

Literary Texts

Introduction

in: **Previews, Langenscheidt 50747**

Genre

When we talk about genre in connection with literary texts, we are referring to different text types. The main genres are: poetry, drama and fiction.

Poetry is frequently (although not always) characterised by rhyme and rhythm, which may be regular or irregular.

Drama is normally meant to be acted (on the stage, radio, etc.) and is characterised by dialogue and stage directions (which describe the scenery and tell the actors what to do). It may be written in poetry or prose.

Fiction, which may be a short story or a novel, is characterised by having a narrator, i.e. a figure or voice who tells the story. It is written in prose.

Of course, you will find poetic elements in drama and fiction, dialogue in fiction and poetry, but these will usually not be determining features of the work you are considering.

Theme

Possible themes of literary texts are countless in number:

a poem might deal with the themes of love or loneliness, a drama with the themes of personal relationships or conflicts in society, a novel with the theme of nature and industrialism, conflicts between ethnic groups, and so on. Discovering the theme(s) of a work of literature is one of the main purposes of interpretation,

In order to discover the theme(s):

- in a **drama** look, for example, at what the characters say, the way they interact, the language they use,
- in a work of **fiction** look, for example, at the characters, the setting, the symbols and the comments of the narrator,
- in a **poem** look, for example, at the comments of the 'I' of the poem, the language, images and symbols used.

Character and Characterisation

By the term *character* we mean the kind of people presented by the text, looked at as though they were real living persons. A character may be shy, self-confident, ambitious, kind, ruthless, and so on. The impression of character that the reader or spectator receives is determined by the means of characterisation used by the author; in other words the techniques that he or she employs. In drama, characters might be shown by means of their appearance (what they look like), actions (what they do), language (what they say and the way that they say it), thoughts (if they express them in some way in the form of a monologue, for example), interaction (the way that they behave towards other characters and vice versa), or hearsay (what other characters say about them).

In fiction, authors have more subtle ways of presenting character than in drama, since they can make use of a narrator, which you do not normally have in a play. The means of characterisation they may use are of two main kinds: showing techniques and telling techniques.

Showing techniques are almost the same as those used by a dramatist (appearance, actions, language, thoughts, interaction).

With telling techniques the author informs the reader more directly about what characters are like, analysing and summarising their characteristics, usually by means of the narrator. In addition, in both drama and fiction a character's name often gives an indication of the kind of person he or she is.

Another important aspect we have to consider with respect to character regards the function of the character in a story or play; in other words, is he or she the protagonist (the main character) or a minor character? The protagonist is often a very complex character with a number of different characteristics. Minor characters are frequently flat, having only one or two basic characteristics. If a flat character is in some way very typical of a class, gender, race or nation, etc., he or she may be referred to as a stereotype.

Setting and Atmosphere

By setting we mean the time, place and social background against which the action of a story or novel or drama takes place. Time might refer to the time of day, the time of year or time in the future (as in science fiction, for example) or the past (as in the historical novel).

Place refers to the country, the city or the countryside, inside or outside a house or building. With the term social setting, we refer to the social class or the ethnic group to which the characters perhaps belong. It is important to be able to analyse the setting in order to be able to understand the context of a literary work.

The setting affects the way we see the characters and understand the meaning of a story or drama. In a work of fiction the place is frequently described by the narrator, while in a drama it is conveyed by the scenery (often described by the dramatist in the stage directions, including the stage properties - tables, chairs, etc.). Frequently the setting will help to create an atmosphere.

By atmosphere we mean the feelings and moods created within the reader and the characters by means of certain techniques. The atmosphere may be melancholic, threatening, depressing, optimistic, joyful, and so on. Atmosphere is created by such means as setting, interaction and the use of language.