

An Introduction to Key Concepts and Literary Terms

The novel

novel /nɒvl/ noun [C]: a long written story about imaginary or partly imaginary characters and events

Novels come in all shapes and sizes but all novels contain the same basic elements. And all novels can be analysed and discussed with reference to these elements:

- 1 plot
- 2 characters
- 3 narrator
- 4 themes
- 5 style

The short texts below introduce the key literary terms which are used to talk about the above five elements. All the key terms are highlighted in bold and explained in the glossary at the end of the worksheet. The exercises that follow each text will help you use the terms.

1 Plot

The plot is the story of the novel. It usually follows the lives of one or more of the **main characters** and describes the **key events** that affect these characters over a period of time.

The **timeframe** of the plot can be of any length. A novelist may choose to describe a year in the lives of his characters (as in *Middlemarch*, *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*) or it may cover a number of years (as in *Oliver Twist* or *David Copperfield*, where the novels describe the boys' lives from their births to adulthood). In some novels the **action** happens over 24 hours (for example James Joyce's *Ulysses*). In others the action happens over a number of generations. A novel which tells the story of several generations of the same family is called a **saga**.

A plot may be **linear**. This means it describes events **chronologically** in the order they happened. For example, in *Moby Dick* the plot explains what happens on the *Pequod's* voyage from the time the narrator decides to go to sea until the ship's last battle with the white whale. Or it may be **complex**. It may jump from event to event, or from place to place as in *Our Mutual Friend*. It may have two (or more) story lines, moving side by side, as in *Vanity Fair*.

It may have **flashbacks** (when the writer describes an event that happened before – as in *Our Mutual Friend* when John Harmon remembers his childhood) or a **flashforward** (where the writer jumps forward to describe an event in the future). For example, in the closing chapter of *Middlemarch* Eliot moves ahead to see what happens to the main characters later in their lives.

A novel focuses on the story of one character, or one group of characters, or it may include **sub plots** which happen at the same time as the **main plot**. The sub plots follow the lives of **minor characters** and often help to explore the themes of the main plot. *Vanity Fair* is a good example of a novel which has several plots and subplots.

The **pace** of the plot can change. It may slow down at times to study a scene or event in great detail, and at others it may **race ahead**, jumping over years in its characters' lives. For example, Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* jumps 20 years between the opening scene and the rest of the action in the novel.

The action of the plot will often be connected to a **conflict** or problem and its final **resolution**. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the problem is complex. John Harmon will receive a large fortune from his dead father if he agrees to marry Bella Wilfer. But John wants to get to know Bella before he makes his decision. So he decides to spy on his future wife. This decision leads to a number of other problems and conflicts before a final resolution is achieved. In *Moby Dick*, the conflict is both **external**, the fight between Ahab and the white whale, and **internal**, the captain's fight with his own stubbornness and thirst for revenge.

The novel focuses both on the **action** itself, describing the **mechanics** in detail (the whale hunting industry in *Moby Dick*, the journey to the Count's castle in *Dracula*) and the characters' reactions and attitudes to these actions.

Test Yourself

1 Complete the descriptions below using words in bold from the text above.

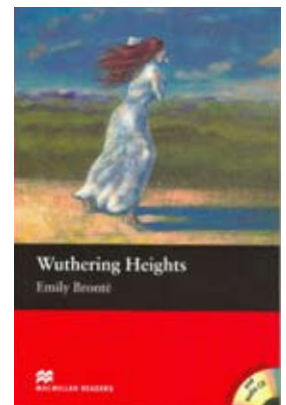
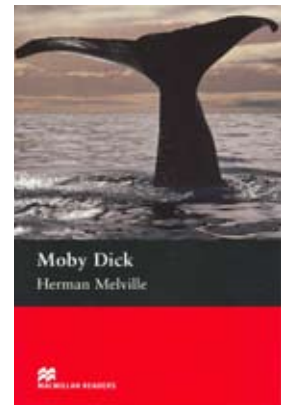
Moby Dick

The plot is (1) _____ and straightforward. It tells the tale of a sea voyage. The events are described (2) _____, starting with Ishmael's decision to go to sea. The action happens over a limited (3) _____, the few weeks of the *Pequod's* last voyage. As the voyage comes to an end, the (4) _____ of the novel speeds up as it moves towards its final (5) _____: the sinking of the *Pequod* and the deaths of almost all the men on board.

Wuthering Heights

The (6) _____ is long and ambitious, covering three generations of two neighbouring families. The novel starts with the narrator arriving at the home of one of the families and being attacked by a ghost in his sleep. The rest of the novel is told as a (7) _____, jumping back more than 40 years in time, and tracing the dramatic and tragic story of the ghost who visited the narrator. There are several (8) _____, both internal and (9) _____, but in the end a (10) _____ seems to have been found and some order and peace is returned to the two families.

2 Write a short description of the plot of a novel you have read recently.



2 Characters

A novel will normally have a number of **characters**. These may be **main characters**, or **minor characters**. Typically the novel gives us more information about its main characters and their feelings, reactions and motivations are described in detail. The minor characters may be fairly **two-dimensional**, simple **devices** to support the plot, or to highlight some feature of the **protagonist's** personality.

The **protagonist** is the main character and there may often be an **antagonist**, someone who the protagonist must fight against or who in some way blocks the protagonist's way. In some novels it is very clear who the protagonist (or main character) is. For example in *Moby Dick* there is no doubt that the protagonist – the most interesting character in the story – is Captain Ahab and that his antagonist is Moby Dick the white whale.

In other novels this is not so clear. In *Vanity Fair*, there are two protagonists, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley. There is not really an antagonist, but there is a **cast** of minor characters.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett is the main character, the protagonist, the **heroine** of the book, but her **counterpart**, and eventual husband, Darcy, is also a **key character**. He is not in fact an antagonist, though he may appear to be so at the beginning, but a **hero**, a mirror to Elizabeth's values.

Characterisation

The author presents and describes the characters in a novel in a number of ways: through direct description, through the characters actions and reactions, through the words of others, through dialogue and through the characters' own words and thoughts.

Characters are often described briefly when they are first presented with information given about their **physical features** and **personality traits**. Dickens does this, often describing one or two **central features** which will be returned to time and again throughout the novel. For example in *Bleak House* he introduces Esther as 'a quiet girl with a calm face and smooth, dark hair, standing close to Ada. This was Esther Sommerson.' Her smooth dark hair will be important later in the novel as a clue to the identity of her mother, and she will be seen as standing close to Ada throughout the story, offering her support and friendship.

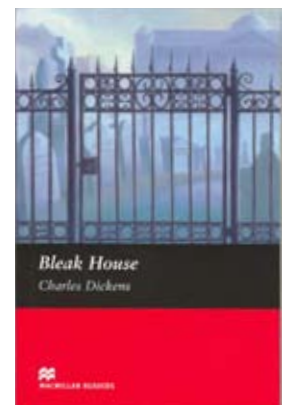
Characters may be introduced through the words of others. In *Moby Dick* we hear people talking about the famous Captain Ahab long before he appears, so we already have an idea of the man before we actually see him. Or sometimes characters are introduced through their own words. For example, on the opening page of *Pride and Prejudice* Mrs Bennett's words show her to be a silly woman who is desperate to marry her daughters to the first rich man who comes along.

As the novel continues, the same **devices** are used to **develop** the characters. They continue to be described – and judged – through their actions, words, reactions, thoughts and feelings.

Test Yourself

- 1 **Complete the description of the characters in Bleak House using words from the text above.**

Esther Sommerson is the (1) h _____ in *Bleak House*. She, along with Ada Clare, Richard Carstone and John Jarndyce are the (2) m _____ c _____. But the novel is also filled with an enormous (3) c _____ of (4) m _____ c _____, such as Mrs Flite, Krook the shopkeeper and the mysterious Nemo. Some of these characters are quite (5) t - d _____, such as Mrs Jellyby, who doesn't look after her children, and is a contrast to Esther kindness and thoughtfulness. Others, such as Mrs Dedlock or Jo the crossing sweeper are given more depth and their characters (6) d _____ as their roles become more important to the plot.



- 2 **Think about a novel you have read recently and answer these questions. Who were the main characters? How were they first introduced? What key features were first presented? How did their characters develop? What devices did the author use to show these developments?**

3 Narrator

The **narrator** is the person who tells the story and the story is told from his/her **point of view**.

Often the narrator is simply a voice that tells the story in the **third person** (someone we do not know and who takes no part in the story). This type of narrator has no personality, but has the power to know the minds and hearts of all the characters in the novel. A third person narrator like this knows everything about the characters and events in the novel. They can follow characters into their homes and into their thoughts, and they are present to describe all the events that take place. Sometimes the narrator has the voice of the author and may comment on the action or characters. They may even speak directly to the reader.

Macmillan Readers

Sometimes the third person narrator will tell the story from the **point of view** of one of the characters. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the story is told from Lizzy's point of view. Any scenes where Lizzy is not present have to be described in a letter to Lizzy, or retold in a conversation. In this example the narrator cannot see into the minds and hearts of the other characters. This kind of narrator is called a **limited third person narrator**.

The narrator may also be a **minor character** in the plot, for example Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*, who **retells** a story that has already been told to him. Or Ishmael, in *Moby Dick*, who, although a member of the crew, watches the madness and obsession of Captain Ahab from a distance. This kind of narrator acts as a bridge between the world of the story and the more 'normal' world of the reader. In this case the narrator is still a **third person narrator**, standing outside the events and looking on, but he/she is **filtering** the events through his/her personality. He or she took no part in the story and only retells it. The narrator may narrate his/her meeting with the **story-teller** in the **first person**, but then the narrative will change to the third person. Another classic example is that of Robert Walton in *Frankenstein*, who acts as a **filter** for doctor Frankenstein's incredible story.

Sometimes the main character of the novel narrates the story in the **first person**. For example, in *Great Expectations* the young boy, Pip, tells his own story. The choice of a **first person narrator** allows the novelist to look closely at the **motivation** and **psychological development** of the main character.

With both first person and limited third person narrators, there is often a question of how **reliable** the narrator is. Can we trust the narrator to be telling us the whole truth? Or is the truth being **coloured** by the narrator's **point of view**? Are they an **unreliable narrator**?

Test Yourself

1 Match the descriptions (1 -3) with the terms (a-c).

- 1 The narrator can see into the minds and thoughts of all the characters.
 - 2 The main character tells their own story in their own words.
 - 3 The narrator tells the story through the eyes of the main character.
- a) first person narrator
 - b) limited third person narrator
 - c) third person narrator

2 Think of a novel you have read which matches each description below.

- 1 A third person narrator who reports on all his main character's thoughts and feelings as well as their actions and reactions.
- 2 A novel which is narrated by the main character.
- 3 A story which is told by more than one narrator and from more than one point of view.

4 Themes

A **theme** is a topic or idea which is **explored** in a novel. The theme is usually about life, society or human nature. For example the **central themes** in *Moby Dick* are obsession, madness and revenge. In Austen's novels there is a **recurring theme** of marriage and the social position of women in Austen's eighteenth-century world. These themes **develop** throughout her novels and are also **common themes** in other novels of her time.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens explores the themes of money and happiness, and the relationship between them. He suggests that money can change a person, and that happiness is more important. However, he also admits that a little bit of material comfort is important for a happy life.

Test Yourself

1 Reorder the lines below.

- a) used to manipulate and control people, but she also shows _____
- b) money. In this novel, George Eliot explores the _____
- c) theme in her novels. She suggests that money is often _____
- d) how money can be used to good ends. _____
- e) One of the central themes of *Middlemarch* is 1 _____
- f) influence of money on people's lives. It is a recurring _____

2 Think of the last novel you read. What was the theme? What does the author (or the novel) say about this theme?

5 Style

Different novelists use different styles. Some are more **dramatic** (Dickens or Melville), others more **realistic** (Austen or Eliot). Some narrate events in a very factual, direct way, others prefer to use long, detailed descriptions. The style of a novel will depend on both the **genre** and the **author**. And it may change during the novel, using different styles to create different effects. A change in style can often also mean a change in pace. (For a list of genres, see the end of this section.)

The style is created through the author's use of language, **symbolism** and literary devices such as **similes, metaphor, satire** and **irony**.

Symbolism

An object or a person in a novel can act as a **symbol**, representing a quality or an idea. For example, in *Moby Dick*, the whale can **symbolise** the power of nature, and at the same time it can demonstrate evil. In *Middlemarch*, the wills of both Casaubon and Featherstone show how the power and influence of property and money can be so strong it continues after death.

In an **allegory**, both the characters and the setting represent something different than themselves. For example in *Animal Farm*, the animals are people and the farm is a political state. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the characters represent qualities (intelligence, bravery, sentimentality).

Test Yourself

1 Complete the text using the words in the box.

birds cat death free obsession prison prisoner symbolic

In *Bleak House*, Mrs Flite keeps a number of (1) _____ in cages in her room. She says that they are in (2) _____, but she refuses to set them free as she is afraid that they will get eaten by Krook's (3) _____. When she hears of Richard Carstone's (4) _____ she sets them all free. This (5) _____ action shows that Mrs Flite has learnt the lesson of Carstone's (6) _____ with the Chancery. She does not want to be a (7) _____ to this obsession any longer, and in setting her birds free she shows that she is also setting herself (8) _____.

2 Think of three more symbols used in novels you've read recently. What were they symbolising? What message was the author conveying through these symbols?

6 Imagery and figures of speech

Imagery is the use of the five senses in creating a **vivid** description of a place or a moment in time. Dickens uses imagery to describe the cold, winter streets of Victorian London:

There was fog too. The fog was everywhere. It came up the river and down the river. Fog covered the boats on the river and filled the boatmen's eyes. Street lamps sent a pale, yellow light through the thick, foggy air.

Bleak House

Metaphor

A metaphor is a direct comparison between two very different things. For example, Dickens compares Jesse Hexam to a bird: 'He had the greedy look of a cruel bird.'

He compares the strength of the desperate schoolmaster, Bradley Headstone as he pulls Riderman to the river, to the strength of iron: 'Bradley caught him round the body. Riderhood was in a grip of iron.' (*Our Mutual Friend*)

Simile

Similes are similar to metaphors. They compare two very different things but the comparison is more direct and is made using *like* or *as*. Melville often uses similes in his description of the whaling ship and its mad captain in *Moby Dick*. For example, 'Ahab jumped up and down on the deck like an excited child' and 'Storms and strong winds started to blow the ship around like a toy on the ocean.'

Test Yourself

2 **Dickens' language is rich and descriptive. He often uses metaphors, similes and imagery. Look at the five extracts below, which one shows:**

a) a metaphor b) a simile c) use of imagery

- 1 The marshes beyond the graveyard were grey. The river beyond the marshes was a darker line of grey. A bitter wind was blowing across the marshes from the sea. The graveyard was a dark and frightening place. (*Great Expectations*)
- 2 The schoolmaster was a young man of twenty-six, but he did everything slowly and carefully, like a much older man. He had worked hard to become a schoolmaster, learning facts like a machine. (*Our Mutual Friend*)
- 3 Poor people crowded into Tom-All-Alone's like rats into holes. (*Bleak House*)
- 4 'You never left me even when there was danger. You stayed near me when the dark clouds gathered. This has been the best part of my life.' (Magwitch in *Great Expectations*)
- 5 The wind moved the hair and the rain fell upon the dead, cold face. (*Our Mutual Friend*)

Satire

Satire is the use of humour to criticise someone and make them look stupid or silly. Austen often uses satire in her novels to criticise the values of the society she's describing. She often satirises people through their speech. Here Mrs Bennet is congratulating Lizzy on her engagement to Mr Darcy, a man she had hated until that moment:

Lizzy! Mr Darcy? And is it really true? Oh, my sweetest Lizzy, how rich and great you will be! Such a delightful man – so handsome, so tall!

Pride and Prejudice

Here Austen is satirising Mrs Bennet's shallow, materialistic attitude to marriage.

Irony

Irony shows the difference between appearance or intention and reality. Dickens often uses irony in his novels. For example in *Bleak House* it is ironic that the gold coin that Lady Dedlock gives poor Jo the crossing sweeper does not help him, as she had intended. Instead it gets him into trouble with the police. Again in *Bleak House* it is ironic that Mr Krook, who runs the Rag and Bottle Shop, saves mountains of papers in his shop, but he can't read them. In both these cases the object of irony leads indirectly to the deaths of both Jo and Richard Carstone.

In *Our Mutual Friend* the schoolmaster, Bradley Headstone, is in love with Lizzie Hexam and is madly jealous of her friendship with the lawyer, Eugene Wrayburn. In order to keep the two apart, the schoolmaster decides to kill Wrayburn, but he fails. Ironically, his failed murder attempt brings Lizzie and Wrayburn closer to each other and they decide to get married.

7 Genres

These are some examples of fictional genres:

Adventure novels

Eg, Melville's *Moby Dick* (upper)

Dumas's *The Treasure of Monte Cristo* (pre-intermediate)

Novels that tell the story of an adventure, often a journey or a quest (a journey to find something that has been lost).

Autobiographical novels

Eg, Dickens' *David Copperfield*.

Novels which are based on the author's life and experiences.

Coming of age novels

Eg, Dickens' *Great Expectations* (upper).

Novels which describe how the main character changes and develops as they progress from childhood to becoming an adult.

Detective novels

Eg, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, Dexter's *The Silent World of Anthony Quinn* (intermediate).
Novels in which a detective, a policeman or an ordinary person solves a crime.

Fantasy novels

Eg, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (pre-intermediate).
Novels which are set in imaginary worlds. These characters often include non human characters.

Gothic novels

Eg, Stoker's *Dracula* (intermediate), Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (upper).
Novels which describe supernatural forces and include scenes of terror. The setting is often a dark, mysterious castle which is haunted by ghosts and evil spirits. These spirits have to be overcome by the hero or heroine.

Historical novels

Eg, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.
A novel based on real historical events. It may be a fictional story set against the background of a factual historical moment. Or it can be a fictional account of the story, where the author enters into the head of the historical character and imagines their thoughts and feelings.

Novel of manners

Eg, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (intermediate), Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (upper).
A novel which describes a particular society, or social group, and the influence it has over the novel's characters (often limiting their choices and freedom, especially those of women).

Science fiction novels

Eg, Huxley's *Brave New World*.
A novel where imagined scientific or technological developments are important to the action in the novel, and the world in which its characters live and interact. These novels are often set in the future.

Test Yourself

- 1 Read these descriptions of three classical novels. Which genre would you class them as?**
 - a) This novel describes how a man discovers a way to make himself invisible.
 - b) It is 18th century England. A wealthy young woman is so busy arranging marriages for her friends that she does not realise that she too is falling in love.
 - c) This novel describes a young boy's journey from a poor orphanage to manhood, and all the adventures he finds along the way.
- 2 Think of the last three novels you have read. What genre would you class them as? Why?**

Glossary

action	the events in the novel	device	a literary technique which is used to create a certain effect
allegory	the use of events and characters as <i>symbols</i> i.e. to represent ideas and qualities	dramatic	exciting and impressive
antagonist	a character who blocks the progress of the <i>main character</i>	explore	to describe and discuss
author	the person who wrote the novel	external conflict	see <i>conflict</i>
cast	a cast is the group of people who act together in a theatre play. <i>Cast</i> is often used to describe the group of characters in a novel too.	figures of speech	expressions which are used to add detail to a description through comparison (see <i>simile</i> and <i>metaphor</i>)
central features	(see also <i>physical features</i>) the most important details about a person's body or face	filter (v)	to describe the facts from a certain <i>point of view</i> .
central theme	see <i>theme</i>	first person	using the pronouns <i>I</i> and <i>me</i>
characters	the people in a novel	first person narrator	see <i>narrator</i>
main/key characters	the most important people in the novel	flashback	a device used to describe an event that happened before the main story
minor characters	characters who are not described in detail	flashforward	a device used to describe an event that will happen in the future
characterisation	how the novelist describes the characters	genre	a particular style or type of novel
chronologically	in the order they happened	heroine	a woman who is the most important person in the novel
colour (v)	to influence a description	hero	a man who is the most important person in the novel
common themes	see <i>theme</i>	imagery	the use of the five senses in describing a scene
complex	not following a simple, straight line	internal conflict	see <i>conflict</i>
conflict	a problem that faces the main character/s	irony	a device that shows the contrast between reality and appearance
external conflict	a problem which involves the character and someone or something else	key events	the most important events
internal conflict	a problem that is a part of the character's personality	limited third person narrator	see <i>narrator</i>
counterpart	a character who has a similar and an equally important role	linear	in a straight line, starting at the beginning and working through the events in sequence
develop	used to describe progress in the <i>plot</i> , in the description of a <i>character</i> or in the exploration of a <i>theme</i> .	main plot	see <i>plot</i>

main characters	see <i>characters</i>		told at the same time as the main plot
mechanics	the mechanics of the plot are the small details of the events and actions	point of view	the position from which a story is told, the 'eyes' through which we see and understand the story
metaphor	an expression which describes one thing as if it was another thing (i.e. he was a hungry wolf) see also <i>simile</i>	protagonist	see <i>main character</i>
minor characters	see <i>characters</i>	psychological development	the way a character's personality changes
motivation	the reason why someone does something	race ahead	move forward very quickly.
narrator	the person who tells the story	realistic	describing things as they are in real life
third person narrator	a narrator who sees the story from outside and who can see into the minds and hearts of all the characters, as well as see all the action that takes place	recurring themes	see <i>theme</i>
first person narrator	a narrator who tells the story in the first person i.e. using <i>I</i> and <i>me</i> not <i>he</i> or <i>she</i> , to talk about the main character.	reliable	someone you can trust
limited third person narrator	a narrator who uses the third person, <i>he</i> or <i>she</i> to talk about the main character, but whose view of the action and the other people involved in the plot is limited to the main character.	resolution	the end of a conflict (see <i>conflict</i>), often comes at the end of the novel retell to tell a story another person has told you
third person narrator	a narrator who speaks in the third person using <i>he</i> or <i>she</i> or <i>they</i> to talk about all the characters.	reverse chronology	starting at the end and going backwards in time
pace	the speed at which the story is told	saga	a story told about two or more generations of the same family
personality traits	details about a person's personality eg, proud, intelligent, silly, obsessed by revenge.	satire	a style which criticises a person, event or part of society by making it look funny or stupid
physical features	details about a person's body and face, for example, dark hair, blue eyes, a scar on his face or a wooden leg.	shift (n)	a change in <i>style</i> or in <i>pace</i>
plot	the story told by the novel	simile	an expression which describes someone or something by comparing it to someone or something else using <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> (eg, <i>he was as hungry as a wolf</i>)
main plot	the most important story told in the novel	story-teller	a person who tells a story
sub plots	stories in the novel that are	style	the way the novel is written
		sub plots	see <i>plot</i>
		symbol	a person or an object that represents a particular quality or idea
		symbolise	to be a symbol of something
		symbolism	the use of <i>symbols</i>
		theme	a topic that is discussed in literature
		central theme	the most important theme

common themes	themes that are often discussed in literature
recurring themes	themes that are repeatedly discussed by the same novelist
third person narrator	see <i>narrator</i>
timeframe	the length of time the story takes
two-dimensional	not described in detail
vivid	very clear and detailed