character, who is alone on the stage, speaks his or her thoughts; the act of speaking thoughts in this way: Hamlet’s famous soliloquy ‘To be or not to be…’

By ‘breaking the fourth wall’ in a soliloquy, the character tells the audience what he or she is thinking without having to share it with other characters (who might put this information to malicious use). In Act 5, scene 4 of Macbeth, King Macbeth, almost at the end of his reign as king of Scotland, talks about his experiences:

*Macb.* I have almost forgot the taste of fears.
The time has been, my senses would have cooled
To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse, and stir,
As life were in’t. I have supp’d full with horrors:
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me.

Upon hearing these lines, the audience learns in Macbeth’s own words how he feels about the history of murder and violence that has placed him on the throne of Scotland, as he explains that once he used to be susceptible to fright if he heard ‘a night-shriek’, but that now he no longer even ‘starts’. We wonder at the experiences of a man who is so hardened to violence that he cannot be frightened by hearing a shriek; but, at the same time, we also sympathise with him as we realise that he must have been through many ‘horrors’ (he says he has ‘supp’d full’ or eaten a lot of them) in order to reach this point. Finally, we realise that he knows he cannot continue on this path of bloodshed and violence, and this intensifies the drama of Macbeth’s inevitable end.

**TIME TO WRITE**

In order to summarise what you’ve learned so far about plays, can you complete the following definitions?

- The three literary genres are …
- A proscenium arch is …
- The list of characters in a play is usually called …
- The setting of the play is created by …
- The playwright tells the director and actors what to do on the stage by including …

Now that we’ve explored the main elements of plays, we can move on to explore the way plays unfold and finally draw to a close. This is the subject of the next section of this chapter.
In a dramatic work, or play, as in a narrative, the **plot** is ‘the structure of its actions, as these are ordered and rendered toward achieving particular and emotional effects’ (Abrams, 1971:127). There are many types of plot forms. Plots of plays (or dramas) do tend to be simpler than those of novels or short stories, simply because the playwright only has about two hours at his disposal in which to tell the story. For this reason, the most important events – the most dramatic ones – are the ones which the playwright will focus on. The less important events will happen ‘off stage’, as it were, and the audience often has to fill in the pieces from the hints provided by the dialogue and action of the characters on stage. In the play *Macbeth*, for instance, the historical details on which the drama is based actually covered a period of seventeen years. In writing the play Shakespeare omitted many of these events and highlighted only those that were connected to Duncan’s assassination. Many of the relevant details also occur off stage, and we are informed of them through a character’s words – such as in the second scene of the play, where we hear about the battle and Macbeth’s bravery, through the words of the captain and of Rosse. This, of course, saved Shakespeare from having to recreate a battle scene on stage!

Shakespeare focuses on the most dramatic moments of the action, such as Macbeth’s initial meeting with the witches on the heath, his reunion with his wife after being away in battle, the murder of Duncan (although the actual deed is committed off stage) and of Banquo, Fleance’s escape, the appearance of Banquo’s ghost at the banquet, the slaughter of Lady Macduff and her son and, most dramatic of all, Macbeth’s final confrontation with Macduff.

*Macbeth*, like all of Shakespeare’s plays, is a play in five acts, as is explained in more detail in the following sections. Briefly:

- *Macbeth* has five acts, broken up into various scenes
- there are many characters, some of the main ones being Macbeth himself, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, and Macduff
- there is also a large cast of minor characters, some of whom are not even named
- the action is condensed into what seems a fairly short period of time
- there are several settings – the battlefield, the heath, Macbeth’s castle, and the castle of Dunsinane among them.

*The Road to Mecca*, on the other hand, is very different because:

- in structure it comprises only two acts
- there are only three characters
- the first act features only two of these characters, Elsa Barlow and Helen Martins
- the setting of the entire play is the home of Helen Martins (the Owl House) in the Karoo town of Nieu Bethesda
- in the second act the third character, Marius Byleveld, the ‘dominee’ or church minister, is introduced
- the entire second act is made up of the conversation between these three characters.
The protagonist is the hero of the drama. In some plays this hero finds himself up against another strong, important character, referred to as the antagonist. In

The Camel Yard at Helen Martins’s home (also known as the Owl House)

TIME TO THINK

Think about the differences in the structure of these two plays. What challenges would the production of each of them present to the director, do you think? Which would you prefer to tackle if you were an aspiring director? Jot down your ideas in your journal.

TRAGEDY

Macbeth is a tragedy. You may have noticed that in some editions, the play is given the full title ‘The Tragedy of Macbeth’.

What is tragedy?

What exactly is a tragedy, though? George Steiner wrote, in The Death of Tragedy:

"Tragedies end badly. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. This again is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama, but not tragedy."

(Steiner, 1961:8)

Thousands of years ago (in 330 bce, to be exact) a Greek philosopher called Aristotle wrote a book called the Poetics. In it, he laid out clear guidelines for the writing of a tragedy. These points included the idea that the protagonist (or main character) should be a person who, even though he may perpetrate wicked
acts, as Macbeth does when he plots the murder of King Duncan and Banquo, will still arouse our sympathies because he is, like all of us, neither completely good nor utterly evil. In order to be a really effective tragedy, Aristotle believed that the hero should be somebody of high rank or social status, such as a king or nobleman, as is the case in Macbeth. The higher the protagonist’s status in society, the greater his fall from grace, and thus the greater the tragedy. (Abrams, 1971)

**Tragic flaws**

In the Aristotelian tragedy, the hero makes a mistake, or suffers from what is often termed a flaw in his character. This Aristotle referred to as *hamartia*, a Greek word which means ‘missing the mark’. Sometimes this flaw is the flaw of *hubris*, or overweening pride or arrogance; or, as in Macbeth’s case, it may be overriding ambition. The inevitable outcome of the actions of the hero, led by his human failings, is death. Often though, the fate he suffers is much worse than he really deserves.

**flaw** *noun* 1 a mistake in something that means that it is not correct or does not work correctly 2 a crack or fault in something that makes it less attractive or valuable 3 a weakness in somebody’s character: There is always a flaw in the character of a tragic hero.

Besides describing what the hero of a tragedy should be like – his social standing, his personal qualities – Aristotle believed that a tragedy required a unified plot which comprised a continuous sequence from beginning to middle and then end (Abrams, 1971:129).

**What makes up a dramatic plot?**

Since the time of Aristotle, much has changed in how playwrights present and audiences perceive tragedy. But Shakespeare did use this framework in his tragedies. Later critics and playwrights have expanded on Aristotle’s proviso of a beginning, middle, and an end. Notice that Macbeth is a play in five acts; the action of Shakespeare’s plays has been described by critics as being like a pyramid in shape:

* the first side of the pyramid is made up of the introduction or exposition and the *rising action*
* the pinnacle of the pyramid is the *climax*.
* the second side is formed by the falling action, and finally there is the *catastrophe*. This falling action, leading to the catastrophe, is also called the *dénouement*, a French word which means ‘unknotting’ – what we could call in English the tying up of all the loose ends. (Cross, 1900)

It isn’t necessary to learn all these terms: what is important, though, is that you try to notice any changes that occur in the action throughout the play.
The exposition, or beginning

The beginning of a play (or ‘initiating action’ (Abrams, 1971:129–30)), is not necessarily the opening scene. In Macbeth, for instance, the first two scenes of the play can be regarded as the introduction, or the **exposition** of events that have happened before this moment.

These scenes prepare the ground for the audience (or the reader when the play is read). We do not see Macbeth in person, but we hear about him from two sources. Scene 1 (see page 152 of this chapter) opens on the **heath** and is our first encounter with the witches.

Here in Act 1 scene 1 we get our first inkling of the sinister plotting of the witches and of the havoc they are soon to set in motion. Their words suggest to us that they have sensed in Macbeth some weakness. In the second scene, ‘A camp near Forres (Duncan’s castle) in Scotland’, we are informed, through reports from a captain and from Rosse (who is described in the dramatics personae as one of the ‘Noblemen of Scotland’) to King Duncan, of Macbeth’s bravery and loyalty in battle. He has killed the rebel Macdonwald in the battle, and has captured the treacherous Thane of Cawdor. Though Macbeth and Banquo have fought together in this battle, the latter is mentioned only fleetingly; the scene rings with praise for Macbeth. The king is delighted at the outcome of the battle and the scene ends with these fateful words:

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**ACT 3, SCENE 2, LINES 65–9**

DUNCAN No more the Thane of Cawdor shall deceive

Our bosom interest. Go pronounce his present death,

And with his former title greet Macbeth.

ROSSE I'll see it done.

DUNCAN What he has lost, noble Macbeth has won.
The rising action

In *Macbeth*, the third scene of Act 1 can be regarded as the scene which propels the action, or the scene which marks the beginning of the rising or initiating action. In scene 3, Macbeth and Banquo, returning from their victory on the battlefield, are confronted suddenly by the three witches, who address Macbeth thus:

1 WITCH All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
2 WITCH All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
3 WITCH All hail, Macbeth, that shall be king hereafter!  

(Act 1, scene 3, 47–50)

These words are directed at Banquo:

1 WITCH Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.  
2 WITCH Not so happy, yet much happier.  
3 WITCH Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.  

(Act 1, scene 3, 65–69)

The witches vanish, and soon after the two men are met by messengers from King Duncan, Rosse and Angus, who inform them that Macbeth, already Thane of Glamis, has been made Thane of Cawdor in gratitude for his loyalty to his king and his bravery on the battlefield. The two men respond as follows:

BANQUO What, can the devil speak true?  
MACBETH The Thane of Cawdor lives: why do you dress me in borrowed robes?  
ANGUS Who was the Thane lives yet;  
But under heavy judgment bears that life  
Which he deserves to lose. Whether he was combined  
With those of Norway, or did line the rebel
With hidden help and vantage, or that with both
He laboured in his country's wrack, I know not:
But treason's capital, confessed and proved,
Have overthrown him.

MACBETH (Aside) Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor:
The greatest is behind. (To Rosse and Angus) Thanks for your pains.

(Aside to Banquo) Do you not hope your children shall be kings,
When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me
Promised no less to them?

BANQUO That, trusted home,
Might yet enkindle you to the crown,
Besides the Thane of Cawdor. But 'tis strange,
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.

(Act 1, scene 3, 107–126)

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**TIME TO THINK**

Read these extracts carefully. What indications are there here, if any, of Macbeth’s ambitions? What are his ambitions, do you think?

**TIME TO WRITE**

After reading the lines above carefully, write a paragraph on the differences you have observed between the characters of Banquo and Macbeth.

The seeming truth of the witches’ prophecy, as Macbeth interprets his acquiring the title of ‘Thane of Cawdor’, brings to the surface desires which have been hidden up to this point, perhaps even from himself. In a letter to his wife, Lady Macbeth, he tells her of the meeting with the witches: ‘While I stood rapt in the wonder of it [their incantation], came missives from the king, who all-hailed me, “Thane of Cawdor”, by which title, before, these Weird Sisters saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time, with “Hail, king that shalt be!”’ (Act 1, scene 4, 4–7).

Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy when she has read this letter is one of the most famous in English literature, and contains imagery with which most of you will probably be familiar, even if you haven’t read the play:

LADY MACBETH Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature:
It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. ...

... Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,  
And chastise with the valour of my tongue  
All that impedes thee from the golden round,  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crowned withal.

(Act 1, scene 4, 11–25)

So the action, or what the Greek playwright, Aristotle, called the *complication*, is set in motion (Abrams, 1971:130). Macbeth, impelled by his own ambition and that of his wife and deceived by the *equivocation* of the witches, is tempted to take matters into his own hands, impatient that that which has been promised him should be hastened.

Through the plots and schemes of Macbeth and his wife, Duncan is murdered while under Macbeth’s roof, and it would appear the prophecy has been fulfilled. Macbeth is in a state of turmoil and conflicting emotions. Troubled by violent nightmares, he sees enemies in every face. At last, realising that Banquo suspects him of the murder of Duncan, Macbeth arranges for him and his son, Fleance to be set upon and murdered by three hired killers. But only Banquo dies and Fleance manages to escape.

If you look back at the words of the witches on page 165 you will see that they say this to Banquo:

1 WITCH Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
2 WITCH Not so happy, yet much happier.
3 WITCH Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.

(Act 1, scene 3, 65–69)

**TIME TO THINK**

Fleance’s escape from the murderers is significant in the light of the words ‘Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none’. Can you explain why this is so?

At this point, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have been driven half-mad by a range of emotions; fear of discovery, guilt, and regret. Macbeth is plagued by bad dreams and terrified by the ghost of Banquo at the banquet. Wracked by remorse, Lady Macbeth sleepwalks nightly. What do you think this behaviour of hers might mean?

**The dénouement**

In many plays, including Shakespeare’s tragedies, the *dénouement* involves a reversal in the hero’s fortunes, a process referred to as recognition (discovery, or *anagnorisis*) and reversal, or *peripeteia*. The words anagnorisis and peripeteia are technical terms, which were originally derived from Greek, for events in the play’s action. You do not have to know these terms in

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**equivocation**  
a way of behaving or speaking that is not clear or definite and is intended to avoid or hide the truth

**dénouement**  
the final outcome or unravelling of the main dramatic complications in a play and is usually applied to tragedies or to comedies which have catastrophes in their plot.
order to read and study drama, but they are included here for your interest.

In Macbeth, there is a moment of recognition when Macbeth realises that Macduff is ‘not of woman born’ and that he himself is not in fact invincible. The final reversal comes when Macduff kills Macbeth.

Before this moment of crisis, however, Macbeth, desperate to secure his position as king, seeks out the witches on the heath. In their second prophecy, they deceive him once again, showing him a series of apparitions, each of which misleads him still further, suggesting his position is unassailable:

1 APPARITION Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macduff, 
   Beware the Thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough.
   Off.
   

2 APPARITION Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn
   The power of man; for none of woman born
   Shall harm Macbeth.
   Off.

MACBETH Then live, Macduff. What need I fear of thee?
   But yet I'll make assurance double sure;
   And take a bond of fate. Thou shalt not live;
   That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies,
   And sleep in spite of thunder.

   Thunder. Third Apparition. A child crowned, with a tree in his hand.
   What is this,
   That rises like the issue of a king.
   And wears upon his baby-brow the round
   And top of sovereignty?

   ALL Listen, but speak not to't.

3 APPARITION Be lion-hearted, proud, and take no care
   Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are.
   Macbeth shall never vanquished be until
   Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
   Shall come against him.
   Off

(Act 4, scene 1, 72–93)

Emboldened by this prophecy, Macbeth embarks on a series of bloody deeds, including the murder of Macduff’s wife and children. Sure of his invincibility, Macbeth faces Macduff at the last stand with bold arrogance:

Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests,
I bear a charmed life, and must not yield
To one of woman born.

(Act 5, scene 8, 11–13.)
This is the moment of crisis and recognition: at this moment Macduff reveals to him that the witches have misled him, or ‘equivocated’, spoken in riddles, and that their so-called prophecy has been mere mischief making.

Thus his fortunes are reversed – from being Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and king of Scotland, he has become little more than a maddened and bloodthirsty ‘butcher’ (Act 5, scene 9, 35). Lady Macbeth, driven mad by remorse, has thrown herself to her death. Macbeth is drained of all human emotion at this point and he dies at the hands of Macduff.

But such is Shakespeare’s skill and understanding of human nature that we feel some sympathy for these characters, despite their horrendous deeds. Aristotle defined tragedy as including ‘incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions’ (Abrams, 1971:173). The word catharsis is Greek and means ‘purgation’ or ‘purification’. The interpretation of this term has been much disputed by critics – but simply put, it means that watching or reading about tragic events may leave us with a feeling of relief, rather than being saddened and depressed.

The tragic hero

For Aristotle, the effect of this catharsis would only be dramatic if the hero/protagonist was not completely good or completely evil – just like Macbeth – and also if he was a man (or woman) who was greater in social and moral stature than the ordinary man. Tragedy, then, in Aristotle’s view, shows a man of high social standing such as a king or a nobleman suffering a reversal of fortune because of his own mistaken behaviour or error of judgement (hamartia) – or what drama critics call a ‘fatal flaw’. A form of hamartia often depicted in Greek tragedy was hubris, or ‘overweening pride’, a pride which encourages a man like Macbeth to ignore not only the advice of others but also the pangs of his own conscience, manifesting themselves in his nightmares – and those of his wife, expressed in her sleepwalking. The tragic hero, then, arouses both our pity, because like Macbeth he is not an out and out evil man, and he has potential for good, but also our fear because we see ourselves in him and see that in similar circumstances we might have been tempted as he was. The reversal in the hero’s fortunes, his recognition of his own failings and the final catastrophe of his death (more or less obligatory in a tragedy) allow us, the audience, to experience this catharsis – this relief that we are not in his shoes (Abrams, 1971:173–4).

TIME TO THINK

The previous paragraph describes what a tragic hero in the Aristotelian or Shakespearian mould would be like. But there are many ‘tragedies’ around us in the present day, particularly in the political domain. How, for instance, do you think the past president Mbeki compares to the classical tragic hero described above? Read the following blog post with this question in mind:
Mbeki as tragic Shakespearean hero

President Thabo Mbeki’s shock resignation on Sunday night has me reaching for my *Julius Caesar* (Act 3, scene 2). I have this image of the noble Caesar (Mbeki) cut down in the forum by the conspirators (Mantashe, Motlanthe, Malema, Zuma et al.).

ANTHONY

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones; So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus Hath told you Caesar was ambitious: If it were so, it was a grievous fault, And grievously hath Caesar answer’d it … .

[...]

Here was a Caesar! when comes such another?

I see that Zapiro (our national and increasingly controversial cartoonist) went a far more direct route with his weekly Sunday Times cartoon.

Mbeki gave a good farewell speech – noble, dignified and pleading his innocence while bowing out graciously. Even though he was an aloof, intellectual and decidedly un-empathic president for most of his term in office, I still prefer him over Zuma whom I just don’t trust. Zuma is possibly more duplicitious, saying what people want to hear (business to the business world; socialism to the workers, his Umshini Wam’, song to the masses) and then doing what he wants anyway. But I guess the masses would say that they love him because he connects with them. They can identify with him.

What was good about Mbeki’s speech on Sunday was that for the first time in a long time, he spoke from the heart as well as from the head. You could see the emotion in his eyes. The irony is that both Zuma and Mbeki have
portrayed themselves as victims rather than perpetrators whereas it is their own actions which have got them (and the country) into such a mess.

Antony famously says that 'I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth, Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech,To stir men's blood: I only speak right on'.

Of course the opposite is true. He speaks very eloquently using the 'power of speech' to stir men's blood to rise up against Brutus and the other conspirators. The trick to being a good politician is to speak eloquently but to let people believe that you are speaking 'right on'. It's also a pity that this new Mbeki, the leader who connects with his feelings as well as his considerable intellect, is bowing out.

Now jot down some points about your reaction to this post, and to the idea of Mbeki as a tragic hero. Think about the feelings you have – do they amount to a sort of tragic ambivalence, that ‘feeling of simultaneous attraction and repulsion we get’ when watching other people’s tragedies, the simultaneous feelings of sympathy and fear we experience when reading about Mbeki’s fall from grace?

TIME TO WRITE

Think about everything we have said about Macbeth in this chapter. In a paragraph, based on what you have read here and also on the play as a whole if you have read it, explain your feelings towards Macbeth. Do you think that he fits the mould of the Aristotelian tragic hero?

Tragedy in more recent times

This then is the sort of structure on which Shakespeare built his great tragic plays. A modern play that has turned this scheme on its head is Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller. This is the story of Willy Loman, an unsuccessful, defeated salesman who has reached a point in his life of utter despair and desperation. He has lost his job, his sons are a disappointment to him, and to themselves, and he can see no way out but suicide. This play runs counter to all that Aristotle decrees about the tragic hero – in fact, Willy Loman could be called an anti-hero, or the opposite of heroic. He is the very antithesis of a man like Macbeth – he is a man on the bottom rungs of the social ladder, struggling to make ends meet and to survive in a capitalist America. As ER Wood puts it in his introduction to the play (1985:ix), ‘America is a country where the values of Capitalism, Free Enterprise, Big Business are seen at their most rewarding and their most destructive. Willy Loman experiences both aspects. Although he is a victim of the system, he is its devoted adherent’. Like The Great Gatsby, this is also a story about the failure of the American Dream, which we discussed in chapter 3. But for all his lowly status, the story of Willy Loman is no less tragic, showing us that even the most ordinary and mundane lives can be tragic.

This is what Miller said about his own character, Willy Loman:

“I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were … . If the
Writing about drama

A recognised form of writing about drama is the review.

TIME TO THINK

Below is a review of Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*. Read it carefully.

Theater Review: A Difficult Road to Mecca

*Scott Brown*

*The Road to Mecca*, a late-career work by South African playwright Athol Fugard, is an odd choice for a Broadway revival — a square peg in an 800-seat hole. Which makes it an all-too-natural choice for the Roundabout's American Airlines mainstage, home of the Dehydrated Play in a Big Rattling Box. The combined efforts (and boy, do they feel like efforts) of such top-flight talents as Rosemary Harris, Jim Dale, and the underutilized Carla Gugino are not enough to congeal *Mecca* — a challenging, elusive play under the best of circumstances, at once diffuse and idiosyncratic, as dramatically cramped as it is structurally gaseous. Under the direction of Gordon Edelstein, the show doesn't reach us as a focused theatrical performance at all, but rather as a sort of mild incense wafted through the AA's vast, cold vacuum.

The problems begin on the page. For nearly all of Act 1, we hear almost exclusively from Elsa (Gugino), a progressive schoolteacher who's driven hundreds of miles nonstop from Cape Town into the bush to check on her godmotherly old friend, an introverted Afrikaner called Miss Helen (Harris). Helen's a sweet old crank with a long-dead husband, a pushy drop-in pastor named Marius (Dale), and a sculpture garden full of her handmade folk-art oddities, all pointed east. (Fugard based the character and setting on an actual artist-iconoclast named Helen Martins, whose 'Owl House' in Nieu-Bethesda became a museum after her 1976 suicide.) Elsa's come to check on her, and to outrun some of her own personal demons back in Cape Town. But Elsa's emotional baggage seems to have been sent on ahead: Even as she rushes to save Miss Helen — who wrote Elsa a disturbing, despairing letter, crying for help — she peevishly punishes the older woman for making her worry about her in the first place, then steadily catechizes her (and the audience) with her personal grievances and disappointments. They can't help sounding petty next to Miss Helen's predicament: the threat of eviction, institutionalization, and madness. (Though, honestly, you'd never know it from the downy-soft way Harris has been costumed and directed. She looks more likely to give you a Werther's Original and a pat on the head than to be a defiant earth-mother declamation on the sanctity of the inner self.)

For her part, Gugino, a talented and perennially underrated actress, searches for a sympathetic approach to her character, but I'm not sure it's the right strategy: Elsa, for all her good intentions, is an irretrievably unpleasant person, at a point in her life where even her finest acts are mostly driven by bitterness and guilt. Something scalding is called for, and Gugino and Edelstein instead serve us tea and noncommittal, room-temperature empathy: Elsa, as a character, often feels like an older man's rambling best-guess representation of the troubles of a younger, single woman. But it adds up to little more than an extremely self-involved-seeming individual who, for obscure
As I am sure you realised from the very first sentences, this is not the sort of review an actor or playwright would like to read the morning after opening night! We have placed small boxes around a few of the comments that most clearly reveal the writer’s attitudes. Read the whole review carefully. Can you find other, less than complimentary comments? The writer also has some positive things to say about the play – see whether you can identify these. Jot them down in your journal.

**TIME TO WRITE**

Look carefully at the remarks the writer of the review makes about the structure of *The Road to Mecca*. Now write a paragraph, based on the information both in this review and in the notes on dramatic structure earlier in this chapter, explaining how the play’s structure affected the reviewer.

**Endings and conclusions**

At the close of a drama, play or film, the audience should come away feeling satisfied with the resolution that has been brought about before their eyes.
Think about how you felt when you finished reading the plays we have focused on here, 
*Macbeth* and *The Road to Mecca*. What issues are resolved in these two plays? Are you satisfied with this resolution, or would you have ended things differently, had you been the playwright, or perhaps the director of a production of one of these plays? Write a few points about this in your journal. If you haven’t read these two plays, think about another you have read or perhaps a film you have seen recently. Were all the ends tied up to your satisfaction? Were you left feeling dissatisfied, perhaps? Explain why this was the case.

**OBSERVING CHARACTER**

In drama, it is usually the words and actions of characters on the stage that hold the deepest interest for the audience. What people on the stage say, how they react to the words of others, how they act, and how they respond to the actions of others, gives the audience or readers of a play insight into the characters. Words and actions, therefore, are elements of character we will discuss in thinking about characters in drama.

Change is important too, since it is often changes in character that capture the interest of the audience or reader and create dramatic tension and development. We will also consider the idea of confinement (which may be either literal of figurative) as a dramatic element that brings characters into view, allowing the audience or reader to see more deeply into the nature of each character.

**Drama and emotion**

Before considering these elements in detail, however, there is another aspect that is worth thinking about. This is an aspect that is perhaps too easy to forget when reading a play for study purposes: the experience of observing characters (played by actors) from the vantage point of an audience. When we watch a play, we are amongst other people, often very close to them, in rows of chairs with little space between ourselves and the next person. We are supposed to keep quiet, according to convention, but we are still aware of the presence of other people. The sound of their breathing, their small movements, their laughter or occasional comments, but most importantly their emotional responses to what they see and hear on stage cannot easily be ignored. These are all part of the experience of attending a live performance.

What this means for an individual in the audience is, often, that there is a heightened sense of emotion in the experience. It becomes hard, when you are part of an audience, to avoid reacting emotionally to events acted out on stage. Responses to the events on stage become amplified or strengthened by the shared sense of participation. Emotions appear to ‘rub off’ on people, and joy, relief, sympathy, tension, fear, and disgust (to name only a few of the emotional states audiences are likely to feel) become important aspects of experiencing the events portrayed by the characters on stage, and seem to be intensified by the sharing.

Writers write to hold the attention of a live audience, and characters are intended to evoke emotions in their audiences. This means that, as a member of the audience, you are being asked to respond to, understand, know, sympathise with and react to the characters speaking. You don’t have the same distance from characters that you may have when you read a novel: they are immediate, more ‘real’ in a sense, and your reaction is elicited by the physical presence of
the character on stage. You become intensely aware of the sounds, gestures, facial expressions, body language and movements of the characters as acted by the actors. Because actors bring them to life on the stage, characters in drama have a real presence in a way that characters you read about in a novel do not have. Characters are brought to life, and at each moment of the performance you are brought face to face with the personality of the characters on stage.

As you think about the ideas in this section regarding character, please bear this in mind. Characters are created to have an impact; they create emotional responses in other characters, and on the audience. In watching a live performance, that sense of emotion is virtually unavoidable, but in reading the play it is important to let yourself react to the emotional impact of what you read too. Observing the dynamics of action and the complexities of characters entails responding to the impact they will (if the play is well crafted) inevitably have on your own emotions.

**TIME TO THINK**

As you respond to a play, ask yourself:
- What is the meaning of the words?
- What is the effect of actions?
- What is the reason for an action, or for a response?
- What motivates a character to act, think, feel, or speak as they do?
- Imagine the actions and events depicted. What is happening? What are the expressions of the characters speaking?
- What about the characters who are not speaking? What are their reactions and what do they feel or think?

**Characters and change**

In a play, action is dynamic. Things change. People change. Events occur which complicate actions or plans that are already underway, and the plot revolves, often, around obstacles or challenges that characters must face, overcome, or come to terms with. Uncertainty is common; events are not generally predictable and the conclusion is often unexpected.

A useful way to consider the transformation and development that a character undergoes in a play is to think about the arc of character change. Unchanging characters make for dull drama. The arc of character refers to the way in which events force changes to occur in a character. Beliefs, behaviours, and characteristics change when characters encounter events that are sufficiently important to trigger change. ‘Character arc is a journey of understanding, and epiphanies and revelations are important ingredients that facilitate change’ (Morrell, 2006:75–6).

As you study a play, bear in mind the ways in which events change characters. As you reflect on the drama, ask yourself:
- What changes in the way that a character acts, thinks, speaks, or feels?
- What or who triggers these changes?
- What is the effect of these changes on events in the play, or on other characters too?

Athol Fugard seems to have been inspired by an arc of change in a person he had encountered in his own life, the artist Helen Martins, which led to him writing *The Road to Mecca*. Read
INTERVIEWER
What was the background of The Road to Mecca? Was it guilt?

FUGARD
No, quite different. An extraordinary sculptress, Helen Martins, lived in the little village in the Karroo where my house is. For twenty-two years of her life, starting at the age of fifty, she handed herself over to an incredible creative energy. She sculpted away, single-mindedly, with a total obsession. Then, mysteriously, her creativity dried up and she committed suicide. From time to time I'd say to myself, Come on, deal with it. You're a writer; this is extraordinary. But I kept pushing her aside. Then her story became such an urgent reality inside me, I needed to examine it. The Road to Mecca focuses on the possibility that creative energy can exhaust itself, probably the most frightening reality an artist can face. Every artist lives in total fear of that—I know I do. I kept wondering whether, with an act of terrible prescience, in describing the end of Helen Martins’s creative energy, I was in fact writing my own epitaph. (Richards, 1989)

Notice the drastic change in her life that he found nagged at his mind: her sudden suicide after years of dedication to her art. Her creativity, artistic energy, and productive life had defined her, in his view. A sudden change in her activity suggested deeper, momentous, and even tragic changes in her life. What he saw of this inspired deep questions in him, too, about his own fears of losing his creativity. These questions and observations, he suggests in this interview, led to him writing The Road to Mecca.

TIME TO WRITE
In The Road to Mecca, how is change expressed in the character of Helen Martins? Write a paragraph in which you discuss this.

**Strengths and flaws**

Characters capture the sympathy of the audience or reader of a play by drawing them in to care about what happens. Often, characters are not especially admirable or likable; they are people the audience dislikes or will struggle to sympathise with. However, a character that is perfect, or by contrast completely evil, is rare. Perfect characters, usually, are simply dull and do not entertain anyone. Interesting, strong characters that hold the attention and engage the imagination of readers will normally have a mixture of qualities. Good characters are usually flawed: they possess a believable mix of strengths and failings. Likewise, evil characters (no matter how nasty or wicked!) also, in most cases, have redeeming qualities that make them credible, human personalities. Jessica Page Morrell puts it this way:

"Interestingly, in real life and in fiction people always act in ways that defend and uphold their beliefs about themselves. Even when those beliefs are at odds with reality, ... A character’s flaws, whether real or perceived, are deeply illuminating, creating inner and outer conflict, and allow readers to know truths about a character that she sometimes doesn't know about herself. (2006: 78–9)"
**TIME TO THINK**

- Consider a play you are studying. What are the qualities that make the main protagonist/s ‘good’? What are their weaknesses? How flawed are they, and are the flaws believable? Why is it possible to sympathise with them, or even admire and like them?
- What about the villains of the piece? Are they completely ‘bad’? What qualities do they have? Are some of these qualities positive?
- A.C. Bradley, who wrote about Shakespeare's plays in the early years of the twentieth century, expresses the view that, ‘the hero, though he pursue his fated way, is, at least at some point in the action, and sometimes at many, torn by an inward struggle; and it is frequently at such points that Shakespeare shows his most extraordinary power’ (1904:12). How does an audience or reader become aware of a character’s ‘inward struggle’ and does this idea apply to a play you know? Do these struggles give a play power and interest?
- Bradley also writes that, ‘The tragic hero with Shakespeare, then, need not be “good”, though generally he is “good” and therefore at once wins sympathy in his error. But it is necessary that he should have so much of greatness that in his error and fall we may be vividly conscious of the possibilities of human nature. Hence …, a Shakespearean tragedy is never … depressing. No one ever closes the book with the feeling that man is a poor mean creature. He may be wretched and he may be awful, but he is not small. His lot may be heart-rending and mysterious, but it is not contemptible. … [The] central feeling is the impression of waste. With Shakespeare, at any rate, the pity and fear which are stirred by the tragic story seem to unite with and even to merge in a profound sense of sadness and mystery, which is due to this impression of waste' (1904:15–16).

Do you think this claim effectively and accurately describe the protagonist in a Shakespearean drama? Why, or why not? Do the concepts of waste, sadness, and mystery apply to any other drama that you know well? How? Does all drama bring into view, for a reader or audience, ‘the possibilities of human nature’? To what extent do you think this might be true?

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**Character expressed in words**

The words spoken by characters are crucial to understanding or interpreting any character; they reveal the thoughts, experience, and perspective of a character, and are often rich with subtext or implications.

A **monologue** or soliloquy is a powerful way to reveal character, and is significant in developing an interpretation of any protagonist. The following extract is taken from a key speech delivered by Macbeth. Before he begins speaking, various people cross the stage, busy preparing for the visit of King Duncan to Macbeth’s home. Now, though, he is alone:

MACBETH

He's here in double trust;
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
A dialogue is an exchange of words between characters. This is an imitation of conversation, but it also reveals crucial information about events, motivations, perspectives, and character. Dialogue can create intimacy between characters or can express formality, distance, humour, and a vast range of emotional dynamics.

TIME TO THINK

Read the following quotation and then answer the questions that follow.

‘Characters in a play are not real people; they are created first and foremost by language and imagery. But because actors interpret them, they seem real to a reader or audience, and you are bound to respond to them with feeling. It’s just important to make sure you can identify the reasons for your interpretation or your powerful response by quoting the words and images that have influenced you, … . The word “characterisation” means making a character and it reminds you that the writer has chosen words and tones to create a particular effect.’ (Toner and Whittome, 2003:205)

- What can words reveal about a character’s feelings and thoughts, or about the action of the play?
- Why is it important to quote words and images when expressing your ideas about a character?
but dozens of Wise Men? Owls with old motorcar headlights for eyes? Peacocks with more
colour and glitter than the real birds? Heat stroke? Am I hallucinating?” And then you! Standing
next to a mosque made out of beer bottles and staring back at me like one of your owls!’ (Act 1,
33).

The reference reads ‘Act 1, 33’. It tells the reader that the quotation comes from Act 1 and is
found on page 33.

If you are quoting from a play that is divided into scenes and acts, you must indicate the
number of the act and the number of the scene, as follows:

When Macbeth has just seen the Ghost of Banquo, Lady Macbeth asks their dinner-guests to
leave at once:

LADY MACBETH. I pray you, speak not; he grows worse and worse;
Question enranges him. At once, good night:—
Stand not upon the order of your going,
But go at once.

(Act 3, scene 4, 117–120)

In the reference for this quotation, we have included the number of the Act (3), the number of
the scene (4) and the line numbers (117–120). Line numbers are necessary when the play is
written in verse, as Shakespeare’s plays are, but not when they are written in prose.

Confinement

Writers often confine their characters within some form of constricted circumstance at least
once within a text. This might not be an actual, or literal, confinement such as imprisonment or
being trapped somewhere, but is often a form of emotional or mental confinement, like a
relationship or a situation. These moments bring character into view.

Writing about the process of crafting fiction, Jessica Page Morrell claims that a story ‘needs
what is called a crucible or cauldron, a predicament coupled with a place where the main
characters are forced together, where the drama simmers, sometimes sputters, and often boils
over. … A cauldron can be a place of no escape, but it is also a situation, circumstance, or
ordeal’ (Morrell, 2006:165).

In drama, this confinement brings important opportunities to observe character in detail and
under duress. In the closing scenes of Macbeth, for example, the castle is under siege from
hostile forces and both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are forced towards increasingly desperate
responses to what they have done. But beyond the physical confinement, the characters are also
trapped within an emotional or mental confinement because of the situation they have created of
intense moral distress, from which there is no escape. These pressures build and the characters
are pushed to the extreme. We see them most vividly in these moments of confinement, entrapment, and pressure.

In Athol Fugard’s play, The Road to Mecca, this sense of pressure develops in the way that
the three characters are forced into closeness by the intensity of the emotional crisis Miss
Helen is facing. This proximity (closeness) is important, and also crucial to how Fugard wrote
the play, as revealed in his words in this interview (Fugard, 2012):
INTERVIEWER
You tend, in your plays, to take a few crucial people, put them into a space and let them thrash out their lives. Is that a part of your own way of functioning?

FUGARD
Yes. How one human being deals with another remains the most critical fact in history. You can kill a man, or you can bless him. We all know about our potential to kill; we have dangerously lost sight of the fact that each of us can also bless.

TIME TO THINK
Consider how Fugard creates a sense of pressure and of being in a confined physical and emotional space in The Road to Mecca. How does this affect the characters and action in the play?

Critical pressure builds up on the characters in the following short play, Enigma. An ‘enigma’ is a puzzle that is hard, or even impossible, to solve. In this one-act play, the dialogue between two characters creates dramatic tension and constitutes the plot.

As you read it, consider the ideas about character discussed in this section. Specifically, observe the language used by each character. What do they say, and how do they say it? What emerges, from the exchange, about the character of each?

Notice what they do. What actions occur, as indicated by the stage directions? How do these actions develop our understanding of the relationship between the man and woman, and what do they suggest about the characters of each?

The following one-act play is reprinted from King Arthur’s Socks and Other Village Plays by Floyd Dell, published in 1922. It is now in the public domain and may therefore be performed without royalties.

ENIGMA: a play in one act
Floyd Dell

Characters
HE
SHE

(A MAN AND WOMAN ARE SITTING AT A TABLE, TALKING IN BITTER TONES.)

SHE: So that is what you think.

HE: Yes. For us to live together any longer would be an obscene joke. Let's end it while we still have some sanity and decency left.

SHE: Is that the best you can do in the way of sanity and decency – to talk like that?

HE: You'd like to cover it up with pretty words, wouldn't you? Well, we've had enough of that. I feel as though my face were covered with spider webs. I want to brush them off and get clean again.

SHE: It's not my fault you've got weak nerves. Why don't you try to behave like a gentleman, instead of a hysterical minor poet?

HE: A gentleman, Helen, would have strangled you years ago. It takes a man with crazy notions of freedom and generosity to be the fool that I've been.

SHE: I suppose you blame me for your ideas!
HE: I'm past blaming anybody, even myself. Helen, don't you realize that this has got to stop? We are cutting each other to pieces with knives.
SHE: You want me to go. . . .
HE: Or I'll go – it makes no difference. Only we've got to separate, definitely and for ever.
SHE: You really think there is no possibility – of our finding some way?... We might be able – to find some way.
HE: We found some way, Helen – twice before. And this is what it comes to. . . . There are limits to my capacity for self-delusion. This is the end.
SHE: Yes. Only –
HE: Only what?
SHE: It – it seems . . . such a pity . . .
HE: Pity! The pity is this – that we should sit here and haggle about our hatred. That's all there's left between us.
SHE: (standing up) I won't haggle, Paul. If you think we should part, we shall this very night. But I don't want to part this way, Paul. I know I've hurt you. I want to be forgiven before I go.
HE: (standing up to face her) Can't we finish without another sentimental lie? I'm in no mood to act out a pretty scene with you.
SHE: That was unjust, Paul. You know I don't mean that. What I want is to make you understand, so you won't hate me.
HE: More explanations. I thought we had both got tired of them. I used to think it possible to heal a wound by words. But we ought to know better. They're like acid in it.
SHE: Please don't, Paul – This is the last time we shall ever hurt each other. Won't you listen to me?
HE: Go on. (He sits down wearily.)
SHE: I know you hate me. You have a right to. Not just because I was faithless – but because I was cruel. I don't want to excuse myself – but I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't realize I was hurting you.
HE: We've gone over that a thousand times.
SHE: Yes. I've said that before. And you've answered me that that excuse might hold for the first time, but not for the second and the third. You've convicted me of deliberate cruelty on that. And I've never had anything to say. I couldn't say anything, because the truth was... too preposterous. It wasn't any use telling it before. But now I want you to know the real reason.
HE: A new reason, eh?
SHE: Something I've never confessed to you. Yes. It is true that I was cruel to you – deliberately. I did want to hurt you. And do you know why? I wanted to shatter that Olympian serenity of yours. You were too strong, too self-confident. You had the air of a being that nothing could hurt. You were like a god.
HE: That was a long time ago. Was I ever Olympian? I had forgotten it. You succeeded very well – you shattered it in me.
SHE: You are still Olympian. And I still hate you for it. I wish I could make you suffer now. But I have lost my power to do that.
HE: Aren't you contented with what you have done? It seems to me that I have suffered enough recently to satisfy even your ambitions.
SHE: No – or you couldn't talk like that. You sit there – making phrases. Oh, I have hurt you a little; but you will recover. You always recovered quickly. You are not human. If you were human, you would remember that we once were happy, and be a little sorry that all that is over. But you can't be sorry. You have made up your mind, and can think of nothing but that.
HE: That's an interesting – and novel – explanation.
SHE: I wonder if I can't make you understand. Paul – do you remember when we fell in love?
HE: Something of that sort must have happened to us.
SHE: No – it happened to me. It didn't happen to you. You made up your mind and walked in, with the air of a god on a holiday. It was I who fell – headlong, dizzy, blind. I didn't want to love you. It was a force too strong for me. It swept me into your arms. I prayed against it. I had to give myself to you, even though I knew you hardly cared. I had to – for my heart was no longer in my own breast. It was in your hands, to do what you liked with. You could have thrown it in the dust.
HE: This is all very romantic and exciting, but tell me – did I throw it in the dust?
SHE: It pleased you not to. You put it in your pocket. But don't you realize what it is to feel that another person has absolute power over you? No, for you have never felt that way. You have never been utterly dependent on another person for happiness. I was utterly dependent on you. It humiliated me, angered me. I rebelled against it, but it was
no use. You see, my dear, I was in love with you. And you were free, and your heart was your own, and nobody could hurt you.

HE: Very fine – only it wasn’t true, as you soon found out.

SHE: When I found it out, I could hardly believe it. It wasn’t possible. Why, you had said a thousand times that you would not be jealous if I were in love with someone else, too. It was you who put the idea in my head. It seemed a part of your super-humanness.

HE: I did talk that way. But I wasn’t a superman. I was only a damned fool.

SHE: And Paul, when I first realized that it might be hurting you – that you were human after all – I stopped. You know I stopped.

HE: Yes – that time.

SHE: Can’t you understand? I stopped because I thought you were a person like myself, suffering like myself. It wasn’t easy to stop. It tore me to pieces. But I suffered rather than let you suffer. But when I saw you recover your serenity in a day while the love that I had struck down in my heart for your sake cried out in a death agony for months, I felt again that you were superior, inhuman – and I hated you for it.

HE: Did I deceive you so well as that?

SHE: And when the next time came, I wanted to see if it was real, this godlike serenity of yours. I wanted to tear off the mask. I wanted to see you suffer as I had suffered. And that is why I was cruel to you the second time.

HE: And the third time – what about that?

(SHE BURSTS INTO TEARS, AND SINKS TO THE FLOOR, WITH HER HEAD ON THE CHAIR, SHELTERED BY HER ARMS. THEN SHE LOOKS UP.)

SHE: Oh, I can’t talk about that – I can’t. It’s too near.

HE: I beg your pardon. I don’t wish to show an unseemly curiosity about your private affairs.

SHE: If you were human, you would know that there is a difference between one’s last love and all that have gone before. I can talk about the others – but this one still hurts.

HE: I see. Should we chance to meet next year, you will tell me about it then. The joys of new love will have healed the pains of the old.

SHE: There will be no more joy or pain of love for me. You do not believe that. But that part of me which loves is dead. Do you think I have come through all this unhurt? No. I cannot hope any more, I cannot believe. There is nothing left for me. All I have left is regret for the happiness that you and I have spoiled between us. . . . Oh, Paul, why did you ever teach me your Olympian philosophy? Why did you make me think that we were gods and could do whatever we chose? If we had realized that we were only weak human beings, we might have saved our happiness!

HE: (shaken) We tried to reckon with facts – I cannot blame myself for that. The facts of human nature: people do have love affairs within love affairs. I was not faithful to you. . .

SHE: (rising to her feet) But you had the decency to be dishonest about it. You did not tell me the truth, in spite of all your theories. I might never have found out. You knew better than to shake my belief in our love. But I trusted your philosophy, and flaunted my lovers before you. I never realized –

HE: Be careful, my dear. You are contradicting yourself!

SHE: I know I am. I don’t care. I no longer know what the truth is. I only know that I am filled with remorse for what has happened. Why did it happen? Why did we let it happen? Why didn’t you stop me? . . . I want it back!

HE: But, Helen!

SHE: Yes – our old happiness…. Don’t you remember, Paul, how beautiful everything was –? (She covers her face with her hands, and then looks up again.) Give it back to me, Paul!

HE: (torn with conflicting wishes) Do you really believe, Helen…?

SHE: I know we can be happy again. It was all ours, and we must have it once more, just as it was. (She holds out her hands.) Paul! Paul!

HE: (desperately) Let me think!

SHE: (scornfully) Oh, your thinking! I know! Think, then – think of all the times I’ve been cruel to you. Think of my wantonness – my wickedness--not of my poor, tormented attempts at happiness. My lovers, yes! Think hard, and save yourself from any more discomfort. . . . But no – you’re in no danger. . .

HE: What do you mean?

SHE: (laughing hysterically) You haven’t believed what I’ve been saying all this while, have you?

HE: Almost.

SHE: Then don’t. I’ve been lying.
HE: Again?
SHE: Again, yes.
HE: I suspected it.
SHE: (mockingly) Wise man!
HE: You don't love me, then?
SHE: Why should I? Do you want me to?
HE: I make no demands upon you. You know that.
SHE: You can get along without me?
HE: (coldly) Why not?
SHE: Good. Then I'll tell you the truth!
HE: That would be interesting!
SHE: I was afraid you did want me! And – I was sorry for you, Paul – I thought if you did, I would try to make things up to you, by starting over again – if you wanted to.
HE: So that was it. . .
SHE: Yes, that was it. And so –
HE: (harshly) You needn't say any more. Will you go, or shall I?
SHE: (lightly) I'm going, Paul. But I think – since we may not meet this time next year – that I'd better tell you the secret of that third time. When you asked me a while ago, I cried, and said I couldn't talk about it. But I can now.
HE: You mean –
SHE: Yes. My last cruelty. I had a special reason for being cruel to you. Shan't I tell you?
HE: Just as you please.
SHE: My reason was this: I had learned what it is to love – and I knew that I had never loved you – never. I wanted to hurt you so much that you would leave me. I wanted to hurt you in such a way as to keep you from ever coming near me again. I was afraid that if you did forgive me and take me in your arms, you would feel me shudder, and see the terror and loathing in my eyes. I wanted – for even then I cared for you a little – to spare you that.
HE: (speaking with difficulty) Are you going?
SHE: (lifting from the table a desk calendar, and tearing a leaf from it, which she holds in front of him. Her voice is tender with an inexplicable regret.) Did you notice the date? It is the eighth of June. Do you remember what day that is? We used to celebrate it once a year. It is the day – (the leaf flutters to the table in front of him) – the day of our first kiss. . .
(He sits looking at her. For a moment it seems clear to him that they still love each other, and that a single word from him, a mere gesture, the holding out of his arms to her, will reunite them. And then he doubts. . . She is watching him; she turns at last toward the door, hesitates, and then walks slowly out. When she has gone he takes up the torn leaf from the calendar, and holds it in his hands, looking at it with the air of a man confronted by an unsolvable enigma.)
CURTAIN

(Dell, 1922)
TIME TO WRITE

In managing a production of a play, the director will give instructions to the actors about how to make the characters they are playing credible; they must be believable and need to represent the director’s interpretation and vision of the play.

- Make notes for a director about how to bring the characters in Enigma to life on stage. What must the director know about each of them? Create a character description for the man and the woman, showing what kind of person each one is.

As you prepare to write these character descriptions, consider the following questions:

- What are their values? What emotions must the actors depict? What does each of them think is true about the relationship? Is the relationship valuable to them? What gestures are important and what must each actor do?

‘Drama arises from characters being in conflict with each other.’

- What do you think about this claim? Write a paragraph in which you express your thoughts about this. Refer to the play Enigma, or to another play you are studying (for example, The Road to Mecca) in your answer.

To consolidate what we have discussed in this section, you might want to try your hand at creating a dramatic script of your own. Remember that characters are revealed through their words and actions. What words will build a unique character for each protagonist in your script? How does each person speak, think, or behave? What actions will occur? How will actions lead to reactions and responses? Will characters change in any way? Will you create dramatic tension by creating some form of confining physical or mental situation for your characters?

The scene: Imagine a group of friends. They are enjoying a social event. One of them receives a text message (SMS). Everything changes.

Write a short script (two or three pages). Depict this scene and what happens when the message is received.

CONCLUSION: DRAMA AND ‘REAL LIFE’

As you’ve probably noticed by now, all kinds of literature are written in response to reality and to the experiences people have in their lives every day. This is particularly true of drama, in which playwrights and screenwriters stage conversations that are similar to the ones people conduct with each other as they face events in their lives, their society and their worlds. But the conversational mode we see on the stage or on screen, on television or in film, should not be mistaken for a direct translation of the way people speak to each other. Some of these differences are:

- When people talk, they often include ‘filler’ words and phrases such as ‘um’, ‘like’ and ‘by the way’.
- In conversation, people do not always stick to the same topic; instead, they often raise a topic, talk for a short while about it and then switch to a completely different topic before returning to the first one.

In a well-constructed drama, these features are absent. The characters do not pad their speech with ‘fillers’; they get straight to the point. At some points in drama, a character may explain a point at length, so that he or she speaks for a long time in a way that...
would be entirely inappropriate in daily conversation. Usually, when we are talking with others, people speak for a short time before giving someone else a chance to speak. This is known as ‘turn-taking’ and is a recognised feature of conversational speech. A particularly striking feature of drama is the soliloquy, where a character speaks to an empty stage. This is an effective method for the playwright to inform the audience of things they might not otherwise know, especially to let them into the character’s private thoughts.

The most important difference between drama and daily conversation, though, is that playwrights craft the words that they give their fictional characters to speak. Here lies the difference between daily life and art; art is made, ordered and constructed, whereas daily life tends to happen, almost haphazardly. A playwright or screenwriter will choose and fashion the words on the stage in such a way that they appear natural, but, at the same time, they are trying to convey a particular idea or set of ideas. All types of drama contain these main ideas, which, in literary study, are called themes. Obviously, real life and everyday conversations do not follow or express themes in the same way as dramatic works of art.

TIME TO THINK

You can explore the difference between daily life and dramatic art the next time you watch a drama on television, see a film, or watch a play. Consider what the theme of the drama is: what are the main ideas that the writer wants to convey to the audience? Then explore how these ideas are communicated to you: what has the playwright done with the tools of drama – namely, language and the space on the stage – in order to get these ideas across? And finally, you should ask how successful the drama is in conveying its themes. If you can do these things, you will have followed some of the most important steps towards literary criticism: you will have understood what the literary work is trying to do; how this is achieved; and you will also have begun evaluating the effectiveness of dramatic work. You will, in fact, be using your intelligence to help you on your way to becoming a literary critic.
References


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Glossary

**alliteration** a sound effect brought about by repeating a consonant sound

**allusion** something that is said or written that refers to or mentions another person or subject, mostly in an indirect way

**analytical** thinking and writing aims to understand something by examining its parts separately and logically

**autobiography** the story of a writer’s own life

**Bildungsroman** a German term which means the ‘development of self through knowledge’ (Mikics, 2007:40). The word *bildung* means education, and these stories usually show the character finding his or her way in life through a combination of learning, often about him or herself, and experience. This is usually a story that centres on a young person finding his or her way in life. In a way, it is also the story of a quest for a clearer knowledge of oneself.

**catharsis** the process of releasing strong feelings, for example through plays or other artistic activities, as a way of providing relief from anger, suffering, etc.

**colloquial language** informal, casual language that typifies conversation rather than writing

**conventions** the way a particular word, style or technique is traditionally used in art

**credits** a list of who performed each task in making a film, including the actors, producers, special effects assistants, costume directors, set designers, editors and so on

**dénouement** the final outcome or unravelling of the main dramatic complications in a play and usually applied to tragedies or to comedies which have catastrophes in their plot. The word comes from the French word meaning ‘untying’ or ‘unknotted’.

**dialogue** the words that are spoken in a play, film or novel

**drama** literature that is written to be performed

**equivocation** a way of behaving or speaking that is not clear or definite and is intended to avoid or hide the truth

**exposition** the explanation of the situation: setting out of what has gone before, and putting the reader in the picture

**expository** writing aims to explain an idea in a clear, fairly formal way, using details to substantiate and illustrate what is expressed

**fiction** Abrams (1971:59–60) defines this genre as ‘is any narrative which is feigned [imagined, made up] or invented rather than historically or factually true’

**first-person narrative** a narrative where the story is told from the point of view of a character using the personal pronoun ‘I’. This means that the story is told as if a character is speaking directly to us in the first person (I said, we thought) and such a technique allows us to read both the character’s words and his or her thoughts.

**foil** a character who contrasts with, and therefore emphasises, the qualities of another
**genre** the categories, or literary forms, based on form, style, or subject matter, into which artistic works of all kinds can be divided. The three main categories are poetry, drama and fiction, or narrative (including the novel and the short story).

**haiku** the name of a special form of poetry, which originated in fifteenth-century Japan. A haiku has only three lines, with five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second, and five in the third.

**ideology** a set of beliefs that influence the way people behave

**imagism** the name given to a poetic movement in the early twentieth century. Two of its most famous members were Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell. The Imagist poets reacted against what they saw as a lack of discipline in poetry.

**irony** the amusing or strange aspect of a situation that is different from what you expect

**lyrics** the words of songs

**metaphor** a comparison that does not use ‘like’ or ‘as’. Instead, it simply says that one thing is another.

**motif** an element, such as a type of incident, device, or formula, which recurs frequently in a work of literature (Abrams, 1971:101)

**omniscient** derived in this case from two Latin words, omnis meaning all or everything and scire to know: omniscient thus means ‘all knowing’. An omniscient narrator is privy to things which in real life would be concealed or secret, such as a character’s inner thoughts. Such a narrator is able to move between characters, telling or concealing as he chooses.

**paraphrase** a version of an idea or quotation from another text in your own words.

**pastoral** the depiction of rural life or the countryside in romantic terms

**plot** Abrams defines this as ‘the structure of actions [in a literary text], as these are ordered and rendered toward achieving particular and emotional effects’ (Abrams, 1971:127)

**rhyming couplet** the final two lines of a Shakespearean sonnet rhyme with each other, and this makes them into a group

**rising action** (also initiating action) an event or incident which sets the plot in motion: for example, Macbeth’s first fateful meeting with the witches on the heath in Macbeth, or the ghost of Hamlet’s father telling him he has been murdered by his brother Claudius in Hamlet (Abrams, 1971:130)

**setting** the place where the action unfolds or the location of the events

**simile** compares two things by using the words ‘like’ or ‘as’

**soliloquy** a speech in a play in which a character, who is alone on the stage, speaks his or her thoughts
sonnet a well-known form of poetry. Sonnets have the following qualities: each line contains ten syllables, arranged in iambs, or groups of two, with the stress on the second syllable (as in the word ‘address’, which is pronounced ‘ad-drèss’). They also follow a regular rhyme scheme.

stanza in a poem, the equivalent of a paragraph in prose. A line is left before and after that section of the text, which is ‘marked off’ from the rest and forms a unit. Poets use stanzas to break up their poems into sections. Different stanzas often deal with separate ideas.

syntax sentence structure, sentence variety, repetition, punctuation patterns and other features of the sentence

theme ‘an implicit conceptual’ idea which is embodied and brought to life through the evolving meanings and imagery of a work of literature (Abrams, 1971:102). A novel may have several, varied themes.

thesis sentence a sentence that expresses the main idea of an essay by stating a claim about something or expressing the writer’s central idea about the topic

third-person narrative the narrator may be outside the action (‘external’), telling the story from a (supposedly) objective perspective or point of view. Such a narrator is referred to as an omniscient narrator.

tragedy a serious play, especially one in which the main character dies

tropes words and phrases used to express ideas figuratively, and to create mental images and effects in texts, often in order to convey new or unusual thoughts

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