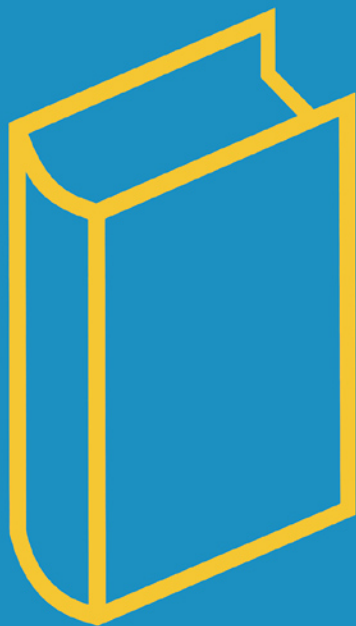


# An Introduction to Literary Studies

Second edition

**Mario Klarer**



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# AN INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY STUDIES

Second edition

In this volume Mario Klarer provides the essential beginner's guide to literary studies. He offers a concise, easy-to-understand discussion of central issues in the study of literary texts, looking at

- definitions of key terms such as “literature” and “text”
- major genres, such as fiction, poetry, drama, and film
- periods and classifications of literature
- theoretical approaches to texts
- the use of secondary resources
- guidelines for writing research essays.

Klarer has fully updated the highly successful first edition of *An Introduction to Literary Studies* to provide greater guidance for online research and to reflect recent changes to MLA guidelines for referencing and quoting sources. His invaluable text concludes with suggestions for further reading and an extensive glossary of important literary and cinematic terms.

**Mario Klarer** is Associate Professor of English and American Studies at the University of Innsbruck.

# AN INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY STUDIES

Second edition

*Mario Klarer*

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For Bernadette, Johanna and Moritz

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## PRELIMINARY REMARKS

This concise introduction provides a general survey of various aspects of textual studies for college students who intend to specialize in English or American literature and want to acquire a basic familiarity with the entire field. The book targets both the European and American college market: it is not only designed for beginners in the European system, where students have to specialize in one or two disciplines upon entering university, but it also meets the requirements for American undergraduates who have opted for a major in English and need an introduction to the more scholarly aspects of literary studies, one which goes beyond freshman "Introduction to literature" courses. It therefore serves as a textbook for Introduction to English literature classes at all major European universities or advanced undergraduate English (honors) courses in the USA and as an independent study guide. Its simple language and accessible style make the book equally apt for English native speakers as well as students of English literature whose native language is other than English.

Unlike most of the existing American textbooks geared toward freshman "Introduction to literature" courses, which emphasize the firsthand reading of primary texts, this book targets a slightly more advanced audience interested in the scholarly aspects of literature. The book does not include entire literary texts, but rather draws on a number of very short excerpts to illustrate major issues of literary studies as an academic discipline.

*An Introduction to Literary Studies* deals with questions concerning the nature of "literature" and "text," discusses the three major textual genres, as well as film and its terminology, gives an overview

of the most important periods of literatures in English, and raises issues of literary theory. A separate section explains basic research and composition techniques pertinent for the beginner. An extensive glossary of the major literary and cinematic terms gives easy and quick access to terminological information and also serves as a means to test one's knowledge when preparing for exams.

In order to meet the expectations of contemporary textual studies, major emphasis is placed on the accessibility of literary theory for beginners. All major schools and approaches, including the latest developments, are presented with reference to concrete textual examples. Film is integrated as a fourth genre alongside fiction, poetry, and drama to highlight the interdependence of literature and film in both artistic production and scholarly inquiry. The chapters on basic research and composition techniques explain today's standard computational facilities such as the online use of the *MLA International Bibliography* as well as the most important rules of the *MLA Style Sheet* and guidelines for research papers.

The book owes a great deal to my interaction with students in "Introduction to literature" courses which I taught at the American Studies and Comparative Literature Departments of the University of Innsbruck, the English Departments of the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia), Columbia University (New York), and the Université de Neuchâtel (Switzerland). Large parts of the manuscript were written during an Erwin Schrödinger Fellowship at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities in Santa Monica from 1992 to 1994. The English translation was completed at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina during a Rockefeller Fellowship in 1995/96.

I am particularly indebted to a number of friends for reading the manuscript. Sonja Bahn, Monika Fludernik, J.Paul Hunter, Ulrich C.Knoepflmacher, Steven Marcus, and Devin J.Steward have been very generous in their advice. I also owe thanks for suggestions and critical comments from friends and colleagues, including Wolfgang Koch, Monika Messner, Susanne Mettauer, Andrea Paulus, Christian Quendler, Elliott Schreiber, and Hilde Wolfmeyer.

My biggest thanks go to my companion Bernadette Rangger for critically discussing every chapter of the book from its earliest

conception to its final version, for having been with me during all these years, and for having made these years a wonderful time.

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

This second, revised, and expanded edition of *An Introduction to Literary Studies* follows the overall structure of the first 1999 English edition, and also takes into consideration changes made in the fourth German edition of 2004. While only minor modifications have been made to the first sections, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 have been completely revised in order to meet current standards in research and composition techniques:

- [Chapter 5](#), “Where and how to find secondary literature?” includes additional advice on the use and evaluation of the Internet as a source for literature searches, paying particular attention to the online version of the *MLA Bibliography*.
- [Chapter 6](#), “How to write a scholarly paper?” benefits from streamlining some of the terminology concerning composition techniques. Additional sample paragraphs of seminar papers enhance the practical use for students. The section on the *MLA Style Sheet* has a stronger focus on quoting and documenting online sources, thus incorporating the new standards set by the sixth edition of the *MLA Handbook* in 2003.
- [Chapter 7](#), “Suggestions for further reading” has been updated with recent publications on literary studies pertinent for the beginner.

In researching and writing this new material, I have stayed true to the principles of the first edition: to provide an up-to-date and accessible introduction to literary studies.

Innsbruck, January 2004

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# WHAT IS LITERATURE, WHAT IS A TEXT?

Look up the term **literature** in any current encyclopedia and you will be struck by the vagueness of its usage as well as by an inevitable lack of substance in the attempts to define it. In most cases, literature is referred to as the entirety of written expression, with the restriction that not every written document can be categorized as literature in the more exact sense of the word. The definitions, therefore, usually include additional adjectives such as “aesthetic” or “artistic” to distinguish literary works from texts of everyday use such as telephone books, newspapers, legal documents, and scholarly writings.

Etymologically, the Latin word “litteratura” is derived from “littera” (letter), which is the smallest element of alphabetical writing. The word **text** is related to “textile” and can be translated as “fabric”: just as single threads form a fabric, so words and sentences form a meaningful and coherent text. The origins of the two central terms are, therefore, not of great help in defining literature or text. It is more enlightening to look at literature or text as cultural and historical phenomena and to investigate the conditions of their production and reception.

Underlying literary production is certainly the human wish to leave behind a trace of oneself through creative expression, which will exist detached from the individual and, therefore, outlast its creator. The earliest manifestations of this creative wish are prehistoric paintings in caves, which hold “encoded” information in the form of visual signs. This visual component inevitably remains closely connected to literature throughout its various historical and social manifestations. In

some periods, however, the pictorial dimension is pushed into the back-ground and is hardly noticeable.

Not only the visual—writing is always pictorial—but also the acoustic element, the spoken word, is an integral part of literature, for the alphabet translates spoken words into signs. Before writing developed as a system of signs, whether pictographs or alphabets, “texts” were passed on orally. This predecessor of literary expression, called “oral poetry,” consisted of texts stored in a bard’s or minstrel’s memory which could be recited upon demand. It is assumed that most of the early classical and Old English epics were produced in this tradition and only later preserved in written form. This oral component, which runs counter to the modern way of thinking about texts, has been revived in the twentieth century through the medium of radio and other sound carriers. Audio-literature and the lyrics of songs display the acoustic features of literary phenomena.

The visual in literary texts, as well as the oral dimension, has been pushed into the background in the course of history. While in the Middle Ages the visual component of writing was highly privileged in such forms as richly decorated handwritten manuscripts, the arrival of the modern age—along with the invention of the printing press—made the visual element disappear or reduced it to a few illustrations in the text. “Pure” writing became more and more stylized as an abstract medium devoid of traces of material or physical elements. The medieval union of word and picture, in which both components of the text formed a single, harmonious entity and even partly overlapped, slowly disappeared. This modern “iconoclasm” (i.e. hostility towards pictures) not only restricts the visual dimensions of texts but also sees writing as a medium which can function with little connection to the acoustic element of language.

It is only in drama that the union between the spoken word and visual expression survives in a traditional literary genre, although this feature is not always immediately noticeable. Drama, which is—traditionally and without hesitation—viewed as literature, combines the acoustic and the visual elements, which are usually classified as non-literary. Even more obviously than in drama, the symbiosis of word and image culminates in film. This young medium is particularly interesting for textual studies, since word and picture are recorded and, as in a book, can be looked up at any time. Methods of literary

and textual criticism are, therefore, frequently applied to the cinema and acoustic media. Computer hypertexts and networks such as the Internet are the latest hybrids of the textual and various media; here writing is linked to sounds, pictures or even video clips within an interdependent network. Although the written medium is obviously the main concern in the study of literature or texts, this field of inquiry is also closely related to other media such as the stage, painting, film, music or even computer networks.

As a result of the permeation of modern textual studies with unusual media, there have been major controversies as to the definition of "text." Many authors and critics have deliberately left the traditional paths of literature, abandoning old textual forms in order to find new ways of literary expression and analysis. On the one hand, visual and acoustic elements are being reintroduced into literature, on the other hand, media, genres, text types, and discourses are being mixed.

## 1

### GENRE, TEXT TYPE, AND DISCOURSE

Literary criticism, like biology, resorts to the concept of evolution or development and to criteria of classification to distinguish various genres. The former area is referred to as literary history, whereas the latter is termed *poetics*. Both fields are closely related to the issue at hand, as every attempt to define text or literature touches not only upon differences between genres but also upon the historical dimensions of these literary forms of expression.

The term **genre** usually refers to one of the three classical literary forms of epic, drama, or poetry. This categorization is slightly confusing as the epic occurs in verse, too, but is not classified as poetry. It is, in fact, a precursor of the modern novel (i.e., prose fiction) because of its structural features such as plot, character presentation, and narrative perspective. Although this old classification is still in use, the tendency today is to abandon the term "epic" and introduce "prose," "fiction," or "prose fiction" for the relatively young literary forms of the novel and the short story.

Beside the genres which describe general areas of traditional literature, the term **text type** has been introduced, under the



influence of linguistics. Texts which cannot be categorized under the canonical genres of fiction, drama, and poetry are now often dealt with in modern linguistics. Scholars are looking at texts which were previously regarded as worthless or irrelevant for textual analysis. The term text type refers to highly conventional written documents such as instruction manuals, sermons, obituaries, advertising texts, catalogues, and scientific or scholarly writing. It can, of course, also include the three main literary genres and their sub-genres.

A further key term in theoretical treatises on literary phenomena is **discourse**. Like text type, it is used as a term for any kind of classifiable linguistic expression. It has become a useful denotation for various linguistic conventions referring to areas of content and theme; for instance, one may speak of male or female, political, sexual, economic, philosophical, and historical discourse. The classifications for these forms of linguistic expression are based on levels of content, vocabulary, syntax, as well as stylistic and rhetorical elements. Whereas the term text type refers to written documents, discourse includes written and oral expression.

In sum, genre is applied primarily to the three classical forms of the literary tradition; text type is a broader term that is also applicable to “non-canonical” written texts, i.e., those which are traditionally not classified as literature. Discourse is the broadest term, referring to a variety of written and oral manifestations which share common thematic or structural features. The boundaries of these terms are not fixed and vary depending on the context in which they appear.

## 2

### PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

Traditional literary studies distinguish between the artistic object, or primary source, and its scholarly treatment in a critical text, or secondary source. **Primary sources** denote the traditional objects of analysis in literary criticism, including texts from all literary genres, such as fiction, poetry, or drama.

The term **secondary source** applies to texts such as **articles** (or essays), book reviews, and **notes** (brief comments on a very specific topic), all of which are published primarily in scholarly journals. In Anglo-American literary criticism, as in any other academic

discipline, regularly published **journals** inform readers about the latest results of researchers (see [Chapter 5](#)). Essays are also published as **collections** (or *anthologies*) compiled by one or several editors on a specific theme. If such an anthology is published in honor of a famous researcher, it is often called a **festschrift**, a term which comes from the German but is also used in English. Book-length scholarly treatises on a single theme are called **monographs**. Most dissertations and scholarly books published by university presses belong to this group.

In terms of content, secondary literature tries to uphold those standards of scholarly practice which have, over time, been established for scientific discourse, including objectivity, documentation of sources, and general validity. It is vital for any reader to be able to check and follow the arguments, results, and statements of literary criticism. As the interpretation of texts always contains subjective traits, objective criteria or the general validity of the thesis can only be applied or maintained to a certain degree. This can be seen as the main difference between literary criticism and the natural sciences. At the same time, it is the basis for the tremendous creative potential of this academic field. With changes of perspective and varying methodological approaches, new results in the interpretation of texts can be suggested. As far as documentation of sources is concerned, however, the requirements in literary criticism are as strict as those of the natural sciences. The reader of a secondary source should be able to retrace every quotation or paraphrase (summary) to the primary or secondary source from which it has been taken. Although varying and subjective opinions on texts will remain, the scholarly documentation of the sources should permit the reader to refer back to the original texts and thus make it possible to compare results and judge the quality of the interpretation.

As a consequence of these conventions in documentation, a number of formal criteria have evolved in literary criticism which can be summarized by the term **critical apparatus**, which includes the following elements: footnotes or endnotes, providing comments on the main text or references to further secondary or primary sources; a **bibliography** (or *list of works cited*); and, possibly, an *index*. This documentation format has not always been followed in scholarly texts, but it has developed into a convention in the field over the last several centuries (see also [Chapter 6](#)).

**forms of secondary sources**

essay (article)  
 note  
 book review  
 review article  
 monograph

**publishing media**

journal  
 anthology (collection)  
*festschrift*  
 book

**formal aspects of secondary literature**

footnotes  
 bibliography  
 index  
 quotations

**aspects of content**

objectivity  
 lucid arguments  
 general validity of thesis

The strict separation of primary from secondary sources is not always easy. The literary **essay** of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is a historical example which shows that our modern classification did not exist in rigid form in earlier periods. This popular genre treated a clearly defined, abstract or theoretical topic in overtly literary language, and thus possessed the stylistic features of primary sources; however, the themes and questions that it dealt with are typical of scholarly texts or secondary sources. From a modern perspective, therefore, the literary essay bridges two text types.

In the twentieth century, the traditional classification of primary and secondary sources is often deliberately neglected. A famous example from literature in English is T.S.Eliot's (1888–1965) modernist poem *The Waste Land* (1922), in which the American poet includes footnotes (a traditional element of secondary sources) in the primary text. In the second half of the twentieth century, this feature has been further developed and employed in two ways: elements of secondary sources are added to literary texts, and elements of primary sources—e.g., the absence of a critical apparatus or an overtly literary style—are incorporated in secondary texts. The strict separation of the two text types is therefore not always possible.

Vladimir Nabokov's (1899–1977) novel *Pale Fire* (1962) is an example of the deliberate confusion of text types in American literature. *Pale Fire* consists of parts—for instance, the text of a poem

—which can be labeled as primary sources, but also of other parts which are normally characteristic of scholarly treatises or critical editions of texts, such as a “Foreword” by the editor of the poem, a “Commentary” with stylistic analysis as well as critical comments on the text, and an “Index” of the characters in the poem. In the (fictitious) foreword signed by the (fictitious) literary critic Charles Kinbote, Nabokov introduces a poem by the (fictitious) author Francis Shade. Nabokov’s novel borrows the form of a *critical edition*, in which the traditional differentiation between literary text and scholarly commentary or interpretation remains clearly visible. In the case of *Pale Fire*, however, all text types are created by the author Vladimir Nabokov himself, who tries to point out the arbitrariness of this artificial categorization of primary and secondary sources. The fact that this text is called a novel, even though it has a poem at its center, calls attention to the relativity inherent in the traditional categorization of genres.



## 2

# MAJOR GENRES IN TEXTUAL STUDIES

As early as Greco-Roman antiquity, the classification of literary works into different genres has been a major concern of literary theory, which has since then produced a number of divergent and sometimes even contradictory categories. Among the various attempts to classify literature into genres, the triad *epic*, *drama*, and *poetry* has proved to be the most common in modern literary criticism. Because the epic was widely replaced by the new prose form of the novel in the eighteenth century, recent classifications prefer the terms *fiction*, *drama*, and *poetry* as designations of the three major literary genres. The following section will explain the basic characteristics of these literary genres as well as those of film, a fourth textual manifestation in the wider sense of the term. We will examine these types of texts with reference to concrete examples and introduce crucial textual terminology and methods of analysis helpful for understanding the respective genres.

## 1

### FICTION

Although the novel emerged as the most important form of prose fiction in the eighteenth century, its precursors go back to the oldest texts of literary history. Homer's **epics**, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (c. seventh century BC), and Virgil's (70–19 BC) *Aeneid* (c. 31–19 BC) influenced the major medieval epics such as Dante Alighieri's (1265–1321) Italian *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*, c. 1307–21) and the early modern English epics such as Edmund Spenser's (c. 1552–99) *Faerie Queene* (1590; 1596) and John Milton's (1608–74) baroque long poem *Paradise Lost* (1667). The majority of traditional epics revolve

around a hero who has to fulfill a number of tasks of national or cosmic significance in a multiplicity of episodes. Classical epics in particular, through their roots in myth, history, and religion, reflect a self-contained world-view of their particular periods and nationalities. With the obliteration of a unified *Weltanschauung* in early modern times, the position of the epic weakened and it was eventually replaced by the novel, the mouthpiece of relativism that was emerging in all aspects of cultural discourse.

Although traditional epics are written in verse, they clearly distinguish themselves from other forms of poetry by length, narrative structure, depiction of characters, and plot patterns and are therefore regarded—together with the **romance**—as precursors of the modern novel. As early as classical times, but more strongly in the late Middle Ages, the romance established itself as an independent genre. Ancient romances such as Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (second century AD) were usually written in prose, while medieval works of this genre use verse forms, as in the anonymous Middle English Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (fourteenth century). Despite its verse form and its eventful episodes, the romance is nevertheless considered a forerunner of the novel mainly because of its tendency toward a focused plot and unified point of view (see also the sections on plot and point of view in this chapter).

While the scope of the traditional epic is usually broad, the romance condenses the action and orients the plot toward a particular goal. At the same time, the protagonist or main character is depicted in more detail and with greater care, thereby moving beyond the classical epic whose main character functions primarily as the embodiment of abstract heroic ideals. In the romances, individual traits, such as insecurity, weakness, or other facets of character come to the foreground, anticipating distinct aspects of the novel. The individualization of the protagonist, the deliberately perspectival point of view, and above all the linear plot structure, oriented toward a specific climax which no longer centers on national or cosmic problems, are among the crucial features that distinguish the romance from epic poetry.

The **novel**, which emerged in Spain during the seventeenth century and in England during the eighteenth century, employs these elements in a very deliberate manner, although the early novels

remain deeply rooted in the older genre of the epic. Miguel de Cervantes' (1547–1616) *Don Quixote* (1605; 1615), for instance, puts an end to the epic and to the *chivalric romance* by parodying their traditional elements (a lady who is not so deserving of adoration is courted by a not-so-noble knight who is involved in quite unheroic adventures). At the same time, however, Cervantes initiates a new and modified epic tradition. Similarly, the Englishman Henry Fielding (1707–54) characterizes his *novel Joseph Andrews* (1742) as a “comic romance” and “comic epic poem in prose,” i.e., a parody and synthesis of existing genres. Also, in the plot structure of the early novel, which often tends to be episodic, elements of the epic survive in a new attire. In England, Daniel Defoe's (1660–1731) *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Samuel Richardson's (1689–1761) *Pamela* (1740–41) and *Clarissa* (1748–49), Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), and Laurence Sterne's (1713–68) *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) mark the beginning of this new literary genre, which replaces the epic, thus becoming one of the most productive genres of modern literature.

The newly established novel is often characterized by the terms “realism” and “individualism,” thereby summarizing some of the basic innovations of this new medium. While the traditional epic exhibited a cosmic and allegorical dimension, the modern novel distinguishes itself by grounding the plot in a distinct historical and geographical reality. The allegorical and typified epic hero metamorphoses into the protagonist of the novel, with individual and realistic character traits.

These features of the novel which, in their attention to individualism and realism, reflect basic sociohistorical tendencies of the eighteenth century, soon made the novel a dominant literary genre. The novel thus mirrors the modern disregard for the collective spirit of the Middle Ages that heavily relied on allegory and symbolism. The rise of an educated middle class, the spread of the printing press, and a modified economic basis which allowed authors to pursue writing as an independent profession underlie these major shifts in eighteenth-century literary production. To this day, the novel still maintains its leading position as the genre which produces the most innovations in literature.

The term “novel,” however, subsumes a number of subgenres such as the **picaresque novel**, which relates the experiences of a vagrant rogue (from the Spanish “pícaro”) in his conflict with the norms of



society. Structured as an episodic narrative, the picaresque novel tries to lay bare social injustice in a satirical way, as for example Hans Jacob Christoph von Grimmelshausen's (c. 1621–76) German *Simplizissimus* (1669), Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), or Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), which all display specific traits of this form of prose fiction. The **Bildungsroman** (novel of education), generally referred to by its German name, describes the development of a protagonist from childhood to maturity, including such examples as George Eliot's (1819–80) *Mill on the Floss* (1860), or more recently Doris Lessing's (1919–) cycle *Children of Violence* (1952–69). Another important form is the **epistolary novel**, which uses letters as a means of first-person narration, as for example Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740–41) and *Clarissa* (1748–49). A further form is the **historical novel**, such as Sir Walter Scott's (1771–1832) *Waverley* (1814), whose actions take place within a realistic historical context. Related to the historical novel is a more recent trend often labeled new journalism, which uses the genre of the novel to rework incidents based on real events, as exemplified by Truman Capote's (1924–84) *In Cold Blood* (1966) or Norman Mailer's (1923–) *Armies of the Night* (1968). The **satirical novel**, such as Jonathan Swift's (1667–1745) *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) or Mark Twain's (1835–1910) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), highlights weaknesses of society through the exaggeration of social conventions, whereas **utopian novels** or science fiction novels create alternative worlds as a means of criticizing real sociopolitical conditions, as in the classic *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949) by George Orwell (1903–50) or more recently Margaret Atwood's (1939–) *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Very popular forms are the **gothic novel**, which includes such works as Bram Stoker's (1847–1912) *Dracula* (1897), and the **detective novel**, one of the best known of which is Agatha Christie's (1890–1976) *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934).

The **short story**, a concise form of prose fiction, has received less attention from literary scholars than the novel. As with the novel, the roots of the short story lie in antiquity and the Middle Ages. Story, myth, and fairy tale relate to the oldest types of textual manifestations, "texts" which were primarily orally transmitted. The term "tale" (from "to tell"), like the German "Sage" (from "sagen"—"to speak"), reflects this oral dimension inherent in short

fiction. Even the Bible includes stories such as “Job” (c. fifth-fourth century BC) or “The Prodigal Son” (c. first century BC), whose structures and narrative patterns resemble modern short stories. Other forerunners of this subgenre of fiction are ancient satire and the aforementioned romance.

Indirect precursors of the short story are medieval and early modern narrative cycles. The Arabian *Thousand and One Nights*, compiled in the fourteenth and subsequent centuries, Giovanni Boccaccio’s (1313–75) Italian *Decamerone* (1349–51), and Geoffrey Chaucer’s (c. 1343–1400) *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387) anticipate important features of modern short fiction. These cycles of tales are characterized by a frame narrative—such as the pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Thomas Becket in the *Canterbury Tales*—which unites a number of otherwise heterogeneous stories. On their way to Canterbury, the pilgrims tell different, rather self-contained tales which are only connected through Chaucer’s use of a frame story.

The short story emerged as a more or less independent text type at the end of the eighteenth century, parallel to the development of the novel and the newspaper. Regularly issued magazines of the nineteenth century exerted a major influence on the establishment of the short story by providing an ideal medium for the publication of this prose genre of limited volume. Forerunners of these journals are the *Tatler* (1709–11) and the *Spectator* (1711–12; 1714), published in England by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, who tried to address the educated middle class in short literary texts and commentaries of general interest (essays). Even today, magazines like the *New Yorker* (since 1925) still function as privileged organs for first publications of short stories. Many of the early novels appeared as serial stories in these magazines before being published as independent books, for example, Charles Dickens’s (1812–70) *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37).

While the novel has always attracted the interest of literary theorists, the short story has never actually achieved the status held by book-length fiction. The short story, however, surfaces in comparative definitions of other prose genres such as the novel or its shorter variants, the novella and novelette. A crucial feature commonly identified with the short story is its impression of unity since it can be read—in contrast to the novel—in one sitting without interruption. Due to restrictions of length, the plot of the short story

has to be highly selective, entailing an idiosyncratic temporal dimension that usually focuses on one central moment of action. The slow and gradual build-up of suspense in the novel must be accelerated in the short story by means of specific techniques. The action of the short story therefore often commences close to the climax (*in medias res*—“the middle of the matter”), reconstructing the preceding context and plot development through flashbacks. Focusing on one main figure or location, the setting and the characters generally receive less detailed and careful depiction than in the novel. In contrast to the novel’s generally descriptive style, the short story, for the simple reason of limited length, has to be more suggestive. While the novel experiments with various narrative perspectives, the short story usually chooses one particular point of view, relating the action through the eyes of one particular figure or narrator. The **novella** or **novelle**, such as Joseph Conrad’s (1857–1924) *Heart of Darkness* (1902), holds an intermediary position between novel and short story, since its length and narratological elements cannot be strictly identified with either of the two genres.

As this juxtaposition of the main elements of the novel and the short story shows, attempts to explain the nature of these genres rely on different methodological approaches, among them reception theory with respect to reading without interruption, formalist notions for the analysis of plot structures, and contextual approaches for delineating their boundaries with other comparable genres. The terms plot, time, character, setting, narrative perspective, and style emerge not only in the definitions and characterizations of the genre of the novel, but also function as the most important areas of inquiry in film and drama. Since these aspects can be isolated most easily in prose fiction, they will be dealt with in greater detail in the following section by drawing on examples from novels and short stories. The most important elements are:

Plot	What happens?
Characters	Who acts?
Narrative perspective	Who sees what?
Setting	Where and when do the events take place?

a)  
**Plot**

**Plot** is the logical interaction of the various thematic elements of a text which lead to a change of the original situation as presented at the outset of the narrative. An ideal traditional plot line encompasses the following four sequential levels:

exposition—complication—climax or turning point—  
 resolution

The **exposition** or presentation of the initial situation is disturbed by a **complication** or **conflict** which produces suspense and eventually leads to a climax, crisis, or turning point. The **climax** is followed by a resolution of the complication (French **denouement**), with which the text usually ends. Most traditional fiction, drama, and film employ this basic plot structure, which is also called linear plot since its different elements follow a chronological order.

In many cases—even in linear plots—**flashback** and foreshadowing introduce information concerning the past or future into the narrative. The opening scene in Billy Wilder's (1906–2002) *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is a famous example of the **foreshadowing** effect in film: the first-person narrator posthumously relates the events that lead to his death while drifting dead in a swimming pool. The only break with a linear plot or chronological narrative is the anticipation of the film's ending—the death of its protagonist—thus eliminating suspense as an important element of plot. This technique directs the audience's attention to aspects of the film other than the outcome of the action (see also [Chapter 2](#), §4: Film).

The *drama of the absurd* and the *experimental novel* deliberately break with linear narrative structures while at the same time maintaining traditional elements of plot in modified ways. Many contemporary novels alter linear narrative structures by introducing elements of plot in an unorthodox sequence. Kurt Vonnegut's (1922–) postmodern novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) is a striking example of experimental plot structure which mixes various levels of action and time, such as the experiences of a young soldier in World War II, his life in America after the war, and a science-fiction-like dream-world in

which the protagonist is kidnapped by an extraterrestrial force. All three levels are juxtaposed as fragments by rendering the different settings as well as their internal sequences of action in a non-chronological way. Kurt Vonnegut offers an explanation of this complex plot structure in his protagonist's report on the unconventional literary practice of the extraterrestrial people on the planet Tralfamadore:

Tralfamadorian [...] books were laid out—in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars [...] each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end [...]. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen at one time.<sup>1</sup>

Kurt Vonnegut is actually talking about the structure of his own novel, which is composed of similarly fragmentary parts. The different levels of action and time converge in the mind of the protagonist as seemingly simultaneous presences. Vonnegut's technique of non-linear narrative, which introduces traditional elements of plot in an unconventional manner, conveys the schizophrenic mind of the protagonist through parallel presentations of different frames of experiences.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* borrows techniques from the visual arts, whose representational structures are considered to be different from literary practice. Literature is generally regarded as a temporal art since action develops in a temporal sequence of events. The visual arts, however, are often referred to as a spatial art since they are able to capture one particular segment of the action which can then be perceived in one instant by the viewer. Vonnegut and other experimental authors try to apply this pictorial structure to literary texts. Fragmented narratives which abandon linear plots surface in various genres and media, including film and drama, always indirectly determining the other main elements, such as setting and character presentation.

## b)

**Characters**

While formalist approaches to the study of literature traditionally focus on plot and narrative structure, methods informed by psychoanalysis shift the center of attention to the text's characters. A psychological approach is, however, merely one way of evaluating characters; it is also possible to analyze character presentation in the context of narratological structures. Generally speaking, characters in a text can be rendered either as types or as individuals. A typified character in literature is dominated by one specific trait and is referred to as a **flat character**. The term **round character** usually denotes a persona with more complex and differentiated features.

Typified characters often represent the general traits of a group of persons or abstract ideas. Medieval allegorical depictions of characters preferred **typification** in order to personify vices, virtues, or philosophical and religious positions. The Everyman-figure, a symbol of the sinful Christian, is a major example of this general pattern in the representation of man in medieval literature. In today's advertisements, typified character presentations re-emerge in magazines, posters, film, and TV. The temporal and spatial limitations of advertising media revive allegorical and symbolic characterization for didactic and persuasive reasons comparable to those of the Middle Ages.

A good example of the purposeful use of typified character presentation occurs in the opening scene of Mark Twain's, "A True Story" (1874).

It was summer-time, and twilight. We were sitting on the porch of the farmhouse, on the summit of the hill, and "Aunt Rachel" was sitting respectfully below our level, on the steps—for she was our servant, and colored. She was a mighty frame and stature; she was sixty years old, but her eye was undimmed and her strength unabated. She was a cheerful, hearty soul, and it was no more trouble for her to laugh than it is for a bird to sing. [...] I said: "Aunt Rachel, how is it that you've lived sixty years and never had any trouble?" She stopped quaking: She paused, and there was a moment of silence. She turned her face