

ELEMENTS OF FICTION ANALYSIS

CENTRAL IDEA: Central idea refers to the author's main point or purpose in writing the story. Central idea is the reader's intellectual response to the story, citing a generalization based on the particular facts of the story. Central idea is more than an indication of the story's subject; rather, it is the author's statement about the subject. For the central idea following, assume that the subject of the story is maturity: "The central idea of the story is that maturity is a product of one's actions and attitudes, not one's possessions."

CHARACTER: Character refers to the people, animals, or forces that inhabit a story. Each short story has a central character and some minor characters. Characters will have certain qualities and behaviors that help to illustrate the central idea. The central character, or protagonist, will often have one beginning key trait or value that is out of balance. Examples of a key trait might include immaturity, conceitedness, self-denial, arrogance, fear of change, sexual or gender frustration, or a variety of other human behaviors. The key trait is more than an emotion or occupation or external situation. In analysis of character, the student should be most concerned with the static or dynamic nature of the central character. Is the central character's beginning key trait altered by the end of the story? A character whose beginning key trait is changed at the end is said to be dynamic. A character whose beginning key trait is not changed at the end is said to be static.

CONFLICT: Conflict refers to the various problems a character encounters in a story. The central character will usually face one central (major) conflict and several minor conflicts (complications). Conflicts are of three general types: man vs. man; man vs. cosmos; and man vs. himself. At the climax of a story, some critical decision is made or some critical action is performed by the central character, and the winner of the central conflict becomes apparent. The resolution (or solving) of the central conflict produces a new state of affairs. In most substantial stories, the central conflict is internal (man vs. himself), and it relates to the key trait that is out of balance.

SETTING: Setting in a narrow sense refers to the physical location and time setting of the story. It can also refer to the cultural, historical, economic, or social aspects of that setting. The setting is in a sense the "world" through which the characters journey, encountering problems along the way. On a surface level, the setting of a story may sometimes seem insignificant. On an underlying level, though, the setting is often significant to the events of the story.

POINT OF VIEW: Point of view refers to the position from which the story is viewed or told. This position determines the light in which the reader views the characters and events of the story. The narrative voice is a persona the author assumes to tell the story; the author is not the narrator. This voice can be that of a character in the story (first-person); a semi-detached observer (third-person limited); or a detached observer (third-person omniscient and third-person objective). This voice may have a certain sensibility or world view that can in some way color the reader's perception of the story. Be aware that point of view in literary analysis has nothing to do with an opinion or a persuasive "point of view."

LANGUAGE: This term refers to a variety of figurative and literary devices. In most cases, the author's intent in using these devices is to compare dissimilar objects or evoke secondary associations for a literary effect. Some language devices to be analyzed are symbolism, irony, and literary allusion.

TONE: Tone refers to the author's emotional attitude toward the story and characters. The reader gauges tone through his or her own emotional response called mood. If the author is successful in creating tone, then tone and mood should be similar. The reader's expression of tone identifies the reader's reaction to the outcome of the story, not the character's reaction. A story's tone should be expressed as an adjective. For example, "The tone of the story is sad."