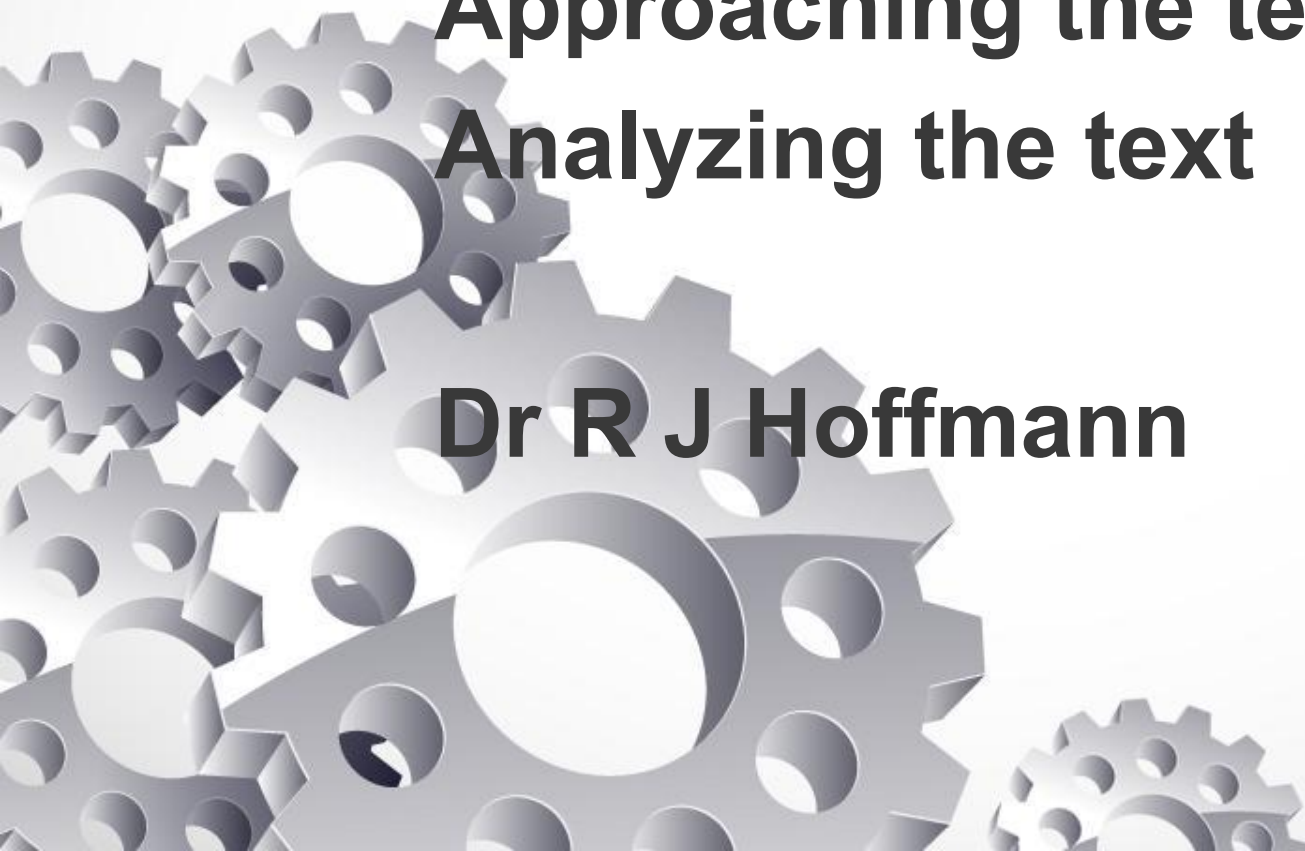# Interpreting Literary Texts

Approaching the text

Analyzing the text

Dr R J Hoffmann

Reading Others

- **Clothes**
- **Language—speech**
- **Body Language**
- **Actions**
- **Thoughts**
- **Attitudes**
- **Background**
- **Physical characteristics**
- **Friends—relationships with others**
- **Name**

Hearing Others

♦ **Tone**

The reflection in a work of the author's attitude
Toward his or her subject, characters, and readers.

- – humorous
- – grim
- – nostalgic
- – tender
- – brusque

-- condescending
-- apologetic
-- playful
-- serious
-- ironic

Analyzing Novel

- ♦ **Plot**
- ♦ **Characters**
- ♦ **Setting**
- ♦ **Point of view**
- ♦ **Tone**
- ♦ **Theme**

Analyzing Novel

♦**Plot**

Plot is the careful arrangement by an author of incidents in a narrative to achieve a desired effect.

Plot is more than simply the series of happenings in a literary work.

It is the result of the writer's deliberate selection of interrelated actions (what happens) and choice of arrangement (the order of happening) in presenting and resolving a conflict.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster explains the difference between *plot* and *story* in this way:

We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on <u>causality</u>. "The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died and then the queen <u>died of grief</u>" is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of <u>causality</u> overshadows it.
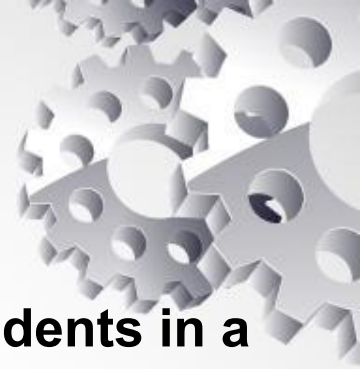
Analyzing Novel

◆ **Most plots involve conflict:**

- <u>External conflict</u>: one person against another or a person against nature or fate.
- <u>Internal conflict</u>: two elements at war within the same person.

◆ **Typical plot structure:**

- <u>Exposition</u>: presentation of important background information
- <u>Complication</u>: building of tension between opposing forces
- <u>Climax</u>: the turning point of the action towards the final resolution of the conflict
- <u>Denouement</u>: sometimes called the resolution of the conflict

Analyzing Novel

♦ **Characters**

  o **List traits of main characters. Note whether characters change by the end of the story.**

  o **Describe each event that influences a character's change. Explain, for each event, what happens to the character and how he or she changes.**

  o **Describe a scene in which a character has an <u>epiphany</u>. Explain what happens and what the character comes to see.**

  o **Mark the places where the author or other characters make revealing statements about a character.**

Analyzing Novel

♦**Setting**

The general locale, time in history, or social milieu in which the action of a work of literature takes place. Setting is often important in establishing the mood or atmosphere of a work.

Mood: the prevailing emotional attitude--such as regret, hopefulness, or bitterness--in a literary work or in part of a work. Mood is often used interchangeably with tone.

Analyzing Novel

♦ **Point of view**

The vantage point, or stance, from which a story is told; the eye and mind through which the action is perceived and filtered, sometimes called <u>narrative perspective</u>.

Analyzing Novel

◆Point of view

♦ <u>first person</u>: (I) the narrator stands inside the story and relates first hand experience—can create a feeling of intimacy.

- – If this narrator does not fully understand the implications of his or her tale, the character is called a <u>naïve narrator</u>.
- – If the first-person narrator presents only the unspoken thoughts of the protagonist, the result is an <u>interior monologue</u>.

♦ <u>third person</u>: (he, she, they) the narrator stands outside the story and comments

- – <u>omniscient</u> third person narrator: assumes a godlike persona, moving about freely in time and space, revealing the thoughts and motives of all the characters, knowing the present, past, and future, and (sometimes) commenting on or interpreting the actions of the characters.

Analyzing Novel

♦ **Tone**

The reflection in a work of the author's attitude

Toward his or her subject, characters, and readers.

- humorous   -- condescending
- grim   -- apologetic
- nostalgic   -- playful
- tender   -- serious
- brusque   -- ironic

Irony: results from the reader's sense of some discrepancy.

♦ **Verbal irony**

A simple kind of irony—saying one thing but meaning the opposite. "A marvelous time" means a boring time. Not to be confused with sarcasm. <u>Sarcasm</u> has a cutting edge and may at times be ironic, but it may also be straight malice.

♦ **Dramatic irony**

Saying or doing something while unaware of its ironic contrast with the whole truth. A character says, "This is the happiest day of my life," and the audience knows what the character doesn't—his family has just died in a plane crash.

♦ **Situational irony**

Events turn to the opposite of what is expected. It rains on the Weather Bureau's annual picnic. Evil or horror occurs on a bright sunny day.

Analyzing Novel

♦ **Theme is the central idea of the work--whether fiction, poetry, or drama.**

For many readers, theme is an attractive element because <u>it gives works meaning</u>; it makes them relevant.

The theme deals with the four general areas of human experience:

   the nature of humanity
   the nature of society
   the nature of humankind's relationship to the world
   the nature of our ethical responsibilities

Theme answers questions such as these:

     Are human beings innately "sinful" or "good"?
     Does fate control us or do we control it?

Analyzing Novel

♦ Theme vs. Subject

Theme is not the same as the subject or topic of a work.

The subject is what the work is about. You can state the subject in a word or phrase.

In contrast, <u>theme is what the work says about the subject</u>. The statement of a work's theme requires a complete sentence and sometimes several sentences. Furthermore, a work's theme must apply to people outside the work.

An example would be the following: Rapid change in environment causes many people to feel their identity threatened.

Remember that a work can have many subjects and thus more than one theme. This concept is especially true of complex works.

Analyzing Novel

♦ **Theme: multiple perspectives**

Themes are interpretive in nature; although an author may introduce a thematic element into a work, the response of the reader also contributes.

Any given work will have multiple meanings.

    For example, Margaret Atwood's "Happy Endings" is a treatise about

        how one should savor the development of one's life and move beyond its structure to focus on its meaning,

        or a treatise on how to write,

        or both

--all depending upon one's reading of the work.

Analyzing Novel

♦ **Theme**

   o **Explain how title, subtitle, epigraph, and names of characters may be related to theme.**

   o **Describe author's apparent attitude toward human behavior.**

   o **Describe author's apparent attitude toward society.**

   o **List the moral issues raised by the work.**

   o **Name the character who is the moral center of the work. List his or her traits.**

   o **Mark statements by the author or characters that seem to state themes.**