



Inovace filologických oborů

CZ.1.07/2.2.00/15.0291

Inovace filologických studijních oborů v souladu s potřebami na trhu práce

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Opora předmětu JC01/AJC1

TOPIC 5 INTRODUCTION INTO LITERARY CRITICISM



Tento projekt je spolufinancován Evropským sociálním fondem a státním rozpočtem České republiky.

Introduction into Literary Criticism

'Literature is organised violence committed on ordinary speech.'
— Roman Jakobson —

Getting the Terms Right¹

Classical Literary Genres

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| Genre | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a literary form or type which follows a set of particular conventions • the classical genres included tragedy, comedy, satire, epic and lyric • modern genres would additionally account for novel and short story |
| ➤ Tragedy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a dramatic form dealing with the fall of an aristocratic person • arouses pity and fear to achieve a catharsis of these emotions • Ex.: William Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i> |
| ➤ Comedy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a dramatic form dealing humorously with ordinary characters • begins with misfortune and ends up with joy and reconciliation • Ex.: William Shakespeare's <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> |
| ➤ Satire | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an art of diminishing a subject by making it look ridiculous • evokes attitudes of amusement, contempt or indignation • practised with the aim of correcting human vice and folly • Ex.: Jonathan Swift's <i>Gulliver's Travels</i> |
| ➤ Epic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a long narrative poem about the grand deeds of legendary heroes • embodies the history and aspirations of a nation in a lofty manner • focuses on a representative central figure of superhuman qualities • Ex.: <i>Beowulf</i> |
| ➤ Lyric | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a short non-narrative poem, typically on common everyday subjects • on personal and subjective feelings and thoughts of a single speaker • Ex.: Shakespeare's sonnets |

Modern Literary Genres

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| ➤ Novel | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an extended piece of fiction of hundreds rather than dozens pages • usually includes characters involved in incidents arranged into a plot • Ex.: Ernest Hemingway's <i>A Farewell to Arms</i> |
| ➤ Novella | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a medium-sized piece of fiction not exceeding several dozen pages • shares many features of the novel but these may not be so complex • Ex.: Ernest Hemingway's <i>The Old Man and the Sea</i> |

¹ See M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1999).

- ➡ **Short Story**
 - a short piece of fiction that aims to achieve a unique or single effect
 - Ex.: Ernest Hemingway's 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber'

Other Literary Forms

- Prose**
 - a nonfiction work dealing faithfully with actual persons and events
 - Ex.: biography, treatise, history etc.
- Fiction**
 - a work involving characters and incidents of the author's invention
 - Ex.: novels, stories, plays etc.
- Fable**
 - a narrative presenting animals as characters and issuing a moral
 - Ex.: George Orwell's *Animal Farm*
- Allegory**
 - a narrative with a double meaning, surface and under-the-surface
 - Ex.: Edmund Spenser's *The Faery Queene*
- Parody**
 - an exaggerated imitation of another author's style, tone or ideas
 - Ex.: John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*

Rhetorical and Figurative Devices

- Trope**
 - in general any rhetorical or figurative device
 - covers metaphor, simile, personification etc.
- ➡ **Irony**
 - a conflict between what is said and what is meant
 - often saying something but meaning the opposite
- ➡ **Metaphor**
 - a figure of speech describing one thing in terms of another
 - the comparison is not explicitly stated, unlike with a simile
- ➡ **Simile**
 - an explicit comparison of two different things
 - recognisable by the use of the words *like* or *as*
- ➡ **Personification**
 - an attribution of human qualities to objects
 - the embodiment of a quality or abstraction

Characters and Audience

- Protagonist**
 - the main character in fiction, major actor in a play
 - Ex.: Hamlet in Shakespeare's eponymous tragedy

ⓘ Note: *Hero/heroine* is occasionally used synonymously with *protagonist*, but this usage is not recommended, for these words carry intrinsically positive connotations.
- Antagonist**
 - the character who opposes the protagonist
 - Ex.: King Claudius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

- Narrator**
- the speaker or the voice presenting a story or poem
- ① Note: The *narrator* must not be identified with the *author*.
- Audience**
- the spectators of a play or readers of a literary text

1 Understanding Basic Concepts (Part 1)

Read the following statements. Discuss what is wrong with them.

- a** The author is a chauvinist, as he portrays women unpleasantly.
The author must not be identified with the sentiments of his/her work.
- b** There are two major and four minor protagonists in the novel.
- c** The novel is very short, for it only spans over some fifty pages.
- d** The protagonist resembles the author, so the two are identical.
- e** The hero of the short story is a serial killer who evades justice.
- f** There is a first person narrator, so the book is autobiographical.

Elements of Structure

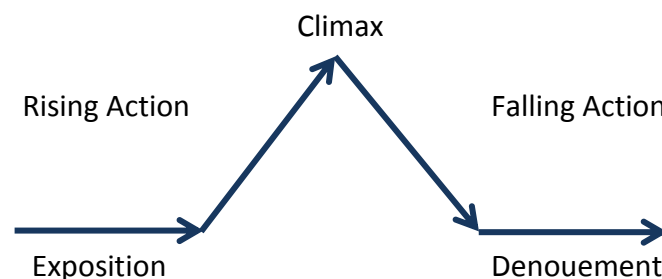
- Theme**
- the main subject or the central idea of a work, often of universal validity
 - Ex.: the theme of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is the First World War
- Motif**
- one of the minor ideas recurring throughout a work to reinforce the theme
 - a motif may involve a minor character, recurrent image or verbal pattern
 - Ex.: one of the motifs of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is recurrent rain
- ① Note: The literary critical term is spelled *motif* (plural *motifs*) and must not be confused with the general word *motive* (plural *motives*).
- Symbol**
- a tangible object which besides being itself represents something else
 - Ex.: Freudian criticism regards tall and thin objects as phallic symbols
- The Story**
- a narrative of events in their natural time sequence
 - *what* is told, the answer to the question *and then?*
- The Plot**
- the pattern of incidents as they are arranged in a work
 - a narrative of events with emphasis falling on causality
 - *how* the story is told, the answer to the question *why?*

- Flashback** • a scene inserted to show what happened at an earlier time
- Flashforward** • a scene inserted to show events that are only to happen later
- Setting** • the place where and the time when the story takes place
- Point of View**
- the position of the narrator with respect to the story
- Omniscient POV** • the narrator has access to the minds of all characters
- Third Person POV** • the narrator is one of the characters and the field of vision is confined to him/her
- First Person POV** • the narrator is one of the characters and the story is seen through his/her eyes

Plot Components

- ➔ **Exposition** • the **beginning** of a story which prepares ground for the events to come
- ➔ **Rising Action** • the part that includes the exposition and goes on to develop the **conflict**
- ➔ **Climax** • the culmination of the rising action leading to a **crisis** and falling action
- ➔ **Falling Action** • the closing part with no new conflicts and all leading up to a **resolution**
- ➔ **Denouement** • the **ending** of a story which concludes the action and settles the conflict

Freytag's Pyramid²



2 Understanding Basic Concepts (Part 2)

Read the following statements. Discuss what is wrong with them.

- a** There is no narrator present in the short story.
The narrator may not be present as a character, but there is always a voice telling the story.
- b** The plot of the novel deals with the Holocaust.
- c** The novella is not set at any place or any time.

² See Gustav Freytag, 'Five Parts and Three Crises,' in *Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, trans. Elias J. MacEwan (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2008), 114–40.

- d The story of the novel does not evolve chronologically.
- e There is the motif of the protagonist's sudden death.
- f There is no message in the book, so it is meaningless.

Traditional Critical Approaches³

- traditional criticism is an **eclectic** approach providing a **common-sense** balance between the views of literature as a mere illustration of history and biography and literature as an autonomously existing body
- literature has an **intrinsic worth**, though some of it is clearly autobiographical, propagandist or topical

Step 1: Textual Scholarship as a Prerequisite to Criticism

- textual criticism is **not an interpretative approach** but a necessary first step to a meaningful analysis
- it examines the **form** of the text, the accidentals: spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, paragraphing
- it explores the **meaning** of the text, the substantives: the actual verbal readings, meanings of words

➡ How is the text **organised** and to what effect?

📖 Ex.: A. L. Kennedy's short story 'The Mouseboks Family Dictionary' (1994) assumes the **form** of a series of alphabetically arranged records in a dictionary, so reinforcing the humorous effect of the story:

marriage	A kind of bedroom ceasefire without benefit of UN Peacekeeping Forces. See <i>Fear of Psychiatrists</i> , <i>Money</i> , <i>Murder</i> , <i>Odd Noises</i> , <i>Sex</i> .
masturbation	Another word for <i>Self-Respect</i> . Or substitute for central heating in older Mouseboks homes. See <i>Sex</i> , See <i>Fear of Psychiatrists</i> .
money	Something to light the heart. A family symbol of reliability, warmth, affection, self-esteem and dignity. Should be easy to fold. See <i>Mouseboks</i> .

📖 Ex.: James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922) concludes with Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness, a passage of over four thousand words with no **punctuation** marks besides two almost arbitrary full stops:

. . . how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

📖 Ex.: Joyce Carol Oates's novel *them* (1969) dismisses the conventional **capitalisation** of the title and styles it in lower-case letters; similarly the title of James Kelman's novel *How late it was, how late* (1994).

➡ What **language** does the author use and to what ends?

📖 Ex.: Henry James's short story 'The Beast in the Jungle' (1903) employs a cultivated Standard English:

³ See Wilfred L. Guerin, 'Traditional Approaches,' in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 16–61.

You said you had from your earliest time, as the deepest thing within you, the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen to you, that you had in your bones the foreboding and conviction of, and that would perhaps overwhelm you.

Ex.: Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) uses a vernacular English throughout:

We caught [sic] fish and talked, and we took a swim now and then to keep off sleepiness. It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big, still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud, and it warn't [sic] often that we laughed, only a little kind of a low chuckle.

Ex.: Irvine Welsh's iconoclastic novel *Trainspotting* (1993) is written in an urban working-class dialect:

Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mouth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yersel in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye've spawned to replace yourself. Choose life.

➤ What **style** does the author employ and to what effect?

Ex.: Ernest Hemingway is famous for his sparse and terse style, as in 'Big Two-Hearted Rivers' (1925):

Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp.

Ex.: William Faulkner, on the contrary, is noted for his heavy and complex style, as in 'The Bear' (1942):

. . . himself and his cousin juxtaposed not against the wilderness but against the tamed land which was to have been his heritage, the land which old Carothers McCaslin his grandfather had bought with white man's money from the wild men whose grandfathers without guns hunted it, and tamed and ordered or believed he had tamed and ordered it for the reason that the human beings he held in bondage and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it . . .

➤ What **genre** and form does the text assume?

Non-Literary Texts

- **monograph**, e.g. Richard Gray's *A History of American Literature* (2003)
- **autobiography**, e.g. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791)
- **treatise**, e.g. Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791)
- **essay**, e.g. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836)
- etc.

Literary Texts

- **novel**, e.g. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929)
- **novella**, e.g. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952)
- **short story**, e.g. Hemingway's 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' (1936)
- **play**, e.g. Hemingway's *The Fifth Column* (1938)
- etc.

Other Forms

- **epistolary novel**, e.g. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740)
- **picaresque novel**, e.g. Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742)
- **novel of manners**, e.g. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)
- **satire**, e.g. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)

- **romance**, e.g. Walter Scott's *Marmion* (1808)
- **Gothic novel**, e.g. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)
- **utopia**, e.g. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516)
- **dystopia**, e.g. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)
- **science fiction**, e.g. G. H. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898)
- **campus novel**, e.g. Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954)
- **growing-up novel**, e.g. J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)
- etc.

① Note: The categories above may overlap (e.g. the campus novel often combines with satire).

➔ What **methods** and means of presentation does the author use?

Basic Methods

- **realism**, e.g. William Dean Howells
- **naturalism**, e.g. Theodore Dreiser
- **modernism**, e.g. Gertrude Stein
- **postmodernism**, e.g. Thomas Pynchon

Other Branches

- **magic realism**, e.g. Salman Rushdie
- **psychological realism**, e.g. Henry James
- **domestic realism**, e.g. Jane Austen
- **regionalism**, e.g. Mark Twain

➔ Does the author **comment** on the work in a preface, afterword, introduction or elsewhere?

📖 Ex.: G. B. Shaw commented on all his plays in didactic prefaces, as in *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1894):
Mrs Warren's Profession was written in 1894 to draw attention to the truth that prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing, and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together.

📖 Ex.: Mark Twain provides an ironic comment in a Notice to his *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884):
 Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR

3 Analysing a Sample Story (Part 1: Textual Scholarship)

Based on your reading of William Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' (1930), answer the following questions:

- What is the internal organisation of the short story?*
- What is the genre (or genres) of this short story?*
- What is the prevailing method of presentation?*

Step 2: Trivia and Text Summary as a Preliminary to Analysis

➔ **author** of the text, **title**, year of its first **publication**

- **narrator** of the text and **point of view**
- major and minor **characters** and their **constellation**
- **setting** of the text in time and place
- **themes** and **motifs** of the text
- summary of the **plot line**

4 Analysing a Sample Story (Part 2: Trivia and Text Summary)

Based on your reading of William Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' (1930), answer the following questions:

- a) *Who is the narrator and what is the point of view of the text?*
- b) *What the major and minor characters and their constellation?*
- c) *What is the setting of the story?*
- d) *What are some of the themes and motifs of this short story?*
- e) *Are there perhaps any symbols in the story? What are they?*
- f) *What is briefly the story of this text and what is the plot?*

Step 3: Historical, Biographical and Bibliographical Considerations

- based on the premise that each text to some extent reflects the actualities of the **author's life and times**
- can be applied to any work, but becomes particularly relevant when dealing with the following forms:
 - **historical novel**, e.g. Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820)
 - **political novel**, e.g. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945)
 - **topical novel**, e.g. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)
 - **(semi)autobiographical novel**, e.g. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)

- Features in Focus
- **historical events** or personalities portrayed in the work
 - inclusion of actually **existing settings** and circumstances
 - incorporation of apparently **autobiographical elements**
 - reference to **topical issues** current in the author's time
 - status of the text in the **context of the author's work**:
 - juvenilia, masterpiece, minor work
 - part of a series, self-contained text
 - features shared with other works
 - shared characters, setting, themes

5 Analysing a Sample Story (Part 3: Historical, Bio- and Bibliographical Considerations)

Based on your reading of William Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' (1930), answer the following questions:

- a) *Are there any references to actual historical events in the story?*
- b) *What is the description of the society (status of women/ blacks)?*
- c) *Are there any features in common with other Faulkner's works?*

Step 4: Moral and Philosophical Considerations

- based on the premise that literature among others **instructs in morals** and **probes philosophical issues**
- can be applied to any text, but becomes particularly relevant when dealing with the following forms:
 - **didactic** and instructive writings, e.g. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740)
 - writings developing a **philosophical** thought, e.g. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953)
 - writings dealing with aspects of **religion**, e.g. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)
 - **propagandist** and ideological writings, e.g. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906)

➡ Is there an explicitly stated or implicitly suggested **moral** in the text?

📖 Ex.: The subtitle of Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Pamela* (1740) directly states the moral aim:

In a series of familiar letters from a beautiful young damsel to her parents. Now first published in order to cultivate the principles of virtue and religion in the minds of the youth of both sexes. A narrative which has its foundation in truth and nature; and at the same time that it agreeably entertains, by a variety of curious and affecting incidents, is entirely divested of all those images, which, in too many pieces calculated for amusement only, tend to inflame the minds they should instruct.

➡ Are the **author's views** on politics, religion, morality or other issues openly manifested?

📖 Ex.: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) expresses the author's indignation at man's corruption:

'He [the prince] was perfectly astonished with the historical account I gave him of our [British] affairs during the last century; protesting it was only a heap of conspiracies, rebellions, murders, massacres, revolutions, banishments; the very worst effects that avarice, faction, hypocrisy, perfidiousness, cruelty, rage, madness, hatred, envy, lust, malice, and ambition could produce.' The prince finally concludes that the human race is 'the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.'

➡ Does the author attempt to **persuade the reader** to adopt his/her point of view?

📖 Ex.: The conclusion of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) issues the following message:

Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister's miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence:—'Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!'

➡ Does the author use characters and incidents merely in order to **illustrate a point**?

📖 Ex.: Upton Sinclair's proletarian novel *The Jungle* (1906) argues for the necessity of a socialist revolution:

'How would Socialism change that?' asked the girl-student, quickly. It was the first time she had spoken.

'So long as we have wage slavery,' answered Schliemann, 'it matters not in the least how debasing and repulsive a task may be, it is easy to find people to perform it. But just as soon as labor is set free, then the price of such work will begin to rise. So one by one the old, dingy, and unsanitary factories will come down—it will be cheaper to build new; and so the steamships will be provided with stoking machinery, and so the dangerous trades will be made safe, or substitutes will be found for their products.'

➡ Does the author discuss **philosophical questions** or meditate on metaphysical issues?

Ex.: Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759) discusses the nature of human happiness:

'They are surely happy,' said the Prince, 'who have all these conveniences, of which I envy none so much as the facility with which separated friends interchange their thoughts.'

'The Europeans,' answered Imlac, 'are less unhappy than we, but they are not happy. Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured and little to be enjoyed.'

6 Analysing a Sample Story (Part 4: Moral and Philosophical Considerations)

Based on your reading of William Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' (1930), answer the following questions:

- Does the story suggest what attitude the reader should take to it?*
- What is your response to this short story as a reader?*

Revision

7 Defining Basic Terms JMatch

Read the following definitions and decide to which of the suggested terms they best apply.

- The main character of a book is referred to as the protagonist.

1 antagonist	3 hero
2 protagonist ✓	4 narrator
- A short piece of fiction, not exceeding a few dozen pages, is called a _____.

1 novel	3 fable
2 novella	4 short story
- A tangible object which represents an abstract idea in the text serves as a _____.

1 symbol	3 metaphor
2 motif	4 personification
- A sequence of events in the same order as they are narrated in the text is termed the _____.

1 story	3 theme
2 plot	4 outline
- One of the minor ideas which keeps on recurring in the text will be a _____.

1 motif	3 symbol
2 theme	4 flashback

- f** A narrative of events ordered as they occur in the natural time-sequence is the _____.
- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| 1 plot | 3 fable |
| 2 story | 4 tale |
- g** The central idea of a work, often of universal validity, is called the _____.
- | | |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1 topic | 3 theme |
| 2 motif | 4 subject |
- h** A form which uses humour to criticise and call for improvement is termed a(n) _____.
- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 irony | 3 parody |
| 2 comedy | 4 satire |
- i** A figure of speech indirectly describing one thing in terms of another is a(n) _____.
- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 metaphor | 3 personification |
| 2 irony | 4 simile |
- j** A rhetorical device of saying one thing but meaning the very opposite is called _____.
- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1 parody | 3 irony |
| 2 satire | 4 metaphor |

8 Commonly Confused Concepts

Answer the following questions.

- a** What is the difference between a **novel**, a **novella** and a **short story**?
A novel is an extended piece of fiction, about several hundred pages; a novella is medium-sized, say between fifty and one hundred pages; and the short story is the shortest form.
- b** What is the difference between a **theme** and a **motif**?
- c** What is the difference between a **motif** and a **symbol**?
- d** What is the difference between the **plot** and the **story**?
- e** What is the difference between a **metaphor** and a **symbol**?
- f** What is the difference between the **author** and the **narrator**?

9 Identifying and Defying Terms JCross

Order the scrambled letters offered below so as to create literary critical terms. Explain the terms.

a A T O S I T P G O R N

Protagonist: the main character.

b G I T A T A S N O N

c R A R A N R O T

d C R E H A T C A R

e E D C U N E A I

f T G I T N E S