**Introduction to Literary Studies: Terms and Questions**

**Narrative** – story (what is told) and discourse (how it is told)

* **Story (general)** – a sequence of events and actions involving characters; the “what” of narrative. Story/plot,[[1]](#footnote-1) character, setting.
  + **Story (specific)/plot** – the chronological sequence of events and the order in which those events are told.
  + **Space/setting** – atmosphere, characterization, milieu (social background), fiction vs. real space, symbolic space or other symbols, plot-line that occurs in only one setting.
  + **Character** – representations of people with certain functions in a narrative context.
* **Discourse** – how the story is transmitted. Plot, narrative situation, time, style, etc.
  + **Narrative situation** – an aspect of discourse, including narrative voice and focalization.
  + **Narrative voice** – “who speaks” or who tells the story. Narrative (prose) is always told or mediated through a voice, even when the narrator presents directly dialogue between characters.
* **Homodiegetic narrator** is also a character in the story.
* **Heterodiegetic narrator** is not a character in the story.
  + **Focalization** – “who sees” or perspective from which the narrator transmits the story to the reader.

**Questions to Ask:**

Who speaks? (Narrative voice)

* How distant or close is the narrative voice to the character, if there is one?
* If there isn’t one, what can we know about this voice?
* Is the narrative voice reliable or unreliable?
* Is the narrator overt or covert? (with or without a personality, intrusive or invisible)

Who sees? (Focalization)

* Does “who sees” match up with “who speaks”?
* If so, how?
* If not, what doesn’t match? Consider tone, syntax, and diction.

Is there a plot? (Chronology of events)

* What can we answer about who, what, when, and where?
* Is there a sequence of events? If so, what is it?
* Does the plot match the story (real-time occurrence) of events? If so, how?
* If not, how do they not match up?

Who are the characters?

* What function do they play? (major, minor, foil, protagonist, witness, confidant, antagonist, etc.)
* How do we learn about them? (Directly/Explicitly or indirectly/implicitly)
* What is the inner life of the character? How much do we know about it?
* Who tells us about the character and how reliable is the narration?

What do we know? How?

* What do we not know? How?
* What are our expectations?
* How does the text set up, challenge, and/or complicate these expectations?

What is unusual, puzzling or stands out in the narration? Why?

* What is the overall tone of the passage?
* Is there something that departs from or changes the tone, even a little bit?
* Are there any rhetorical devices (metaphors, etc.)? Or particularly interesting phrases?

**Interpretations to Make:**

For all observations above, remember to ask, “what is the effect of this?”

* The “so what?” question: how does the use of this particular strategy or device contribute to the overall meaning of the line, passage, and/or novel?

1. There are two important definitions of story. The first definition is the part of narrative that describes what is told (the basic sequence of events). The second definition refers to the chronological sequence of events (in contrast to the “plot,” which is the relation of events in a particular order to show causality or logical structure). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)