

CHAPTER TWO

Literary Elements in Works for Children

Overview

Literature is a miracle. With words on a page, a writer can take readers to a place that never was, let them know people who never lived, and help them share adventures that never happened—and, in spite of the artifice, create something truer than life itself.

This quote from the beginning of the second chapter frames how we can think about the role of literature in our own lives and the lives of children. The key word here is miracle – that ability to transcend the day to day and see the world through different eyes. That said, literature – great literature- is created by deft and careful use of the tools of writing and elements of story. Thus becoming familiar with techniques and terminology used in examining literature can add to our appreciation of the “magic” it imparts. Literary elements in this chapter are illustrated using a variety of examples pulled from a wide range of literature.- folk tales, novels, the new classics of Harry Potter and the tried and true such as C.S. Lewis’s *Narnia* series. The authors offer us extensive discussion on the specifics of each of these elements.

Genre refers to the “kind” of story. Just like in watching a sports event, there is a structure in place that allows you to understand what you are watching and what to expect. The genre of folk tales is different structurally than poetry – thus the genre lets the reader know what to expect and gives the reader a way to make sense out of what happens.

The setting of a story (i.e., the time and place where the story unfolds) is tied closely to the genre in which it exists. In folk and fairy tales the setting is characterized by an ill-defined past and a broadly defined place (home, the forest, the country, a palace). In realistic fiction the settings contain the detail necessary to render authenticity to the story. In general settings include geography and a historical period and provide the contextual piece that makes the

story possible. The authors use Garcia-Williams *One Crazy Summer* to illustrate how this combination of geography and historical moment works.

Characterization refers to the creation and development of the individuals who lend substance to the story. Characters are developed through their actions, their relations with others, their sense of themselves, and the roles they play in the plot. The authors use the bravery and inventiveness of Parvana from Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner* to illustrate how characters operate in a story.

The plot of a story consists of an integration of the ordered events and outcomes. The genre of a story strongly influences the possibilities for a plot. For example, typically an author cannot reach into the world of fantasy to fashion and resolve a problem in historical fiction.

Plots often depend on a character who becomes involved in conflict while striving toward a goal that remains elusive because of a complication, or problem. A plot contains rising action as the character perseveres until tension reaches its peak in a climax followed by a resolution to the problem. A denouement may follow placing the character in perspective as the story concludes.

Books written for older children may contain episodes (i.e., stories within stories). In such cases a plot may extend over several chapters or the story may be characterized by a series of subplots with partial resolutions always contingent on further resolution to the central problem.

Some authors use imaginative variations of time sequence to enhance the narration of a story. Cynthia Voigt's *The Homecoming* and Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* serve as examples here.

Some plot forms tend to recur in stories. For example, it is common for young people to be faced with initiation rites, as is the case in Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* and Mary Hoffman's *Amazing Grace*. The journey is another popular plot form. Characters often strike out on arduous journeys in search of redemption or to achieve self-fulfillment. Frances Temple's *The Ramsay Scallop* and Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons* fit into these categories.

The theme of a story gets at the issue or lesson brought to consciousness as an integrating idea. It may be stated explicitly as part of the story. A theme may also be implicit, in which case it is only suggested, making it necessary to draw inferences from the reading. An author may also use an image to communicate a theme. Themes often answer the question of "why did this author write this in the first place". Or the ever enigmatic question – "what

does this actually mean”. Themes can be explicit or implicit. Implicit themes are tricky as it is easy to read more or less into a story. As educators our ability to help our students unravel the meaning of a story is dependent upon our own understanding of what themes do and do not do.

“Reading against the grain” occurs when we examine implications of a story that are not intended to be held up to critical scrutiny. For example, we may ask a question about the sex roles, age disparities, or class structure buried in the text.

The implied reader is the person the author envisions as the interpreter of the work when the text is written. This is the person whose mood, point of view, or feelings the author imagines he or she is influencing as the story is composed. If the author is successful, the actual reader will assume the stance of the reader who is implied. The stance of the implied reader may also affect the reader by getting him or her to identify with a story’s characters, take a moral position, and fill the gaps necessary to make the story make sense.

The point of view of a story is the perspective imposed on the reader as a result of the narrative form the author has elected to use. In a first-person point of view the story is told through the voice of a character who is actively participating in it. When an author describes a story as if it was happening to someone else and uses *he, she, or they* rather than *I* when talking about the characters, the story is written in the third person.

When we look at how an author says whatever it is she or he has to say, we are examining that author’s style. Style is reflected in the word choices an author makes, the quality of the imagery he or she uses, and the effectiveness of the metaphors he or she creates. The characteristics of the sounds of the language being used also bears on the author’s style as does the manner in which the author uses voice to communicate perspective, mood, or point of view.

Pre-Reading Direction

1. When you think of “literary elements” or individual qualities of literature, what do you think of? Before you read the chapter, list what you would consider literary elements to be. When you have completed the reading compare your list with the elements identified by the authors. How does your list compare with elements they have identified?

2. Select a passage from a favorite children's book and prepare to read it aloud to the class. Discuss the role of literary elements in making that particular passage memorable.
3. Pick a passage from a children's book that you think is particularly bad and compare it to the one that you selected as exemplary. What are the big differences and what is the role of literary elements in your consideration of exemplary and awful?

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Why do you suppose Harry Potter was such a huge success? What are the elements of Children's Literature that would suggest a recipe for success? Can you draw any inferences about what you value in literature from your response?
2. Ask your students to discuss the common elements in several of the books the authors reference. You may also select the books to be discussed yourself. (Class responses could lead into a discussion of the elements of style identified by the authors.)
3. Compare the settings of two books written on contemporary "hot" topics. One book should be intended for early adolescents and the other for young children pre- or early adolescents. Think about Deborah Ellis *the Breadwinner* and *14 cows for America* as a place to start.
4. In *The Call of Stories*, Robert Coles says that "constructing a good reading list involves not so much matching student interest with author's subject matter . . . as considering the degree of moral engagement a particular text seems able to make with any number of readers" (1989, p. 190). Does this apply to children's literature? Support your answer with examples.
5. Read part of the denouement of a familiar children's book. Ask yourself or your classmates it affects the rest of the story (i.e., Would the story have been different without it?).
6. Someone other than the author identified the theme in Charles Temple's *Shanty Boat* as "the importance of respecting differences." That differed from Temple's perception of

his own work. Is it necessary for an author to be unambiguous with regard to theme in order for a theme to be effective? Can a reader be intuitively informed by a theme even though that reader cannot articulate it?

7. According to the authors, a writer must “keep an ideal reader in mind, and arrange the details of the work in such a way as to evoke the desired responses from that reader.” Identify the implied reader in *Children’s Books in Children’s Hands*. Support your answer with evidence from the text.
8. The authors emphasize the importance of good word choices. Apply the position of the authors to their own work. For example, they tell us that “Good words create *fresh* images. Good writing *crackles* with insight.” Repeat those sentences substituting *clear* for *fresh* and *is filled* for *crackles*. What happens? Try the same exercise using selections from children’s literature.

Classroom Activities

1. Try involving the class in the creation of settings using sense impressions based on a variety of media. This activity is appropriate for small groups, or may be engaged in individually by students. Start with something with which they are familiar; try a printed text such as part of the first paragraph in Chapter 11 of Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, which follows:

The night whispered of distant thunder. It was muggy, hot, a miserable night for sleeping. Twice I had awakened hoping that it was time to be up, but each time the night had been total blackness with no hint of a graying dawn. On the front porch Mr. Morrison sat singing soft and low into the long night, chanting to the approaching thunder. He had been there since the house had darkened after church, watching and waiting as he had done every night since Papa had been injured. No one had ever explained why he watched and waited. But I knew.

That might be followed with a visual image —Winslow Homer’s *Fog Warning* (1885) or Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937). For an auditory experience try Edvard Grieg’s “Morning Mood” from the *Peer Gynt Suite*, “Sunrise” from the beginning of Ferde Grofé’s *Grand Canyon Suite*, or the opening of Maurice Ravel’s *Daphnes et Chloe*. In each case ask your students to offer commentary on the kind of story that the setting evokes. You might also ask them if any of the above settings would “fit together.”

Have them share their responses. The experiences should help the class to understand the critical relationship between setting and event in literature.

2. Ask individuals or groups of two or three to identify a memorable character in a children's book they have read. Have them write down traits that made the character a memorable one. After they have done this they should retrieve the book from which their character emerged and select several passages that the author used to develop the character. Ask groups or individuals to share their findings. Count the number of male characters and the number of female characters identified during the activity above and compare. Does the difference in the numbers appear to be significant? If so, how do you account for it?
3. One way to emphasize the effectiveness of voice in literature is to ask students to take the point of view of particular characters and put those characters in situations that will bring forth their traits. Perhaps Judd from *Shiloh* might be interviewed by a contrasting character such as Dona Josefa from *The Gold Coin*. Or simplify. Let one student be Judd and others be reporters who interview him.
3. To illustrate the importance of dialogue and character development have students select a passage from *The Breadwinner* and read it aloud as part of a "reader's theatre." How does the dialogue work to enhance the story? What do we learn about the characters as we listen to their voices? How would the story change if the voice changed?

Extending the Reading

1. In *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty sees language as a gesture that creates a song. According to him, the variety of linguistic constructions and syntactical systems are several ways for the human body to "sing the world's praises and . . . to live it" (1973, p. xvi). A word, then, takes its form each time a person creates it, particularly in the sounds of each speech act. When the authors speak of the sound of language, they refer to the inherent poetic dimension of much of the best writing in children's literature as well as the specific constructions (e.g., onomatopoeia, consonance, and assonance) contributing to that poetry. How is what the

authors say similar to Merleau-Ponty's position with regard to the sounds of language?
How is it different?

2. In the Pre-Reading Direction you were asked to analyze a children's book using your own criteria and then to compare those criteria with the literary elements identified by the authors. Examine a second children's book, except in this case use the literary elements identified in *Children's Books in Children's Hands* as a basis for determining quality. How does your second analysis compare with the first? In what ways was it better? Did it come up short in any area?
3. Assign one of the classics, such as *Winnie the Pooh* or *The Trumpeter Swan* as a reading experience for the whole class. Ask students to select passages that resonate for them and then have a large class discussion using this chapter as a guide. How does the classic hold up in light of literary elements? Use this opportunity to connect the idea of elements to the larger discussion of children's literature as outlined in Chapter 1.

Multiple Choice

- 2.1) How is plot related to genre?
 - A) The genre of a story determines the range of possible actions in it.
 - B) Plot and genre are gender specific.
 - C) Plot has a history which constrains gender.
 - D) Genre and plot are interchangeable.
- 2.2) How does the setting for a folktale compare with the setting for a work of realistic fiction?
 - A) The folktale has a more contemporary setting.
 - B) Realistic fiction is more likely to have a briefly described setting.
 - C) There are likely to be more characters built into the setting of a folktale.
 - D) Settings in realistic fiction are usually described with greater detail.
- 2.3) The authors identify five ways in which characters are developed in stories. Which of the following is included?
 - A) Characters are developed through their physical appearance.
 - B) Characters are developed through their actions.
 - C) Characters are developed by examining background.
 - D) Characters are developed by the setting.
- 2.4) How does a denouement function in a story?
 - A) It prepares the reader for the climax.

- B) It tempers the intensity of violent or disturbing action.
 - C) It displays the characters' state of affairs following the resolution of the problem.
 - D) It introduces the problem in instances where there is a complication.
- 2.5) What is the usefulness of intertextuality in children's literature?
- A) It increases the tension among works of literature .
 - B) Supports the setting.
 - C) Rewards readers by supporting a rich literary understanding
 - D) Complicates literature by using obscure references
- 2.6) The authors make a distinction between the "real" story and the story-as-narrated, through which the "real story is gradually revealed." What is the distinction they make?
- A) The incomplete full plot is distinguished from the plot that underlies it.
 - B) The real story has a single author; the story revealed has multiple authors.
 - C) The story revealed is easier for children to understand.
 - D) The real story cannot be fictional.
- 2.7) From the following, identify a plot form that can be classified as a recurring plot.
- A) A cousin must be airlifted to safety
 - B) Children discover an unknown chamber under the school gym
 - C) Police officers establish a school for orphans
 - D) Children are separated from, or abandoned by, one or both parents
- 2.8) What is the difference between an explicit and an implicit theme?
- A) The implicit theme has a stronger setting.
 - B) The explicit theme is less plausible.
 - C) There are no characters associated with the explicit theme.
 - D) An implicit theme is suggested in a story, but not stated.
- 2.9) What do the authors mean by "reading against the grain"?
- A) questioning something that remains unquestioned in the text
 - B) reading that is not done voluntarily
 - C) engaging a text that is beyond a child's reading level
 - D) reading in which the author switches narrative styles
- 2.10) What is an implied reader?
- A) a person who identifies words but does not comprehend
 - B) the ideal interpreter of a work, as imagined by the author
 - C) the narrator of a work
 - D) the author of the text in question
- 2.11) Aspects of setting in Realistic Fiction can include:
- A) Immediate social group

- B) Wider social setting
- C) Historical Period
- D) All of the above

2.12 A setting can sometimes become a _____ in a story?

- A) metaphor
- B) simile
- C) alliteration
- D) none of the above

2.13 Intertextuality refers to _____

- A) tone of authors story
- B) emotional state of the work
- C) tendency of authors to relate one work to another
- D) the theme of a story

2.14 Tone refers to _____

- A) authors attitude toward work
- B) way the author would sound if reading the story
- C) emotional state of the work
- D) comparison of the works

2.15 Point of view refers to _____

- A) tone of authors story
- B) perspective from which events in story are narrated
- C) characters thoughts during the story
- D) imagery from story

Essay

2.11) Using a work of children’s literature referenced by the authors, how would you “read against the grain” with children? As you craft your answer, consider who the implied reader is and how you could leverage that concept to promote discussions with children.

2.12) How do the elements of style work together in children’s literature? Choose an example from the text to support your answer.

Answer Key

- 2.1 A
- 2.2 D
- 2.3 B
- 2.4 D
- 2.5 A
- 2.6 A
- 2.7 D
- 2.8 C
- 2.9 C
- 2.10 B
- 2.11 D
- 2.12 A

2.13 C

2.14 A

2.15 B

2.16 Filling in the gaps; moral stance; stance of the implied reader; asking questions about different portrayals of characters

2.17 Lively language, vivid images, fresh approaches, avoiding stereotypes, promote use of metaphors and sounds all working together;, voice and characterization

2.18 Compare and contrast round and flat characters in relation to children's literature.

2.19 Describe point of view from first person, second person and from the third person points of view.

2.20 Describe and give specific examples of what explicit and implicit themes are in children's literature.