

Awareness of the genre, mode, and (or) implied situation in a given literary work also helps us to understand and interpret literary works. As Leland Ryken has usefully said, "Literary genres carry with them sets of expectations that should guide our encounter with a text" (*Words of Delight* 21). For example, if you are reading an allegory and you know that it is an allegory, you will not be surprised to find a character named Evangelist who helps the hero—Christian—to find the King's Highway, which is straight and narrow. If you understand what an allegory is and how it works, you will also be able to correctly understand and interpret this episode as a concrete word-picture of a Christian's spiritual life.

Knowledge of modes, genres, and implied situations can also enable us to avoid potential pitfalls. For example, a courtly love lyric is very different from an elegiac lyric: though both are short non-narrative poems that express personal feelings, as a rule they characteristically have different implied situations. The implied situation of the courtly love lyric is that of a man who is in love with a beautiful, unattainable lady, and the implied situation of the elegiac lyric is the speaker writes after the death of a dear friend. If we know this, then we will not approach an elegiac poem with the expectation that it is likely to plead for the love of a beautiful woman, and we will not expect to find a courtly love lyric about a friend or family member's death.

Another problem that we can avoid by being aware of these things is the impatience that we often feel when we come to one book expecting it to be like another, and find that it isn't. This may occur because we have wrong expectations which, when they go unfulfilled, make it difficult to enjoy our reading. For example, a person expecting a metrical lyric poem to be like a novel might be greatly disappointed to find that there is imagery, rhyme, and the thoughts of a speaker, but no plot or character development. If we had been aware from the start of the genre of the book, we would have been able to form the right attitude towards it, whereas now we are tempted to be impatient with the beautiful sound patterns and images which we might otherwise have enjoyed.

With a little experience, and especially a little knowledge of which genres and modes were popular with which authors or historical eras, we can learn to identify the genre(s) and mode(s) that are present in a work (when dealing with a work that displays more than one genre, we should try to be aware of each of its genres separately).

With these ideas in our literary toolbox, we can now practice setting our expectations or "taste buds" and rightly understanding, interpreting, and enjoying all the "flavors" that we find in fiction!

J. ARTISTRY

1. INTRODUCING ARTISTRY

More than any other single analysis category, this is the one that focuses on understanding the artistic excellence of the literary craftsman. In this category we look at examples of artistic elements, meaning through form, form follows function, and personal enjoyment.

As you think about the literary work you are studying in light of these terms, the goal is that you will understand (and enjoy, if appropriate) the way the author uses elements of artistry to strengthen and adorn his content.

2. TEN BASIC ARTISTIC ELEMENTS

a. Introducing the Ten Basic Elements

There are at least ten elements of artistry which can be found in all the arts, including music, painting, dance, etc. These are: Pattern, Central Focus, Unity, Unity in Variety, Balance, Contrast, Symmetry, Repetition, Rhythm, and Unified Progression.¹ In the artistic elements section of our study, we also include particular devices and techniques that are associated, in literature, with various of the artistic elements. These include poetic justice, symbolism, and various kinds of irony.

Although each element of artistry is described and explained in the outline, the goal of this section is not that you fill out a long list of examples to show how the literary work you are studying contains each of them. Instead, try to step back and look at the whole literary work with an appreciative eye. What catches your attention, artistically speaking? Is it that pattern of repeating sounds? Is it the unity of the whole? Is it variety within unity? If you notice and are pleased with any of these elements, the goal is that you will make a note to yourself and share your pleasure with your teacher (and with other students, if you are not the only one) in class.

b. Pattern (Design)

A pattern is an arrangement of parts in such a way that they form a recognizable unit or a series of units. For example, if you take three pencils and arrange them in a triangle, you have made a pattern. Using more pencils, you might make a

¹ This list of ten elements is based on a similar list provided by Leland Ryken in *Words of Delight*, p. 16.

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series of triangles across the top of the table, or arrange triangles back-to-back to form a new pattern: a star.

In literature there are many patterns. Events in a plot have patterns; the conversations of characters follow characteristic speech patterns; images are sometimes arranged in patterns; and even the way sentences or lines of poetry are arranged can be patterned.

If there were any patterns that you found particularly lovely or interesting in the work you are studying, try to name and describe them.

c. Unity

Our English word “unity” comes from the Latin *una*, which means “one.” Unity in artistry is a “oneness” of purpose or effect. In a work of literature, every element should be united in support of the author’s purpose(s) and every element should contribute to the unified effect of the story on the reader. Does the book in front of you display unity in any particularly striking or powerful ways? Can you see how the various parts contribute to the author’s purpose, or how they all contribute to the story’s total effect on you? If you can see these things, try describing them!

d. Central Focus (Theme)

In terms of content, a theme is an author’s comment on reality and (or) human experience. In terms of form, it is the center of a whole arrangement or something that repeats itself at the center of each part of the whole arrangement. For example, a theme in a daisy would be the yellow center of the flower. A theme in a daisy-chain it would be the yellow center that is repeated in each flower.

A literary example of the daisy chain would be the plot of *Beowulf*, in which all events in the story are arranged around three battles that come one after another in sequence, just as the white petals of each daisy in a chain of three are arranged around their three yellow centers.

Is the work in front of you arranged in such a way that its most important thought or image is at the center, or in such a way that a certain thought or image repeats at intervals throughout the story? If so, you might write down what the central focus is and why you think the author chose to emphasize it this way.

e. Balance

When you think of balance, you might think of a pair of scales with exactly the same amount of weight on each side, or a pair of dice that are perfectly balanced in size. In literature, balance might mean something like the plot of the epic poem *The Odyssey*, in which the main character spends exactly 12 parts of the story wandering and exactly 12 parts in his homeland, fighting to regain his palace, family, and kingship. Because there are 12 parts for each, we might say that the two halves of the story are balanced.

If you see any outstanding examples of balance in the work you are reading, be prepared to share them with your teacher. Also, be aware that balance may enhance meaning; in Dante’s *Commedia*, for example, the perfect balance between punishment and crime that he saw during his visit to Hell (in the section called *Inferno*) served to exemplify God’s perfect justice. If you notice ways in which balance is conveying meaning, be sure to note them under the meaning through form section—and this goes for the other artistic elements as well!

f. Contrast

Contrast occurs when something is set next to its opposite and, as a result, seems even more starkly *itself*, because it is so different from its contrary. Contrasts are commonly drawn in literature between such pairs of opposites as good and evil, life and death, heroes and villains, etc. If you find a remarkable contrast that interests you, be sure to bring it up in class. Also, be aware of how the author may be using that contrast to make a point (meaning through form). For example, when two things are contrasted, which seems better as a result of the comparison? What does that tell us about the way the author is portraying each, and which he values most?

g. Unified Progression

Unified progression means that everything is moving forward together towards one goal, without any stray ends or stragglers. If you find it amazing that everything in the work you are reading is contributing to the overall progression, with nothing wasted or unnecessary, make a note and draw attention to it when you get an opportunity during class discussion.

h. Variety in Unity

The principle of variety in unity means that you have both similarity and difference in a group of literary elements. For example, if an author writes a story in which he tells of a baseball team’s practices, a player’s personal struggles to

improve, and the winning home run, he is describing a variety of things, but all of them may be unified around the story of a baseball player. Variety in unity is one of the methods that authors use to make their works interesting without letting them become chaotic, and in description it is also a way of praising something or someone, by recounting its many beauties. If you see an example of variety in unity that pleases you, especially if it seems to indicate what the author wishes you to see as valuable, make a note of it.

i. Symmetry

Symmetry occurs when two parts correspond to each other in size and (or) form and (or) arrangement. For example, if a story is divided into two parts, each with the same number of parallel events or characters, then the story is strongly symmetrical. If you notice a particularly high degree of symmetry in a literary work, you might make a note of it and look at how the symmetry between two elements contributes (if at all) to the author's overall artistic patterns or conveyance of meaning through form.

j. Repetition

Repetition means simply that something is repeated. For example, in *Beowulf* there are three great battles. This means that there is repetition of fighting in the story. Repetition is generally part of a pattern or a rhythm. If there seems to be a lot of repetition going on in the work you are studying, or in a particular part of the work, note it for reference in class. Also try to discern its effects on you: does it lend a rocking, rhythmic, or especially patterned feel to the work you are studying?

k. Recurrence (Rhythm)

Recurrence is repetition which has become a stable and cyclical pattern, though it may also include variations. Repetition is the idea that the same thing will happen over and over again. Recurrence is the idea that there is a rhythm to the repeated action—moments of rising and falling intensity. Take breathing. When you breathe, your lungs expand over and over again. That is repetition. However, the whole process of expanding *and* contracting your lungs, of going back and forth between expansion and contraction, is rhythm. Recurrence is most common in highly stylized stories, such as the biblical account of creation: "And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day" (Gen. 1:5, c.f. 8, 13, 19, 23, 31).

If you notice an element of recurrence or rhythm in the work you are studying, feel free to note it and note also how it affects you from an audience perspective.

3. SOME DEVICES OF ARTISTRY

a. Irony

In a word, irony is a kind of contrast. More specifically, it is a device of artistic contrast, often involving inversion and incongruity. Irony is commonly present when things don't match (incongruity), or more specifically when what occurs is the exact opposite of what was intended, expected, suitable, or ideal (inversion).

Authors employ irony partly because, like all forms of artistic contrast, it can function as a spotlight for certain ideas (following the principles of meaning through form and form follows function), while adding interest and affecting the reader's emotions. If you are taking notes on irony, try to figure out what the author is highlighting as real or not real, right or wrong, valuable or worthless, through his use of irony. Also take note of the way this type of artistry affects you.

b. Situational Irony

This kind of irony occurs when the situation in which a speaker or character finds himself is different from and usually the opposite of what would be suitable. An example of situational irony occurs in the book of Esther, when the king asks Haman what should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor. Expecting that he is the man the king has in mind, Haman makes a suggestion. However, since the king is thinking of Mordecai, Haman finds himself in the situation of being chosen to carry out the suggestion in honor of his enemy. How ironic!

If you are studying a work that seems to include situational irony, look to see what that situation reveals about characters, especially through their responses to it. An author will often tell you a lot about how he views a character by showing how they respond to an embarrassing ironic situation. For instance, Haman responds to his with anger and humiliation, which reveals his pride and hatred towards Mordecai and isn't very pretty. We like Haman less, as readers, because of the way he responds. No doubt that's just what God intended when he caused the account of the story to be written in that way.

c. Verbal Irony¹

This kind of irony occurs when a speaker or character, intentionally or unintentionally, says one thing when another is really the case. Commonly, verbal irony takes the form of sarcasm. Some authors use a lot of verbal irony to spice up their books and make them witty, whereas others use very little. If you are studying irony in a particular work of literature, try to measure the amount of irony being used in it (a little, medium, a lot, etc.) and look at how the author is using it both in specific instances and in general: if he uses enough of it, for instance, then irony could become the dominant tone of the work, which would affect its overall mood and style. Think about these things especially in relation to verbal irony.

d. Dramatic Irony

This kind of irony occurs when a speaker or character in a literary work does things that he would not do if he knew what the audience knows. For example, if one character in a play has told the audience that a dragon lives in a cave, but the main character does not know this as he later stares into the cave's dark entrance, then the drama being unfolded before the audience is ironic. Such situations can be funny or suspenseful, and in some situations they may also highlight a character's naivete or even gullibility.

As you study irony, bear in mind that dramatic irony refers generally to ironic actions and events, whereas situational irony refers to the ironic positions in which people find themselves, and verbal irony refers to the ironic things people say.

e. Poetic Justice²

Poetic justice is a literary device whereby goodness succeeds or is rewarded, and evil fails or is punished. It is called "poetic" both because it used to occur often in poetry and literature in general and because it is understood as an especially elegant and artistic expression of punishment for crimes.

Poetic justice can coincide with irony in the sense that virtue's reward or vice's punishment may occur in a way which surprises the virtuous or vicious person, and is the opposite of what he intended or expected. Often, in stories, a villain's own evil plan will backfire on him and become his punishment. Poetic justice is therefore often linked with dramatic or situational irony.

If you are studying a story which seems to include poetic justice, you might note how good is rewarded and evil is punished (ironically or not) in this section, and tell whether you found this effect pleasing when you were reading the story.

4. MEANING THROUGH FORM

a. Meaning through Form

"Meaning through form" is a phrase used by Leland Ryken to describe the relationship between content and form (*Words of Delight* 20). The principle is that, in imaginative literature, we receive the meaning and message (content) through description, techniques, patterns, characters, plots, images, and other elements of artistic form.

Within this sub-category of meaning through form, we study all the ways in which the author conveys meaning through artistic form in a given work of literature. For example, we can point out examples of meaning through artistic form in the author's description of characters, his arrangement of the plot, his use of settings, or his style and texture. You could also point out ways in which his use of the nine elements of artistry and devices of irony such as artistry or poetic justice carry or enhance his meaning.

This is the place where you can write down anything at all that struck you as being an example of the way an author uses artistic form to convey and enhance what he is saying (meaning and message) in a literary work. Any literary elements or techniques that you identified for any of the other analysis categories are fair game, and your goal is to make notes on *how* the author is using them.

b. Form Follows Function

The other side of meaning through form, of course, is the principle that form follows function. If you are studying a work and, after filling out sections on characters, frameworks, texture, plot, etc., you notice some ways in which the elements in those categories are particularly suited to the function that the artist is using them to perform, feel free to make note of your observations and see if your teacher agrees when you come to class.

1 We could discuss verbal irony under texture, but we have decided to place it here so that we can consider it in the context of other kinds of irony, and also to emphasize that it is an artistic device of contrast.

2 We could just as well study the device of poetic justice under characters, but we placed it here because it is at base a device of artistic symmetry and we wanted to emphasize that.

c. Some Literary Elements Commonly Used as Devices of Meaning Through Form

Imagery, symbolism, allegory, and experiments in living are all artistic literary elements whose forms are particularly well suited to the function of carrying meaning, just as metal is especially suitable for carrying an electric charge. One might even go so far as to call them devices of meaning through form. So, if you are casting about for examples of meaning through form, consider these (if they are present in the work you are studying) first, and ask yourself what meaning (especially what themes or what beliefs about reality, morality, and values) they convey.

5. YOUR FAVORITE ASPECTS OF ARTISTRY

This is the place where we can just tell what we liked best or enjoyed most in a given work of literature. Feel free to write down as many or as few observations as you wish, but do remember that a large part of the point of studying literature is that you would find things to enjoy in the process. You have to “look to like,” but if you do, the process of looking will probably “move” you to like something. If so, your teacher would probably love to hear about it!

K. CONTENT

a. Introducing Content

The content section in our analysis outlines exists so that we can clearly describe the meaning or message that the author is trying to communicate through his artistic literary work, and write out a description of some of the most important elements of his worldview so that we can biblically evaluate them. In our discussion of content, we look for topics and themes, as well as the author’s worldview and the story’s presentation of reality, morality, and values.

b. Topic and Theme

Not all literature teachers differentiate between topics and themes in literature, but we do.¹ A topic is the subject of a piece of literature: the area of reality that it is *about*. It can be as broad as “love and marriage” or “homecoming.” For example, the topic of Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is just that: a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector, or, more broadly, a story about justification before God. The topic of many poems, for example, is romantic love.

A theme is a meaningful comment or message that an author makes or delivers about a given topic which he addresses in his literary work. For example, the themes of Jesus’ parable about justification before God are that all humans need justification from God, and that there is a right way and a wrong way to go about seeking it, and which is the right way.

Or, if the topic is homecoming, then the theme might be, “Home is the most valuable place in the world, and you should do whatever you have to do in order to get home.” Or again, if a poet’s topic is romantic love, he might be saying that it is wonderful, or terrible, or difficult, but he will be making some kind of comment about it which invites us to believe or not believe certain things, and to act accordingly.

c. Reality, Morality, and Values

Whenever we are analyzing content, we always seek to connect themes to an author’s worldview: that is, to what he believes about reality, morality, and values. Authors’ themes flow from their worldviews. By tracing a theme back to the author’s worldview, and then considering that worldview from a biblical perspective, we can better understand how to evaluate the author’s theme(s). Of course, not every piece of literature comments on reality, morality, *and* values, but most great works have something important to say about at least one of them. Longer great works, especially, are likely to have something to say about at least reality and values, and sometimes an important comment to make about morality as well.

For instance, you might look to see whether the author believes, for example, that reality includes God. Is God real? Is truth real? Is happiness real? What does the author believe to be real in this universe that we live in? What does he believe is *most* real?

Similarly, what is the author’s view of right and wrong? His beliefs in this area will likely flow from his view of reality—for instance, if he believes that God is real, then he is more likely to view right and wrong by biblical standards.

Values are the things that the author implies are valuable through his literary work. An author may value anything

¹ In many classrooms, teachers use “topic” and “theme” (as we understand them) interchangeably. We separate them because it is usually useful to be able to talk about each by itself, but somewhere down the road a literature professor might ask you for a “theme,” meaning what we call a “topic.” This is just one example of the way that different literature teachers take different approaches to literature. Neither one is “wrong” or “right,” but both can be useful. If you do run into a professor who seems to use theme to indicate something that you have been taught to think of as a topic, you may simply want to ask him to clarify whether he means to ask you what the literary work is *about*, or whether he wants you to comment on the author’s beliefs about the general area of life that he is addressing in his story (or poem, or play, or whatever kind of literary work you might be discussing). Remember, the ultimate goal is to be able to use every appropriate tool available to you for literary analysis.