

Guide to Writing About Literature & Film

Compiled for Professor Gair's LIT 2174 Classes

Some of these terms may be useful in writing about the literature interpretations that are due each Thursday. I have also included a section that will assist you in writing about films that you view. These are some of the things you might cite as you analyze and interpret the selections in each medium. Cite actual instances where the author or film maker uses a particular technique or strategy.

As you read the weekly selections keep this reference guide nearby. Look for instances where these terms and or techniques may be used. Point them out in your written analysis-interpretation of the selection. Some of these techniques will ne very obvious, while others will take closer examination to spot.

Narrative

A **narrative** is a sequence of events that a narrator tells in story form. A **narrator** is a storyteller of any kind, whether the authorial voice in a novel or a friend telling you about last night's party.

Point of View

The **point of view** is the perspective that a narrative takes toward the events it describes.

First-person narration: A narrative in which the narrator tells the story from his/her own point of view and refers to him/herself as "I." The narrator may be an active participant in the story or just an observer. When the point of view represented is specifically the author's, and not a fictional narrator's, the story is **autobiographical** and may be **nonfictional** (see Common Literary Forms and Genres below).

Third-person narration: The narrator remains outside the story and describes the characters in the story using proper names and the third-person pronouns "he," "she," "it," and "they."

Setting

Setting is the location of a narrative in time and space. It may be specifically historical or geographical, as in the ancient Rome of Robert Graves's *I, Claudius*, or it may be imaginary, as in the Neverland of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. The suggestive mood that the setting may create is called the **atmosphere**. For example, the open windows of the nursery in *Peter Pan* create an atmosphere of innocence and magic.

Elements of Style

Figures of Speech

Figures of speech are expressions that stretch words beyond their literal meanings. By connecting or juxtaposing different sounds and thoughts, figures of speech increase the breadth and subtlety of expression.

Alliteration: The repetition of similar sounds, usually consonants, at the beginning of words. For example, Robert Frost's poem "Out, out—" contains the alliterative phrase "sweet scented stuff."

Euphemism: The use of decorous language to express vulgar or unpleasant ideas, events, or actions. For example, "passed away" instead of "died"; "ethnic cleansing" instead of "genocide."

Hyperbole: An excessive overstatement or conscious exaggeration of fact: "I've told you about it a million times already."

Metaphor: The comparison of one thing to another that does not use the terms "like" or "as." Shakespeare is famous for his metaphors, as in *Macbeth*: "Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage."

- **Mixed metaphor:** A combination of metaphors that produces a confused or contradictory image, such as “The company’s collapse left mountains of debt in its wake.”

Personification: The use of human characteristics to describe animals, things, or ideas. Carl Sandburg’s poem “Chicago” describes the city as “Stormy, husky, brawling, / City of the Big Shoulders.”

Sarcasm: A simple form of **verbal irony** (see Literary Techniques, *below*) in which it is obvious from context and tone that the speaker means the opposite of what he or she says. Sarcasm usually, but not always, expresses scorn. Commenting “That was graceful” when someone trips and falls is an example.

Simile: A comparison of two things through the use of “like” or “as.” The title of Robert Burns’s poem “My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose” is a simile.

Literary Techniques

Whereas figures of speech work on the level of individual words or sentences, writers also use a variety of techniques to add clarity or intensity to a larger passage, advance the plot in a particular way, or suggest connections between elements in the plot.

Allusion: An implicit reference within a literary work to a historical or literary person, place, or event. For example, the title of William Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and the Fury* alludes to a line from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Authors use allusion to add symbolic weight because it makes subtle or implicit connections with other works. For example, in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Captain Ahab’s name alludes to the wicked and idolatrous biblical king Ahab—a connection that adds depth to our understanding of Ahab’s character.

Epiphany: A sudden, powerful, and often spiritual or life changing realization that a character reaches in an otherwise ordinary or everyday moment. Many of the short stories in James Joyce’s *Dubliners* involve moments of epiphany.

Foreshadowing: An author’s deliberate use of hints or suggestions to give a preview of events or themes that do not develop until later in the narrative. For example, in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, the nightmares Lockwood has the night he spends in Catherine’s bed prefigure later events in the novel.

Irony: A wide-ranging technique of detachment that draws awareness to the discrepancy between words and their meanings, between expectation and fulfillment, or, most generally, between what is and what seems to be.

- **Verbal irony:** The use of a statement that, by its context, implies its opposite. For example, in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Antony repeats, “Brutus is an honorable man,” while clearly implying that Brutus is dishonorable. **Sarcasm** (see Figures of Speech, *above*) is a particularly blunt form of verbal irony.
- **Situational irony:** A technique in which one understanding of a situation stands in sharp contrast to another, usually more prevalent, understanding of the same situation. For example, Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” comments on the grotesque difference between politicians’ high-minded praise of the noble warrior and the unspeakably awful conditions of soldiers at the front..
- **Dramatic irony:** A technique in which the author lets the audience or reader in on a character’s situation while the character himself remains in the dark. With dramatic irony, the character’s words or actions carry a significance that the character is not aware of. When used in tragedy, dramatic irony is called **tragic irony**. One example is in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, when Oedipus vows to discover his father’s murderer, not knowing, as the audience does, that he himself is the murderer.
- **Cosmic irony:** The perception of fate or the universe as malicious or indifferent to human suffering, which creates a painful contrast between our purposeful activity and its ultimate meaninglessness. Thomas Hardy’s novels abound in cosmic irony
- **Parallelism:** Similarities between elements in a narrative (such as two characters or two plot lines). For instance, in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, both Lear and Gloucester suffer at the hands of their own children because they are blind to which of their children are goodhearted and which are King Lear, evil. Parallelism can also occur on the level of sentences or phrases (see Figures of Speech, *above*).
- **Pathos:** From the Greek word for “feeling,” the quality in a work of literature that evokes high emotion, most commonly sorrow, pity, or compassion. Charles Dickens exploits pathos very effectively, especially when describing the deaths of his characters.
- **Poetic license** The liberty that authors sometimes take with ordinary rules of syntax and grammar, employing unusual vocabulary, metrical devices, or figures of speech or committing factual errors in order to strengthen a passage of writing. For example, the poet e. e. cummings takes poetic license in violating rules of capitalization in his works.

Thematic Meaning

Literature becomes universal when it draws connections between the particular and the general. Often, certain levels of a literary work's meaning are not immediately evident. The following terms relate to the relationship between the words on the page and the deeper significance those words may hold.

Emblem: A concrete object that represents something abstract. For example, the Star of David is an emblem of Judaism. An emblem differs from a **symbol** in that an emblem's meaning is fixed: the Star of David always represents Judaism, regardless of context.

Imagery: Language that brings to mind sense-impressions, especially via figures of speech. Sometimes, certain imagery is characteristic of a particular writer or work. For example, many of Shakespeare's plays contain nautical imagery.

Motif: A recurring structure, contrast, or other device that develops or informs a work's major themes. A motif may relate to concrete objects, like Eastern vs. Western architecture in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, or may be a recurrent idea, phrase, or emotion, like Lily Bart's constant desire to move up in the world in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.

Symbol: An object, character, figure, or color that is used to represent an abstract idea or concept. For example, the two roads in Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" symbolize the choice between two paths in life. Unlike an **emblem**, a symbol may have different meanings in different contexts.

Theme: A fundamental and universal idea explored in a literary work. For example, a major theme of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* is the perpetual contest between good and evil.

Thesis: The central argument that an author makes in a work. Although the term is primarily associated with nonfiction, it can apply to fiction. For example, the thesis of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* is that Chicago meatpacking plants subject poor immigrants to horrible and unjust working conditions, and that the government must do something to address the problem.

Tone: The general atmosphere created in a story, or the narrator's attitude toward the story or reader. For example, the tone of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is outraged, defiant, and claustrophobic.

Film Studies

When examining the various videos. Documentary films or dramatic representations of the Holocaust on film you might find the following helpful as a reference to react to, analyze and interpret that medium. Reference to these terms and techniques will enrich and enhance those essays you write.

Film Form and Analysis

Cinematography

Cinematography describes the process by which a film strip is exposed to light to create an image. It encompasses many factors: the camera's distance from the action, camera angle and direction, type of lens, camera movement, and lighting, among others. The art of cinematography also includes **mise-en-scène**—the arrangement of objects and movements in the frame.

Shot Types

The amount of visual information included in the image depends on the **distance** of the camera from the action and on the **focal length** of the camera lens. Throughout the history of cinema, filmmakers have favored certain combinations of camera distance and focal length, or **shot types**.

- **Extreme long shot:** Captures a scene in its entirety; used for establishing location in **exterior shots**. Used frequently in epic genres such as westerns and war films, it reduces human beings to mere dots on the screen.
- **Long shot:** Accommodates at least the entire bodies of figures (if that is all the shot includes, it is called a **full shot**). Captures movement, background, and broad gestures and expressions.
- **Medium shot:** Contains a figure from the waist or knees up. It is a functional shot, favored in classical Hollywood editing, often used for scenes with dialogue.
- **Close-up:** Includes very little if any background, concentrating on an object or, if an **extreme close-up**, a fragment of an object, such as the human face. Close-ups often accord great significance and symbolic value to the objects they portray.

Camera Lenses

The camera **lens** is a curved piece of glass that refracts the light it receives onto a strip of film that records the visual information, creating the film image.

- **Normal lens:** Creates a minimum of distortion, approximating the way that objects are perceived by the human eye.

- **Telephoto lens:** Used to capture crowd scenes or when the camera operator wants to remain far away from the action. A telephoto lens collapses distances between foreground and background, dampening the effect of movement within the frame. It also keeps background elements out of focus, which allows a single element to be emphasized and isolated.
- **Wide-angle lens:** Captures a wider field of vision than a normal lens. Deep-focus shots use wide-angle lenses, exaggerating movement and shapes (especially in close-up). Lines and shapes are distorted at the edges of the frame.

Camera Angles

The direction in which the camera is pointed in relation to the action being recorded is called the **camera angle**.

- **Bird's-eye view:** Camera is positioned high above the action, looking down on figures, who seem powerless or vulnerable.
- **High:** Camera is positioned above eye level, reducing the size of figures and suggesting stasis and weakness.
- **Eye level:** Camera is positioned at eye level, a neutral vantage point that does not impose meaning on the action.
- **Low:** Camera is positioned below eye level, increasing size of figures and rendering them powerful, even threatening or heroic.
- **Canted:** Camera is tilted to one side, creating a diagonal composition that suggests tension or impending movement.

Camera Movement

The camera can remain motionless or may be moved, rotated, or zoomed. **Camera movement** involves physical movement of the camera from one location to another. **Camera rotation** keeps the location of the camera the same but shifts the direction in which the camera is pointed. **Zooming** involves the adjustment of the camera's focal length so that more or less visual information is included in the film image.

- **Pan:** Side-to-side rotation of the camera, often used to follow the movement of figures and keep them within the frame.
- **Tilt:** Top-down rotation of the camera, often used to view an object that extends above or below the frame.
- **Tracking:** Movement of the camera in any direction, often used to follow the movement of figures and retain their positions and proportions within the frame.
- **Crane:** Movement of the camera above ground level, often involving a vertical rise or drop, used to reveal elements at different heights. Variations of this shot position the camera on an airplane or helicopter.
- **Shaking:** Use of a handheld camera to express a psychological state or to generate a documentary-like aesthetic, as opposed to usual placement of a camera on a tripod to prevent shaking.
- **Zooming:** Adjustment of the camera's focal length. A filmmaker who wants to emphasize a portion of the image can **zoom in**, which increases that portion's relative size within the frame and signals to the viewer that whatever it contains is of significance. A filmmaker wants to expose the environment around a figure or action can **zoom out**, revealing the larger context.
- **Rack focus:** Adjustment of focus within a shot in order to change the portion of the image that is in sharp focus. Rack focus guides the spectator's attention from one area of the screen to another or from one object to another. It is possible because in most shots (that do not use deep focus), only certain portions of the image are in sharp focus.

Lighting

Most interior scenes are naturally too dark to generate a clear, discernible film image, requiring the use of artificial **lighting**. The intensity, position, and direction of lights in relation to the action have significant effect on the look and mood of a shot.

- **Lighting intensity:** Intense lighting, or **hard lighting**, creates stark shadows and lines of contrast; **soft lighting** creates a diffuse illumination.
- **Natural vs. artificial lighting:** Realist directors often avoid the use of artificial lights and choose instead to rely on natural light that more closely approximates reality.
- **Lighting setups:** The principal light illuminating the scene is called the **key light**. A **fill light** is often used to cover the shadows created by the key light. Typically, a **three-point lighting** setup is used in order to light a scene evenly.
- **Lighting effects:** A **high-key** lighting scheme minimizes the contrast between darker and brighter parts of the image. A **low-key** lighting scheme creates a **chiaroscuro** effect, with dark shadows and stark contrasts.
- **Lighting direction** creates an array of effects by manipulating the size and directions of shadows.

Frontal lighting eliminates shadows.

Side lighting accentuates features (of the face, for instance).

Backlighting creates silhouettes.

Top lighting creates a benevolent “halo” effect.

Underlighting makes a figure look sinister or even horrific.

Mise-en-Scène

Mise-en-scène is the arrangement of objects and movements within the **frame**—the rectangular border of the film image. Although analysis of mise-en-scène involves close inspection of the film image, keep in mind that film images are always open to a variety of different interpretations. The meanings and effects of film images are a function of the broader contexts within which they operate: those of narrative, representation, genre, history, and culture.

Blocking refers to the arrangement and movement of actors on the film set.

- Filmmakers often use blocking to express the **psychological and social relationships** between characters.
- For example, a shot of two characters in which each shares an equal proportion of the frame, at equal heights and depths suggests a balanced relationship in which neither of the characters has power or advantage over the other.

Framing refers to the placement of people and objects within the rectangular frame of the film image. Typically, the center of the film image contains the most important visual information. Filmmakers who want to make framing as unobtrusive as possible use **centered compositions**.

- The top of the film image carries more intrinsic weight, so balanced compositions usually keep the **horizon line** above the middle of the frame. A low horizon line can lead to a top-heavy composition, emphasizing the threatening or oppressive nature of the sky or of figures situated in the top part of the image.
- The edges of the image carry less intrinsic weight optically, so figures placed there can seem insignificant or marginalized.
- **Open framing** refers to compositions that situate the action depicted in the film within a broader context, suggesting that there is an “outside” to the “inside” of the film narrative.
- **Closed framing** is used when the filmmaker wants the film image to express the totality of reality, to keep the viewer focused on the action of the film, or to express claustrophobia and entrapment, such as in prison films.
- Framing that creates **diagonal** lines of composition emphasizes a scene’s anarchic, unsettled, or dynamic nature. **Horizontal** and **vertical** lines suggest order, balance, or stability.

Sound and Editing

Sound

Sound design in film involves the arrangement of **live sound** (primarily the voices of actors), **sound effects**, and **music**.

- Sound effects and live sound usually are **synchronized** with images to achieve a realistic representation of the action.
- Sound effects can also be used to direct the viewer’s attention offscreen or trigger camera or character movement.
- When sound and image do not match, the sound is called **contrapuntal** or **asynchronous**.
- **Music** establishes genre conventions (such as the eerie music in horror films) and has emotional effects on the viewer. It also contributes to the rhythm of narrative and can be used repeatedly to establish motifs.
- **Perspective sound** regulates sound volume to make it seem as if the sound originates at a certain distance from the camera.
- **Dialogue overlaps** and **sound bridges** are used to minimize the disruption caused by visual transitions at the shot level and the scene level, respectively.

Editing

A contiguous scene or segment of a scene shot on film is called a **take**. The process by which portions of different takes are connected together to organize the film into its final form is called **editing**. The connections between takes are called **cuts**.

- A typical Hollywood film contains over 1,000 cuts—a number that has increased steadily over time.
- Realist or art films often contain fewer cuts, such as in Theo Angelopoulos’s *Thiassos* (only 80 cuts in nearly four hours).

Optical effects: The editor can use a number of optical effects to connect different shots together.

- A **fade-in** gradually lightens the beginning of a shot from black; a **fade-out** gradually darkens the end of a shot to black.
- In a **wipe**, the initial shot is replaced by the subsequent shot through a horizontal motion, as when one piece of paper is gradually slid over another.
- In a **dissolve**, the subsequent shot is briefly superimposed over the initial shot. Dissolves often denote the passage of time.