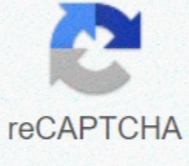




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## Literary elements with definition and examples

The AP Literature exam is designed to test your ability to analyze literature. That means you'll have to know how to use analytical tools, like literary elements, to uncover the meaning of a text. Because literary elements are present in every piece of literature (really!), they're a good place to start when it comes to developing your analytical toolbox. In this article, we'll give you the literary element definition, explain how a literary element is different from a literary device, and look at the top nine literary elements you need to know before taking the AP Literature exam. So let's get started! What Are Literary Elements? Take a minute and imagine building a house. (Stick with us, here.) What are some of the things that you would absolutely have to include in order to make a house? Some of those non-negotiable elements are a roof, walls, a kitchen, and a bathroom. If you didn't have these elements, you wouldn't have a house. Heck, you might not even have a building! A literary element's definition is pretty similar. Literary elements are the things that all literature—whether it's a news article, a book, or a poem—absolutely have to have. Just like a house, the elements might be arranged slightly differently...but at the end of the day, they're usually all present and accounted for. Literary elements are the fundamental building blocks of writing, and they play an important role in helping us write, read, and understand literature. You might even say that literary elements are the DNA of literature. How Is a Literary Element Different From a Literary Device? But wait! You've also learned about literary device (sometimes called literary techniques), which writers use to create literature! So what makes a literary element different from a literary device? Let's go back to our house metaphor for a second. If literary elements are the must-have, cannot-do-without parts of a house, then literary devices are the optional decor. Maybe you like a classic style (a trope!), or perhaps you're more of an eclectic kind of person (a conceit)! Just because you decorate your house like a crazy person doesn't make it any less of a house. It just means you have a...unique personal style. Literary devices are optional techniques that writers pick and choose from to shape the style, genre, tone, meaning, and theme of their works. For example, literary devices are what make Cormac McCarthy's western novel, Blood Meridian, so different from Matt McCarthy's medical memoir, The Real Doctor Will See You Shortly. Conversely, literary elements—especially the elements that qualify both works as "books"—are what keep them shelved next to each other at Barnes & Noble. They're the non-negotiable things that make both works "literature." Top 9 Literary Elements List (With Examples!) Now let's take a more in-depth look at the most common elements in literature. Each term in the literary elements list below gives you the literary element definition and an example of how the elements work. #1: Language The most important literary element is language. Language is defined as a system of communicating ideas and feelings through signs, sounds, gestures, and/or marks. Language is the way we share ideas with one another, whether it's through speech, text, or even performance! All literature is written in a recognizable language, since one of literature's main goals is sharing ideas, concepts, and stories with a larger audience. And since there are over 6,900 distinct languages in the world, that means literature exists in tons of different linguistic forms, too. (How cool is that?!) Obviously, in order to read a book, you need to understand the language it's written in. But language can also be an important tool in understanding the meaning of a book, too. For instance, writers can combine languages to help readers better understand the characters, setting, or even tone. Here's an example of how Cherrie Moraga combines English and Spanish in her play, Heroes and Saints. Look into your children's faces. They tell you the truth. They are our future. Pero no tendremos ningun futuro si seguimos siendo victimas. Moraga's play is about the plight of Hispanic migrant workers in the United States. By combining English and Spanish throughout the play, Moraga helps readers understand her characters and their culture better. #2: Plot The plot of a work is defined as the sequence of events that occurs from the first line to the last. In other words, the plot is what happens in a story. All literature has a plot of some kind. Most long-form literature, like a novel or a play, follows a pretty typical plot structure, also known as a plot arc. This type of plot has six elements: Beginning/Exposition: This is the very beginning of a story. During the exposition, authors usually introduce the major characters and settings to the reader. Conflict: Just like in real life, the conflict of a story is the problem that the main characters have to tackle. There are two types of conflict that you'll see in a plot. The major conflict is the overarching problem that characters face. Minor conflicts, on the other hands, are the smaller obstacles characters have to overcome to resolve the major conflict. Rising Action: Rising action is literally everything that happens in a story that leads up to the climax of the plot. Usually this involves facing and conquering minor conflicts, which is what keeps the plot moving forward. More importantly, writers use rising action to build tension that comes to a head during the plot's climax. Climax: The climax of the plot is the part of the story where the characters finally have to face and solve the major conflict. This is the "peak" of the plot where all the tension of the rising action finally comes to a head. You can usually identify the climax by figuring out which part of the story is the moment where the hero will either succeed or totally fail. Falling Action: Falling action is everything that happens after the book's climax but before the resolution. This is where writers tie up any loose ends and start bringing the book's action to a close. Resolution/Denouement: This is the conclusion of a story. But just because it's called a "resolution" doesn't mean every single issue is resolved happily—or even satisfactorily. For example, the resolution in Romeo and Juliet involves (spoiler alert!) the death of both main characters. This might not be the kind of ending you want, but it is an ending, which is why it's called the resolution! If you've ever read a Shakespearean play, then you've seen the plot we outlined above at work. But even more contemporary novels, like The Hunger Games, also use this structure. Actually, you can think of a plot arc like a story's skeleton! But what about poems, you ask? Do they have plots? Yes! They tend to be a little less dense, but even poems have things that happen in them. Take a look at "Do not go gentle into that good night" by Dylan Thomas. There's definitely stuff happening in this poem: specifically, the narrator is telling readers not to accept death without a fight. While this is more simple than what happens in something like The Lord of the Rings, it's still a plot! #3: Mood The mood of a piece of literature is defined as the emotion or feeling that readers get from reading the words on a page. So if you've ever read something that's made you feel tense, scared, or even happy...you've experienced mood firsthand! While a story can have an overarching mood, it's more likely that the mood changes from scene to scene depending on what the writer is trying to convey. For example, the overall mood of a play like Romeo and Juliet may be tragic, but that doesn't mean there aren't funny, lighthearted moments in certain scenes. Thinking about mood when you read literature is a great way to figure out how an author wants readers to feel about certain ideas, messages, and themes. These lines from "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou are a good example of how mood impacts an idea: You may shoot me with your words, You may cut me with your eyes.You may kill me with your hatefulness,But still, like air, I'll rise. What are the emotions present in this passage? The first three lines are full of anger, bitterness, and violence, which helps readers understand that the speaker of the poem has been terribly mistreated. But despite that, the last line is full of hope. This helps Angelou show readers how she won't let others' actions—even terrible ones—hold her back. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from the Harry Potter book series #4: Setting Have you ever pictured yourself in living in the Gryffindor dormitories at Hogwarts? Or maybe you've wished you could attend the Mad Hatter's tea party in Wonderland. These are examples of how settings—especially vivid ones—capture readers' imaginations and help a literary world come to life. Setting is defined simply as the time and location in which the story takes place. The setting is also the background against which the action happens. For example, Hogwarts becomes the location, or setting, where Harry, Hermione, and Ron have many of their adventures. Keep in mind that longer works often have multiple settings. The Harry Potter series, for example, has tons of memorable locations, like Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, and Gringotts. Each of these settings plays an important role in bringing the Wizarding World to life. The setting of a work is important because it helps convey important information about the world that impact other literary elements, like plot and theme. For example, a historical book set in America in the 1940s will likely have a much different atmosphere and plot than a science fiction book set three hundred years in the future. Additionally, some settings even become characters in the stories themselves! For example, the house in Edgar Allen Poe's short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," becomes the story's antagonist. So keep an eye out for settings that serve multiple functions in a work, too. #5: Theme All literary works have themes, or central messages, that authors are trying to convey. Sometimes theme is described as the main idea of a work...but more accurately, themes are any ideas that appear repeatedly throughout a text. That means that most works have multiple themes! All literature has themes because a major purpose of literature is to share, explore, and advocate for ideas. Even the shortest poems have themes. Check out this two line poem, "My life has been the poem I would have writ." from Henry David Thoreau: My life has been the poem I would have writ But I could not both live and utter it. When looking for a theme, ask yourself what an author is trying to teach us or show us through their writing. In this case, Thoreau is saying we have to live in the moment, and living is what provides the material for writing. #6: Point of View Point of view is the position of the narrator in relationship to the plot of a piece of literature. In other words, point of view is the perspective from which the story is told. We actually have a super in-depth guide to point of view that you can find here. But here's the short version: literature can be written from one of four points of view. First person: This is told by one of the characters of the story from their perspective. You can easily identify first-person points of view by looking for first-person pronouns, like "I," "you," and "my." Second person: second-person point of view happens when the audience is made a character in the story. In this instance, the narrator uses second person pronouns, like "you" and "your." If you ever get confused, just remember that "Choose Your Own Adventure" books use second person. Third person limited: this is when the narrator is removed from the story and tells it from an outside perspective. To do this, the narrator uses pronouns like "he," "she," and "they" to refer to the characters in the story. In a third person limited point of view, this narrator focuses on the story as it surrounds one character. It's almost like there's a camera crew following the protagonist that reports on everything that happens to them. Third person omniscient: in this point of view, the narrator still uses third-person pronouns...but instead of being limited to one character, the narrator can tell readers what's happening with all characters at all times. It's almost like the narrator is God: they can see all, hear all, and explain all! Point of view is an important literary element for two reasons. First, it helps us better understand the characters in a story. For example, a first person point of view lets readers get to know the main character in detail, since they experience the main character's thoughts, feelings, and actions. Second, point of view establishes a narrator, or a character whose job it is to tell the story, which we'll talk about in the next section! #7: Narrator Like we just mentioned, the narrator is the person who's telling the story. All literature has a narrator, even if that narrator isn't named or an active part of the plot. Here's what we mean: when you read a newspaper article, it's the reporter's job to tell you all the details of a particular event. That makes the reporter the narrator. They're taking a combination of interviews, research, and their own eyewitness account to help you better understand a topic. The same is true for the narrator of a book or poem, too. The narrator helps make sense of the plot for the reader. It's their job to explain, describe, and even dramatically reveal plot points to the audience. Here's an example of how one of the most famous narrators in literature, John Watson, explains Sherlock Holmes' character to readers in A Study in Scarlet: He was not studying medicine. He had himself, in reply to a question, confirmed Stamford's opinion upon that point. Neither did he appear to have pursued any course of reading which might fit him for a degree in science or any other recognized portal which would give him an entrance into the learned world. Yet his zeal for certain studies was remarkable, and within eccentric limits his knowledge was so extraordinarily ample and minute that his observations have fairly astounded me. Surely no man would work so hard or attain such precise information unless he had some definite end in view. Desultory readers are seldom remarkable for the exactness of their learning. No man burdens his mind with small matters unless he has some very good reason for doing so. John Watson tells the story from a first person perspective (though that's not evident in this quote). That means he's giving readers his own perspective on the world around him, which includes Sherlock Holmes. In this passage, readers learn about Holmes' peculiar learning habits, which is just another part of his extraordinary nature. Grant Snider/Incidental Comics #8: Conflict Because conflict is a part of plot—and as we've already established, all literature has some sort of plot—that means conflict is a literary element, too. A conflict is the central struggle that motivates the characters and leads to a work's climax. Generally, conflict occurs between the protagonist, or hero, and the antagonist, or villain...but it can also exist between secondary characters, man and nature, social structures, or even between the hero and his own mind. More importantly, conflict gives a story purpose and motivates a story's plot. Put another way, conflict causes the protagonist to act. Sometimes these conflicts are large in scale, like a war...but they can also be small, like conflict in a relationship between the hero and their parents. One of the most important things to understand about conflict is it can be both explicit and implicit. Explicit conflict is explained within the text; it's an obvious moment where something goes wrong and characters have to fix it. Bram Stoker's Dracula uses explicit conflict to fuel its plot: a vampire has come to England, and the heroes in the story have to kill him as soon as possible. Implicit conflict is more common in poetry, where there isn't a specific occurrence that obviously screams, "this is a problem." Instead, you have to read between the lines to find the conflict that's motivating the narrator. Take a look at Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "How Do I Love Thee?" for an example of implicit conflict in action: How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and heightMy soul can reach, when feeling out of sightFor the ends of being and ideal grace.I love thee to the level of every day'sMost quiet need, by sun and candle-light.I love thee freely, as men strive for right.I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.I love thee with the passion put to useln I love thee with my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.I love thee with a love I seemed to loseWith my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,I shall but love thee better after death. The conflict here is actually a happy one: the narrator is so in love that she's struggling with expressing the depth of her emotion! Cyanide and Happiness/Explosm.net #9: Characters A piece of literature has to have at least one character, which can be a person, an object, or an animal. While there are many different character types (and archetypes!), we're going to talk about the two you absolutely need to know: the protagonist and the antagonist. The protagonist of a work is its main character. The plot circles around this person or object, and they are central to solving the conflict of the story. Protagonists are often heroic, but they don't have to be: many stories focus on the struggles of average people, too. For the most part, protagonists are the characters that you remember long after the book is over, like Katniss Everdeen, David Copperfield, Sherlock Holmes, and Hester Prynne. Antagonists, on the other hand, are the characters that oppose the protagonist in some way. (This opposition is what causes the conflict of the story!) There can be multiple antagonists in a story, though usually there's one major character, animal, or object that continues to impede the protagonist's progress. If you ever forget what an antagonist is, just think of your favorite Disney villains. They're some of the best bad guys out there! What's Next? If you're not taking AP practice tests, there's no way to know how you'll do when you're taking the exam for real. Here's a list of practice tests for every AP exam, including the AP literature exam. It might seem like extra work, but we promise—practice tests are one of the best ways to help you improve your score! Listen: we know you're busy, so it can be hard to schedule time to study for an AP test on top of your extracurriculars and normal class work. Check out this article on when you need to start studying for your AP tests to make sure you're staying on track. What does a good AP score look like, anyway? Here's a list of the average AP scores for every single AP test. This is great for seeing how your practice scores stack up against the national average. Have friends who also need help with test prep? Share this article! 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