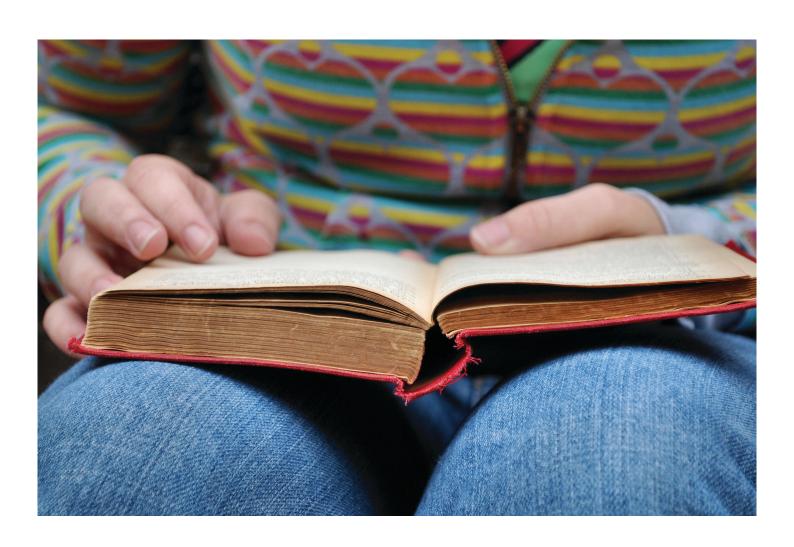# OpenLearn

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Introduction

This course is designed to help you develop the analytical skills needed for studying literary texts at university level.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- recognise and discuss selected library texts from the Renaissance to the present
- approach literary texts in terms of genre, gender and the canon
- engage in close analysis of narrative and poetic language and apply technical analytical terms
- engage in comparative work, draw general conclusions and use textual evidence to argue a case
- understand and use academic conventions: referencing and bibliography.

1 Why do we read prose fiction?

Prose fiction, whether in the form of the novel or the short story, is unarguably the most popular and widely consumed literary **genre**. One only has to see the proliferation of bookstalls at railway stations and airports, for example, and the predominance of novels over other forms of writing made available in such locations to realise the appeal of fiction.

Take a few moments to think about *Why* we read fiction? *What* do we hope to gain from reading stories about imagined events that happen to imaginary people?

Robert DiYanni begins his impressively wide-ranging study *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay* (1997) with the following assertion about why we read:

> We read stories for pleasure; they entertain us. And we read them for profit; they enlighten us. Stories draw us into their imaginative worlds and engage us with the power of their invention. They provide us with more than the immediate interest of narrative – of something happening – and more than the pleasures of imagination: they enlarge our understanding of ourselves and deepen our appreciation of life.
>
> (p. 27)

Did your own answers to the question of why we read touch on any of the reasons DiYanni gives? I wouldn't be at all surprised if they did. It is, I think, true for all of us that there is an element of sheer escapism in our desire to read stories, to imaginatively engage with the incidents and events that befall the characters we read about. We often come to identify with these fictional characters, and think perhaps about how we would react and respond to the situations they find themselves in.

We can immerse ourselves in a fictional world in this way without necessarily applying a great deal of critical or intellectual effort, of course. But if fictional narratives are, as DiYanni puts it, 'enlarge our understanding of ourselves and deepen our appreciation of life,' we need, perhaps, to read them in a more objective way, to subject them to a more critical scrutiny to see if they reinforce or challenge our existing ideas about the world around us. Close attention to the texts we read can only enhance our understanding, and this in turn can increase our pleasure in reading. In this course I will concentrate largely on introducing you to the various elements that make up a fictional **narrative**; the events that make up a **story** and how they are arranged (the **plot**); the perspectives from which stories can be narrated; the act of **characterisation**; the importance of **setting**, both in terms of time and place, and the actual language and style which writers adopt to tell their narratives. Above all, in what follows, and in your own readings of fictional narratives, I want to stress the importance of always keeping in mind the question of *why* you think writers use particular narrative strategies. There are an infinite number of ways in which stories can be told; the choices made by individual writers of individual texts are not randomly made. We need to think about why those choices might have been made. There is no single authoritative answer to such questions. How we read is dictated largely by the experiences and contexts we each of us bring to a particular text, and for that reason no two readings are likely to be the same, even though we may be applying the same critical processes to our reading.

We have spent some time in this introductory section thinking about why we read and, indeed, what we are reading when we read a fictional narrative. I want to conclude this

section with a quotation from Ian Milligan. This, I think, encapsulates the discussion I have tried to instigate here and gives an illuminating analysis of our reasons for reading and the need to develop our critical faculties. Keep Milligan's words in mind as you proceed through the rest of this course.

> Novels, then, are exciting machines (verbal machines) which transport their readers in space and time. They challenge us to meet the unfamiliar. They offer us a share in the pleasure of making because the designs they consist of are not simply there to be seen; they have to be understood, constructed, recreated by the reader out of the materials and according to the patterns which the fabric of their language contains – or conceals. When we become expert readers, we may begin to see some flaws in the workmanship or in the coherence of the design itself. But as beginning students our first task is to become aware of the pattern of meanings which can be discerned in the novel we are studying. It is only with practice and experience that we shall begin to see that the flood of books we call novels have features in common which allow us to group them together. Each novel has its own pattern, but as our experience widens we may begin to identify patterns running through the history of the form as a whole. These patterns cannot be assembled into a grand design, but the forms of fiction, the ways in which stories have been told, have their own history. An understanding of that historical pattern, haphazard and fragmentary as it may be, does give us some insight into the forms of life which literate societies have evolved in history, some awareness of their predominant interests, and of the myths and guiding principles which have sustained them.

(Milligan, 1983, pp. 7–8)

2 The elements of narrative

2.1 The act of reading

The act of reading has been characterised by Robert DiYanni as involving three interrelated processes: experience, interpretation, and evaluation. The first thing we do when we read a novel is to experience it, that is to say, we respond to the development of the narrative and the characters presented to us. The story we read if it does its job effectively affects us on certain levels. We become involved in the events and incidents that befall the characters. The language of the narrative forces us to respond to it, maybe with pleasure or admiration, or sometimes with confusion. If we are engaged by the story on any level we will have feelings one way or the other about the outcome; we will all respond in different ways. That response is shaped by our reaction to the interplay of various narrative elements, which will be outlined now and discussed in detail later.

2.2 Narrative events

Any narrative is made up of a series of events or incidents, arranged in a particular way. This can be defined as the plot of the story. Consider, as an example, Ernest Hemingway's appropriately entitled 'A Very Short Story' (Hemingway, 1944, pp. 135–6). Different readers will summarise the story in different ways, allocating different levels of significance to various narrative events. If you can access a copy of the story, you might like to try and summarise it yourself and compare it with my summary in the box below. When preparing that summary, I had to think about the crucial narrative events and how they are arranged, so the box includes at least some of the key events. You or other readers might include others.

In reading any story we have to evaluate for ourselves which are the key moments. There are many events I have left out of my summary: the opening, in which the soldier is carried onto the roof to look out over the town; the couple praying in the Duomo; the fact that it was agreed that he would not drink or see his friends in America; the loneliness of Luz's life in Pordenone. I have omitted these events or descriptions because it could be argued that they are not crucial to the main narrative incidents. In that case, why would the author have included them?

> *An unnamed soldier, hospitalised with an unspecified injury meets and falls in love with a nurse called Luz. They try to marry before he returns to the front but are unable to do so. Luz writes to the soldier frequently to declare her continuing love for him. After the armistice they decide that the soldier should return home to get a job and that Luz will then join him and they will marry. However, they quarrel before parting. After the soldier returns home Luz meets and falls in love with an Italian major who promises to marry her. She writes to the soldier to end their affair. He does not reply, and she does not marry the Italian major. The story ends with the soldier contracting a sexually transmitted disease from a casual fling.*

If you have read the story, you may disagree with the choices I've made. Nevertheless, whether or not another reader agrees with my analysis of the main events in this narrative, I hope you can see that it is possible to differentiate between the major and minor incidents in any story. What we judge as major or minor affects our interpretation of the narrative. As Seymour Chatman has argued 'narrative events have not only a logic of connection, but also a logic of *hierarchy*' (1978, p. 53, Chatman's italics). Certain narrative incidents have a direct influence on the direction of events. They are crucial to the maintenance of narrative logic. Others can be deleted from the narrative without affecting the outcome. What did you decide was the purpose of such narrative moments? Chatman contends that such events perform the function of 'filling in, elaborating […]; they form the flesh on the skeleton' (p. 54). Narratives without such elements would be much less interesting to read, indeed, would give us little incentive to read on.

Narrative events are arranged in such a way as to encourage us to read on to find out what happens next.

Activity 1

Attached are the openings of three novels. Please read them now.

How do these three openings try to convince us to read on? Which of the three would you be most likely to want to read further and why? Take a few moments to think about your response to these questions.

Your own predilections will dictate which of the three extracts you found most compelling (if any). But I think you'll agree that all three take very different approaches to 'hooking' the reader's interest.

The first extract, from the start of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) begins with a somewhat mundane descriptive detail – 'It was a bright cold day in April' – which in itself is hardly likely to set our pulses racing, but is immediately followed by a disconcerting piece of information: 'the clocks were striking thirteen'. What did you make of this? It's an attention-grabbing device, isn't it? Straightaway we are presented with something unfamiliar and disturbing or unrealistic, perhaps. This moment of defamiliarisation gives way to the introduction of a character with an ordinary, almost reassuring name. Winston Smith's appearance in the story at this early stage suggests that he is likely to be significant. The description of his first actions, struggling for shelter through a 'vile wind', trailing 'a swirl of gritty dust' in his wake, is a return to the kind of image we can identify as 'realistic'. But that odd detail, clocks striking *thirteen* still lingers, maybe suggesting a futuristic element? Did it make you want to read on?

What about the second extract? How would you characterise the narrative voice? Unlike the neutral, distanced tone of Orwell's third-person narrative voice, there's something insistent and conversational about the first-person **narrator** of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). Did you note also the perhaps parodying use of that familiar story-opener 'once upon a time' – undercut straightaway by the narrator's change of mind: 'No, that won't do'. We are then given a very specific setting, not just Bombay – a city perhaps exotic and unfamiliar to many readers – but also the name of the Nursing Home and an actual date and time: midnight on August 15th, 1947. The narrator tells us that the time 'matters, too.' Is the implied significance of time and date enough to make you want to continue reading? You may or may not already realise the momentousness of that exact point in history, but in any event Rushdie soon reveals it. The narrative continues:

> Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world.

The fact that the narrator was born at such a time surely suggests to us that the story he will tell is likely to have some cultural, historical and maybe even political significance. Depending on your own concerns and interests, even your own background, this could well be enough of a motivation to keep on reading.

The third extract, like the opening of Rushdie's novel, introduces us to what will be for many of us an unfamiliar setting, but perhaps also intrigues us in another way, with its deliberate vagueness about time – 'Lifetimes ago' – and the juxtaposition of unlikely symbols, a banyan tree and a satellite dish. The astrologer's prophecy about the protagonist's 'widowhood and exile' raises initial expectations about the likely direction of the narrative, in spite of the narrator's fervent denial. In fact, the novel, *Jasmine* (1989), by Bharati Mukherjee does chart the events the old man foretells here. The narrator, Jasmine Vijh, is widowed and flees India for America, changing her name and identity at various points in her odyssey across the United States.

You might well say that a few lines from the opening of a novel are insufficient to sway our judgement one way or another as to whether we want to engage with the story it has to tell us, and I think I'd agree, though novelists invariably do want to grab our attention as early as possible. In the next section I want to discuss three longer openings from famous novels, with attention not so much to *what* is being told as to *who* is doing the telling; the narrative perspective, or **point of view**.

2.3 Narrative perspectives

Two of the most fundamental choices that face the author of a fictional narrative is to decide *who* is to be the narrator and *how* the story is to be narrated.

Activity 2

Click to read the attached extract from the opening of Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey (1818). Who is the narrator? How would you characterise the narrative 'voice'?

This is what is known as third-person narration. The voice does not belong to a particular character in the novel, and in the extract it does not assume the perspective of any of the characters, merely describing their physical appearance, social status and relationships, and, in Catherine's case, her likes and dislikes, her accomplishments and pastimes. You will probably have noticed that this extract comprises a single, extremely long paragraph and is mostly concerned with describing the young Catherine Morland. This amount of detail at the start of the novel suggests to us that Catherine is likely to be the central character, and so it proves.

At first sight the narrative voice seems to be fairly neutral and undemonstrative, like that at the beginning of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* above. But a closer inspection reveals greater subtleties. Indeed, it appears that the narrative voice is doing everything in its power to undermine our possible interest, while also drawing our attention to the kinds of

expectations and conventions that often attend the process of reading particular kinds of fiction. Everything about Catherine seems to militate against the possibility of her being an interesting central character. According to the narrator, she was no-one's idea of a heroine, and her social and family connections are of little assistance in this respect too. Austen is poking fun here at the idea of the tragic heroine. The narrator sounds almost disappointed at the fact that Catherine is not a motherless waif whose plight can tug at our heartstrings:

> Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as anybody might expect, she still lived on – lived to have six children more – to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself.

Neither does Catherine have the classical beauty of the novelistic heroine, her unprepossessing looks in themselves rendering her 'unpropitious' for such a role. Furthermore, she clearly lacks aptitude and enthusiasm for the kind of accomplishments which young girls of this time were expected to acquire.

The overriding tone of this extract could perhaps be best described as coolly detached and above all ironic. As you will discover from reading further in Austen, irony was invariably the main feature of her narrative voices. In the case of the opening to *Northanger Abbey*, would you agree that this ironic strategy of seeming to deflate our enthusiasm is in fact a subtle device to heighten the reader's interest? If Catherine is such unlikely heroine material, what kind of narrative will it be that can feature her as its central character?

This would perhaps be a good point at which to say a little more about third-person narrators. These are often known as an **'omniscient'** narrators. An omniscient narrator is one that exhibits full knowledge of the actions, thoughts and feelings of each of the characters in the story. Austen invariably used this omniscient perspective, and it remains a popular means of narration amongst contemporary writers. Indeed, more recent authors have made great play of drawing attention to the narrator's role as an all-powerful figure, an embodiment of the author who has full control of the characters at his or her mercy. The beginning of Martin Amis' novel *London Fields* demonstrates this well:

> This is a true story but I can't believe it's really happening.
>
> It's a murder story, too. I can't believe my luck.
>
> And a love story (I think), of all strange things, so late in the century, so late in the goddamned day.
>
> This is the story of a murder. It hasn't happened yet. But it will. (It had better.) I know the murderer, I know the murderee. I know the time, I know the place. I know the motive *(her* motive) and I know the means. I know who will be the foil, the fool, the poor foal, also utterly destroyed. And I couldn't stop them, I don't think, even if I wanted to. The girl will die. It's what she always wanted. You can't stop people, once they *start creating*.
>
> What a gift. This page is briefly stained by my tears of gratitude. Novelists don't usually have it so good, do they, when something real happens (something unified, dramatic and pretty saleable), and they just write it down?
>
> (1989, p. 1)

We might be forgiven for thinking that this is the direct voice of Martin Amis himself. After all, he is the author of the novel, the manipulator of events and characters. But as we read on we realise that this narrator is another character, an American writer called Samson Young, who is living in London in the flat of yet another fictional writer, Mark Asprey (note the initials). To further confuse matters a writer called Martin Amis also makes a cameo appearance in the novel! *London Fields* uses a variety of narrative perspectives. When Samson Young is actually present at the events described first-person narration is used; when he is not we have something akin to the omniscient narrator of the Austen extract in Activity 2, but we also have the sense that that narrator has a name and a role in the novel. But, at this stage, let's not get too embroiled in such complex approaches to story-telling as those Amis habitually uses. We'll turn instead to the more conventional strategies of Charles Dickens.

Activity 3

How would you describe the narrative voice and perspective of this extract?

Clickto read the opening of Great Expectations by Charles Dickens.

This is an example of first-person narration. The story is told by a character who is also a protagonist in the narrative. In *Great Expectations*, as in most **first person** narratives, the narrator is also the central character. The opening paragraph, with its emphasis on the narrator's family background, and the repetitions of his name – 'So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip' – are an immediate suggestion that the character telling us the story is likely to be at the heart of it. This is further reinforced as we are then given more information about his family and his circumstances.

The story begins, then, with the narrator giving us an introduction to his own childhood, moving rapidly from the general to the particular and his meeting with the 'fearful man' he met in the churchyard. Again, the relation of this incident at the start of the novel leads us to attach some significance to the episode and its participants, raising expectations that are not fulfilled until much later in the narrative.

Here, and throughout *Great Expectations* there is in a sense a dual narrative perspective, presenting events narrated by the adult Pip which are at times mediated through the perceptions of the child Pip. The opening encounter in the churchyard, for instance, is enacted with a vivid immediacy. Look again at the point at which the narrative shifts from description to direct speech. The rapidity of the exchanges, with further repetitions of the main character's name and the allusion to his feelings of terror engage us much more directly with the boy's feelings of horror and dismay.

In reading a first-person narration we encounter a potential problem that we do not have when we encounter an omniscient third-person narrative such as Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Can you think what that might be?

The factor I was hoping you would identify is that of the degree of reliability we can attach to a first-person narrative. As we read and discover more about a narrator we receive more and more indications that determine the extent to which we can trust the voice telling us the story. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is narrated by its central character, an English butler called Stevens, who recalls various events and incidents from the past in such a way as to constantly cast doubt on the dependability of his narration. At one point we are presented with a prolonged and heated argument between Stevens and the housekeeper Miss Kenton about the butler's ailing father, also a

member of the staff of the same country house. The argument is narrated in direct speech, suggesting an authentic recreation of the actual incident, but is followed by a piece of narration by Stevens that immediately undermines our trust in his version of events:

> But now that I think further about it, I am not sure Miss Kenton spoke quite so boldly that day. We did, of course, over the years of working closely together come to have some very frank exchanges, but the afternoon I am recalling was still early in our relationship and I cannot see even Miss Kenton having been so forward. I am not sure she could actually have gone so far as to say things like: 'these errors may be trivial in themselves, but you must yourself realise their larger significance'. In fact, now that I come to think of it, I have a feeling it may have been Lord Darlington himself who made that particular remark to me that time he called me into his study some two months after that exchange with Miss Kenton outside the billiard room. By that time, the situation as regards my father had changed significantly following his fall.
>
> (p. 60)

There are numerous such examples of Stevens' 'unreliability' throughout the novel. These become more significant when placed against the wider historical and political backdrop of the story. Stevens had been butler to Lord Darlington, devoting his life to the service of someone he saw as a 'great man'. However, as the narrative unfolds, and in spite of Stevens' selective and constantly revised memory, Darlington is revealed as an unwitting pawn of Nazism. The unreliability of Stevens' narration draws an implicit parallel between memory and history and shows both to be liable to distortion and manipulation, whether consciously or unconsciously.

We can see, then, that even when the identity of the narrator of a prose fiction is made clear to us, there are possibilities for uncertainty and ambiguity. So what are we to make of the next extract?.

Activity 4

Please read the extract from [A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man](#) by James Joyce nowand consider what the narrative is describing, and try to characterise the narrative voice and perspective.

This is not at all an easy narrative voice to characterise. Indeed, it is difficult to define who is narrating at various points in the opening section of this novel. However, I hope you realised at least that, as with the other two extracts, this is an account of childhood experience. It even begins with the time-honoured phrase used for telling stories to children – 'Once upon a time'. The diction of the remainder of the opening sentence seems very childlike, an excited-sounding unpunctuated flow with repetitions of childish terms such as 'moocow' and nonsense words like 'nicens'. We are a long way from narrative '**realism**' here. As the novelist Anthony Burgess has implied, a more conventional representation of the child's impressions – 'My first memories are of my father, a monocled hirsute man who told me stories' – would have a very different effect on us as readers. Burgess described the beginning of *Portrait* as 'the first big technical breakthrough of twentieth-century prose-writing' (1965, p. 50) and I hope you were able to identify aspects of the extract that might warrant such a description.

The narrative seems to be made up of fragmented, unrelated associations; the father's 'hairy face'; the mysterious Betty Byrne and her even more mysterious 'lemon platt';

the random and sometimes distorted snatches of song and the sinister nursery-rhyme-like refrain '*Pull out his eyes /Apologise*'; and the unexpected reference to Michael Davitt and Parnell, which we need some knowledge of Irish politics to understand fully.

But can we detect some sort of order or pattern here? I think we can, though it is by no means obvious. The passage gives me the impression of an attempt to replicate a child's growing awareness of his world, the relationships between those who populate it, and the development of his facility for language. The novel begins with an episode of storytelling as we have seen, though we can't be sure whether the child or the father is the actual speaker at that point. The child's stumbling attempts at language are suggested by the nonsensical line of song – '*O, the green wothe botheth*' – which seems to be a corruption of the two lines quoted prior to that. A world of sensations, sight, sound, touch, smell, movement is invoked and gradually the wider world begins to impinge and we can see the child beginning to categorise and impose order on his growing knowledge; recognising different smells and the ages of the adults around him. The family unit is then transcended as mention is made of the Vances and the 'different father and mother', again implying a developing awareness on the part of the child-narrator. The sense of fragmentation remains strong, however, with the unexplained incident of the child hiding under the table (we are not told why he is there or why he must apologise). The critic Hugh Kenner has described the opening of *Portrait* as 'contrapuntal', and there are certainly at least two contrasting perspectives revealed in this extract; what Kenner calls 'an Aristotelian catalogue of senses, faculties, and mental activities' combined with 'the unfolding of the infant conscience' (quoted in Beja, 1973, p. 126).

The three 'beginnings' we have looked at here, by Austen, Dickens and Joyce represent a diverse range of approaches to storytelling. There are, of course, many other narrative methods open to novelists. For example, a novel might be written in the form of a diary, or be cast as a series of letters, or any one of a number of such devices. But as I hope you have discovered, the 'voice' which is used to tell a story and the perspective, or perspectives, from which it is told affect the way we respond to the events and characters described. But these events and characters are usually placed in specific locations and it is to the question of the 'setting' of fictional narratives that I now want to turn.

2.4 Setting

We can define the 'setting' of a story as the geographical location or locations in which the events of the narrative takes place, as well as the time in which those events are set. Location can refer to wider geographical entities such as countries or cities as well as to smaller entities such as households or domestic interiors. Time can refer to a general historical period or to the chronological boundaries of the story's events.

Let's look again at the beginning of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. How important is setting in this case? How does Rushdie's narrative style help us to evaluate the significance of the setting?

> I was born in the city of Bombay … once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more … On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-

hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicos ratified my authenticity.

(1981, p. 9)

Did you feel that setting was clearly very important here? We may not know exactly *why* at this stage, but the implication is that the time and place at which the narrator's story begins is of great significance. He describes himself as 'handcuffed to history' by the circumstances of his birth, and, as I suggested earlier, we are alerted to the possibility of a story to come which will have historical and political associations, reinforced by the assertion that the narrator's 'destinies' were 'indissolubly chained' to the future of his country. Location is surely important here; the place of the narrator's birth is the first thing we are told. You might further have noticed that the specific cultural environment is suggested by the image of 'Clock-hands join(ing) palms in respectful greeting', mimicking the Indian gesture of *namaste*. The references to 'soothsayers', 'newspapers' and 'politicos' further enhances our sense of a culturally significant environment, where traditional and modern values interact. The American writer Eudora Welty has claimed that 'every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else' (quoted in DiYanni, 1997, p. 67). Rushdie's use of place and time in this extract from *Midnight's Children* seems to bear this out; the narrative's entire meaning and significance rests on its setting, I hope you'll agree.

The surroundings in which characters are placed and in which narrative events take place can have other, more subtle effects on how we read and interpret stories. Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) is another novel rooted very specifically in time and place. Much of the action takes place in various country house settings, which represent different aspects of Russian society at the time. Into that environment comes the anarchist Bazarov, influenced by the ideas he has absorbed in the very different settings of the city and the university. As you will see from your study of the novel, the various settings come to represent different values, ideas and attitudes. This is equally true of smaller scale settings. We associate particular characters with the environments in which we encounter them, and the values associated with those places; characters often seem 'at home' in specific places, but not elsewhere. In *Great Expectations* Joe Gargery is uncomfortable when visiting Miss Havisham at Statis House, and awkward in Pip's London dwelling. Other characters, like Turgenev's Bazarov, are **characterised** by their failure to 'belong' in any of the locations they inhabit in the course of the story. Pavel Petrovich, seemingly the antithesis of Bazarov, also often seems ill-at-ease in his surroundings. He lives on the estate of his brother Nikolai, but is not originally from this sort of rural background.

Activity 5

Read the following description of Pavel's room and try to decide what the setting tells us about him.

> But Pavel Petrovich returned to his elegant room, hung with fine dark-grey wallpaper and decorated with guns fixed on a colourful Persian rug, with walnut furniture upholstered in dark-green velveteen, a Renaissance-style bookcase in old dark oak, bronze statuettes on a magnificent desk and a fireplace. He flung himself on his sofa, folded his hands behind his head and remained there motionless, gazing almost with despair at the ceiling. Whether it was that he wanted to hide from the very walls themselves what was happening to his face, or for some other reason, he stood up, undid the loops holding the heavy window curtains and once again flung himself down on the sofa.
>
> (1862, pp. 40–1)

The overall impression given by the very detailed inventory of Pavel's room is one of a bewildering array of cultural styles and influences, from different times and places. It is undoubtedly the room of someone with a well-developed aesthetic sense, but does it appear at all comfortable or inviting? The very diversity of the décor seems to suggest a sense of rootlessness, reinforced by Pavel's behaviour here; the possibility that he is trying to 'hide from the very walls themselves what was happening to his face'. Even in the sanctuary of his own rooms on his brother's estate he seems to find himself alienated amongst the no doubt impressive, yet strangely soulless artefacts he has gathered around him.

The significance of setting will vary from novel to novel, or from story to story, of course, and one of the questions you should continually ask yourself as you read is *how* important to the narrative events and characterisation are the dual factors of time and place.

2.5 Characterisation

How do writers of prose fiction make us respond to the imaginary people they create? In order to encourage us to continue reading writers must force us to react in some way to their characters, whether it is to identify, empathise or sympathise with them, to dislike or disapprove of them, or to pass judgement on their actions, behaviour and values. As we have already seen, the fundamental question we repeatedly ask when we read a story is what happened next. Equally importantly we want to know to whom it happened, and we will only want to know this if we feel strongly, one way or another about the characters in the story. In this respect the author's skill at characterisation is crucial.

We use the term characterisation to describe the strategies that an author uses to present and develop the characters in a narrative. This use of descriptive techniques will vary from character to character. Some characters are central to a story; often there will be one main character, around whom the narrative revolves: Pip in *Great Expectations*, for example, or, we may reasonably surmise from the opening paragraph we looked at earlier, Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. We expect that such characters, and others close to the heart of narrative events will be presented to us in great detail; we may be allowed access to their consciousness, either by the use of first-person narration or third-person **focalisation**, and it is extremely likely that they will undergo some sort of significant personal change (for better or worse) as a result of their experiences. These kinds of characters are sometimes known as *dynamic*. Other characters, often described as *static*, may be much less thoroughly-drawn; they may be introduced to the narrative

primarily to perform a particular narrative or thematic function, and will probably undergo little or no change in the course of the story.

Another useful distinction between types of characters was proposed by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*. 'We may divide characters into flat and round,' Forster suggested (1927, p. 65). What do you think he meant by these terms?

I expect you found this rather straightforward. The word 'flat' suggests a one-dimensional figure, and what Forster meant by 'flat' characters were those who are largely taken to represent a particular idea, human trait or set of values, much like the static characters described above. They are caricatures who can be easily and quickly summarised; Forster gives an example:

> The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as "I will never desert Mr Micawber." There is Mrs Micawber – she says she won't desert Mr Micawber; she doesn't, and there she is.
>
> (ibid.)

The reference is to a character in Dickens' *David Copperfield* who does not change in any significant way in spite of the varied experiences she and her family encounter. 'Round' characters, by contrast, are described and developed in such a way as to achieve three-dimensionality, a physical and psychological complexity that mimics that of the real people we come to know in our everyday lives.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* provides some interesting examples of 'flat' and 'round' characters. Note, however, that identifying those examples will largely depend on the reader's response to Austen's characters, but we might well place figures such as Mrs Bennett in the former category, and the central character, her daughter Elizabeth in the latter. As you may know, Austen sums up Mrs Bennet in three short, direct sentences at the end of the opening chapter of the novel:

> She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.
>
> (Austen, 1813, p. 3)

Compare this with the opening of the final chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*:

> Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters. With what delighted pride she afterwards visited Mrs. Bingley and talked of Mrs. Darcy may be guessed. I wish I could say, for the sake of her family, that the accomplishment of her earnest desire in the establishment of so many of her children, produced so happy an effect as to make her a sensible, amiable woman for the rest of her life; though perhaps it was lucky for her husband, who might not have relished domestic felicity in so unusual a form, that she still was occasionally nervous and invariably silly.
>
> (ibid., p. 295)

These two descriptions of Mrs. Bennet, at the beginning and end of the novel are rare examples of Austen 'telling' us about this particular character. More often, she 'shows' us Mrs. Bennett by reporting her speech directly and allowing us to draw our own conclusions about Mrs. Bennet's attitudes and values. We are never given access to Mrs.

Bennett's consciousness; events are never 'focalised' through her. Why do you think this is?

It is probably because Mrs. Bennet's main function in the story is to represent a particular attitude of the period in which the novel is set, that the best, or only chance for women's social advancement and financial security was through marriage. By representing this view from the outside, as it were, Austen leads us to scrutinise it in a more rigorous way. To describe Mrs. Bennet as 'flat' or 'static' is not to imply that she is necessarily a negligible character. She may perform only one function in the novel, but it is a function that draws attention to the constrained position of women in the society Austen depicts.

That Elizabeth is a 'round', or 'dynamic' character is surely not in doubt. The entire novel revolves around her and we perceive much of the action through her eyes. The changes she experiences conform to Forster's template of 'roundness', and the contrast with Mrs. Bennet demonstrates the necessity for combinations of 'flat' and 'round' that Forster sees as necessary for the successful creation of fictional narrative:

> The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it – life within the pages of a book. And by using it sometimes alone, more often in combination with the other kind, the novelist achieves his task of acclimatization, and harmonizes the human race with the other aspects of his work.
>
> (Forster, 1927, p. 75)

2.6 Genre

In *The Realist Novel* Dennis Walder provides you with an extract from a detective novel to identify, and suggests that you'll find this relatively easy because it contains certain features that we expect in such a work. In other words, we each have a mental set of expectations that we use to categorise writing.

Activity 6

How would you categorise these extracts, all of which are taken from novels? Think about your reasons for suggesting a particular category.

How did you get on? The first extract is from an historical novel (Dunnett, 1993, p. 11). We can guess that it's set in the past because the detailed description of Edinburgh doesn't sound like a modern town. We know it's from a novel since, in the last paragraph of the extract, we are allowed to share a piece of information that one of the characters has been given: 'The King's Wark, Anselm Adorne had been told.' Anselm Adorne did exist – he was a merchant and magistrate in Bruges in the second half of the fifteenth century – but Edinburgh is described as he sees it, and this we know can only be a fictional reconstruction. This is a good example of what historical novels can do: they can imaginatively recreate the past, peopling it both with characters who really existed and with characters who are completely fictional.

The second extract is from a popular romance (Mortimer, 1980, pp. 12–13). We know this, I think, because of the emphasis on the smouldering sexuality of the male character and the admiring response of the female character to him. They are stereotypes, placed in a stereotypical situation, although it's perhaps worth pointing

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out that the male figure has sound literary antecedents in the form of Heathcliff and Mr Rochester, from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* respectively.

The third extract is science fiction (May, 1982, p. 11). We might deduce this from the unfamiliar situation, the use of strange words such as 'superficies' and 'normal space' and the fact that the Ship is a space ship, surrounded by stars.

I hope you could classify these extracts without too much difficulty, because you were able to draw on concepts of various kinds of fictional writing, based on your knowledge and experience of reading. This is the kind of classification that Dennis Walder summarises on page 9 of *The Realist Novel*, although he also points out that these classifications are not fixed or rigid.

2.7 Style and language

What do we mean when we talk of a particular writer's style? It might help us to think of style as a way of organising and expressing narrative unique to the writer, as distinctive and personal a characteristic as the writer's handwriting or the prints on the fingers holding the pen. Just as no two sets of fingerprints are alike, so no two writers are alike. Writers write in a style that reflects their individual view of the world.

The word 'style' can generally be used to encompass the various literary devices that authors combine to convey their themes and the content of their narratives. Some of those devices, such as narrative perspectives and the representation of character have already been discussed, so I want to focus here on the language writers use and the effects of that language.

Activity 7

Please read the attached extract from a short story, 'Kew Gardens' (1919), by Virginia Woolf. How would you characterise the descriptive language Woolf uses here and the way in which she presents the thoughts and speech of her characters?

The descriptive language of the first and final paragraphs is intensely detailed. Various human figures pass by and butterflies flit from flower-bed to flower-bed – a scene we can easily visualise. But Woolf s use of terms such as 'curiously irregular' to describe the movement of the humans and 'zig-zag' to depict the flight of the butterflies suggests a sense of vagueness and randomness. The change of focus, from the general scene to the positioning and attitudes of a man, a woman – he 'strolling carelessly', she moving 'with greater purpose' alerts us to anticipate that they will be the subject of what is to follow. Would you agree that there is almost a filmic quality to this narrative description. When I read this I imagine a camera panning across a wide screen before closing in on the two characters. The final paragraph of the extract, which describes how the husband and wife and their children 'diminished in size […] as the sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches' seems to me to suggest a gradually dissolving image, such as we might see when a film deliberately loses focus. In spite of the plethora of detail and description, then, I feel there is nevertheless a somewhat impressionistic feel to Woolf's scene-setting.

Did you notice how a similar 'blurring' effect seems to result from the second paragraph's shifts, first to the man's internal consciousness, as we are given access to his thoughts, and then to direct speech right at the end of the paragraph: 'Tell me, Eleanor, d'you ever think of the past?' There is only a dash to denote this second shift; on a first reading we may not even notice that Woolf has moved from a depiction of thoughts to the representation of speech.

And what of the conversation between the man and woman? Does this strike you as a naturalistic representation of dialogue? Probably not, I would suggest. There is something artificial and heightened about the woman's speech in particular:

> 'Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren't they one's past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees … one's happiness, one's reality?'

We might think that no-one would really speak like this, or relate a memory of 'the mother of all my kisses all my life' in quite such a mannered fashion. Only with the brisk command to her children – 'Come Caroline, come Hubert' – does the woman's speech appear naturalistic. I think it's safe to assume that this is not merely bad writing on Woolf's part; she has chosen her language and her means of representing it for a reason. Indeed, it may seem as though the language itself, rather than the actual narrative, is the main focus of this piece of writing. Woolf was one of a number of authors in the early twentieth-century who sought new ways of writing, challenging the conventions of previous generations that gave a primacy to realistic and naturalistic representation and foregrounded narrative events; stories that had a beginning, middle and end, a strong sense of closure, and a fixed authorial point of view. The narrative, such as it is, of Woolf's story 'Kew Gardens' is episodic rather than linear, and is a good early example of a style of writing that later came to be labelled 'Modernist' (James Joyce, whose opening to *Portrait of the Artist* we looked at earlier was another dominant figure in this movement). We could say, then, that 'style' seems to take precedence over subject-matter in writing such as this, and I hope you can see how Woolf's particular use of language contributes to this.

Activity 8

Now look at another extract; the closing section of a much more recent work, a short story, 'Gazebo', by the American writer Raymond Carver. Think again about the questions I asked you to consider in Activity 7 before reading the Woolf extract. How does Carver's style differ from that of Woolf?

The language is minimalist, pared down to the absolute basics, and heavily dialogue-led. We are given no indication of speech intonation; the only verb used to describe the dialogue is the verb 'to go', which gives us no clue as to how the words are spoken. This breeds a sense of uncertainty in the reader, I think, and as with Woolf's elevated tone and language this strategy is deliberate, I would suggest. Although the story is narrated in the first-person I get a strong impression that the narrator, Duane, does not fully understand the situation he is describing: 'I pray for a sign from Holly. I pray for Holly to show me.' Similarly, the sparseness of Carver's writing leaves the reader in a state of uncertainty. Although the dialogue is, I think you'll agree, much more colloquial and naturalistic than that of Woolf's characters, there seems to me to be a great deal left unsaid, and a sense that the two characters, while conversing, are not communicating. This is, I would argue, a direct consequence of Carver's choice of style and language.

3 Conclusion

In this course you have been introduced to the main components of prose fiction and have been given the opportunity to develop and practise your critical and analytical skills. These are essential skills you will need to continue your studies in this area.

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Glossary

Characterisation

The revelation of character through techniques such as physical description, action, dialogue, interaction with other characters, and the depiction of thought, emotion and belief.

Dialogic

Describes a narrative in which multiple voices, perspectives or discourses are present and engage and interact with each other.

Dialogue

Speech between two or more characters in a narrative.

First person

Narration from the point of view of a character, often central to the plot, who refers to himself or herself as 'I'. Such narrators can often be deliberately 'unreliable'.

Focalisation

The point-of-view being narrated. The distinction between 'who speaks' and 'who sees'. Thus, although the narrator 'speaks' the focaliser is the character through whose eyes and perceptions the narrative is described. In third-person narratives such as *Pride and Prejudice* the narrator is the user of the third-person perspective, while the focaliser is the centre of consciousness being represented.

Free indirect speech

Speech that is represented, rather than directly related. Extremely flexible form of prose discourse, between indirect narrative commentary and direct speech, giving the impression of combining the two. Examples: **direct** speech – He said: 'I love her' **indirect**speech – He said that he loved her **free indirect speech** – He loved her.

Genre

The classification of literary works according to common elements of content, form, or technique.

Irony

The expression of a meaning contrary to the stated or ostensible one.

Narrative

The description of the events and situations that make up a story as distinct from **dialogue**.

Narrator

the 'speaking voice' of a narrative; the voice and perspective through which a narrative is told, often, particularly in first-person narratives, a character in the work.

Omniscient

Describes a third-person point of view that allows an author to convey external details, description and information while also enabling the revelation of characters' internal thoughts, emotions and motivations. Omniscient narrators are able to comment on as well as describe events and themes.

Plot

The arrangement of narrative events in a story, organised in such a way as to create interest and involvement for the reader and to establish and emphasise causality.

Point of view

The perspective from which a story is narrated. There are two major perspectives, *first-person* and *third-person*.

Realism

A style of writing that seeks to convey the impression of accurate recording of an actual way of life in a recognisable time and place. Closely associated with the rise of the

novel in the nineteenth century as the most effective genre for representing contemporary life, society and attitudes.

Setting

The background of location(s) and historical time against which the characters and plot of a story are set.

'Showing' and 'telling':

Showing – more dramatic presentation of events and characters through use of direct speech, dialogue, etc., without the overt involvement of the narrator. Telling – the narrator describes what happens, what characters said, did, felt without directly relating it through dialogue.

Story

A narrated sequence of events arranged chronologically.

Style

The characteristic way in which a writer organises and expresses his or herself in writing; the combination of literary devices that a writer uses to communicate themes and narrative content.

Third person

A narrative perspective that does not belong to a specific character in the novel. Such narrators are often 'omniscient'; they are all-knowing and are able to recount the story fully and reliably and are able to enter the consciousness of characters in order to reveal their thoughts, emotions, beliefs and motivations.

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