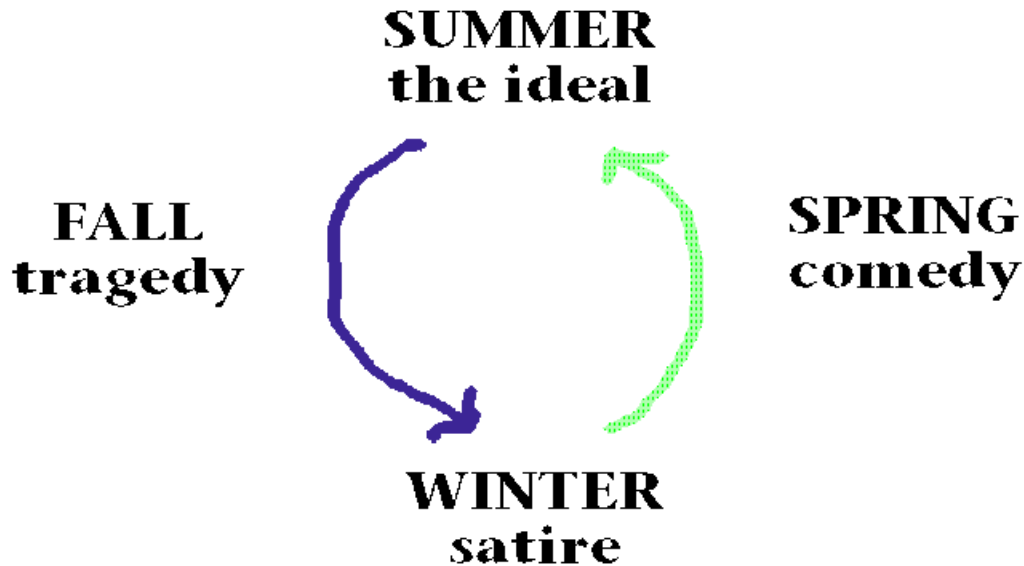


# The Literary Toolkit

## The Plot Cycle

The Plot Cycle is a universal pattern on which basic literary plots can be placed. The Plot Cycle also correlates several clusters of images and symbols.



The plot cycle is a pattern found universally in literature. It can be found underlying all plots. Some of these terms may be used in a different sense than you are familiar with.

**Romance**, for instance, refers to a story taking place with somewhat idealized characters, with some suspension of the laws of nature in favor of the main character(s), and with a somewhat idealized scene. **Comedy** includes not only humor but a movement upward—a happy ending. **Tragedy** has a specific plot pattern; it does not mean simply a terrible or unfortunate event. **Irony** is realistic, sometimes to the point that the characters, events, or setting are less admirable or desirable than ordinary life.

Both **Comedy** and **Romance** are somewhat static, whereas **Tragedy** and **Comedy** involve movements downward or upward. An actual story may combine elements of these four basic plots.

The correlation with the seasons of the year can be matched with other correlation, such as the times of day, stages of life, and so on.

## The Dramatistic Pentad



The dramatistic pentad derives from the work of Kenneth Burke. **Scene**, as you might expect, means the place where the action occurs, although the scene can be social or cultural as well as physical. The **Act** is what is done by an **Agent**. The **Agent** is a character who does something. The specific identities for terms in the pentad will vary, depending on which character is chosen as the **Agent**. The **Agency** is the means by which the agent performs the act; the **Agency** may be physical, psychological, or sociological. (For instance, one character, as agent, may use another as an agency. **Purpose** is the agent's reason, or motivation for the act.

## The Pollution Cycle

The Pollution Cycle also derives from Kenneth Burke. It describes the way a kind of plot moves. Although the terms obviously have a religious basis, the cycle can be applied to plots with no religious context.

**Pollution** is the beginning state; there is something wrong, some imbalance, conflict, disharmony. For example, at the beginning of Sophocles' **Oedipus the King**, Thebes is afflicted with a plague.

**Guilt** is the reason for the pollution. The idea is that nothing happens without a moral cause. Blame or responsibility must be assigned. In **Oedipus**, the **guilt** is Oedipus's having killed his father and married his mother.

Removal of the guilt leads to **purification**. Whatever means are appropriate are used to restore the balance. Oedipus's suffering purifies Thebes.

When the guilt has been purged, the situation is restored to health or balance, leading to **Redemption**. When Oedipus blinds himself, Thebes is redeemed from the plague.

## Characteristics of Popular Literature

To understand and evaluate a piece of writing, one needs to know its genre. Often, negative responses to a text come from judging it by the wrong genre standards. Popular literature has its own features and is often negatively judged because the critic wants something different.

I have drawn this list of characteristics of popular literature from **The Shorter Books of the Apocrypha** volume of the **Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible**.

### Popular literature prefers incident over character.

The plot includes

- love
- *either* a journey/quest *or* a military or political conflict
- at least one reversal of fortune
- a happy ending

### The characters in popular literature do not develop or change, and they are also morally stereotyped.

Stock figures include a tyrant and a chaste woman. The loner, the dumb but nice guy, the sneaky person are all stock figures.

### Popular literature appeals to simple, strong emotions.

Because of the outbursts of heightened emotion, popular literature often mixes poetry and prose. Contemporary popular usually does not include poetry, except for some fantasy literature.

### Popular literature is indifferent to historical and geographical details.

The time and place of events. Popular literature doesn't care if the location of places or point in history are accurate. The effect is more important than accuracy.,

### Philosophically, popular literature stays on the level of proverbs and wise sayings.

Proverbs and wise sayings can, of course, be valid. However, one of the weaknesses of popular literature is its tendency to become "deep" over simplistic ideas. "Trust the Force, Luke."

### Popular literature often includes the supernatural.

Ancient literature includes gods, goddesses, and various other nonhuman but intelligent creatures. Modern popular literature often includes the supernatural or, at least, the noticeably unrealistic. How many heroes in action films survive physical punishment that would disable (or kill) even the fittest real person?

## Damon Knight's Terms

In *Creating Short Fiction*, Damon Knight gives a set of four terms for seeing the structure of a story.

- **Setting.** Setting is similar to the Pentad's Scene. In trying to describe the location and chronology of TPD, we were finding the Setting. Obviously, a story must take place somewhere, although the "where" can be very vague or highly detailed.
- **Character.** Characters are also obviously necessary for a story. But the characters can range from highly detailed "realistic" characters to the stereotypes of popular literature and the symbols of allegory.
- **Situation.** The situation gives the characters reasons to act. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus tries to return home after the Trojan War. In *Don Quixote*, Alonzo Quijana decides to become a knight errant.
- **Emotions.** The characters, setting, situation, and the plot that unfolds from them generates feelings. These feelings are integral to the story, even though they can vary widely in different readers.

According to Damon Knight, **theme** is the product of these four elements.

In literature classes, I've found that Knight's four terms complement the Pentad well.

## Wesley Kort's Terms

Literary critic, Wesley A. Kort, suggests four terms to analyze literature (*Story, Text, and Scripture*). The terms are plot, character, tone, and atmosphere. These terms also overlap the Pentad, but having several perspectives helps understanding.

- **Plot** means the pattern of actions and events that make up a story. Kort's plot and character pretty much cover Knight's four terms. Some critics like to graph plots; so do some writers.
- **Character** is, of course, the person(s) in the story, and relates to human attitudes and motivations. As TPD shows, characters can be nonhuman.
- **Atmosphere** is less obvious; Kort uses it to mean the boundaries, limits, or conditions on what can happen in a story or what the characters can do. Atmosphere is related to **setting**, but not synonymous.

In narratives including the supernatural, it is worth asking what is possible and what isn't. Even when the world of the text allows for "fantastic" occurrences, there are still rules and limits.

- **Tone** refers to several things.

**First**, it refers to the author's selection of material—what goes into the story and what stays out.

**Second**, tone refers to the author's voice or style— the manner in which the story is told.

**Third**, tone refers to the author's attitude toward the material in two ways:

- the point of view from which the story is told, grammatical and physical;
- the author's evaluation of the material, the values the author finds in the material.

**Tone** and **atmosphere** relate to the world of the text in a more subtle way than do Scene or Setting. All of these sets of terms can be applied to movies. Think of all the movies set in Los Angeles and then think of how different the tone and atmosphere of those different movies are: “The Rapture” has different tone and atmosphere than “L. A. Confidential,” which in turn differs from “Slums of Beverly Hills.” Or pick your own examples. **Literal** setting does not create tone; the writer’s (or director’s) choices and perspectives create tone and atmosphere (roughly equivalent to Knight’s “emotions.”

## The Three Worlds of Writer, Text and Reader

This tool applies reader-response theory to the process of reading and discussing literature. The basic point is that the **meaning** of a story or poem does not exist in the text on the page but in the process of reading.

Think of a text as a medium for storing information—as a CD is a medium for storing information. When you play a CD, you retrieve the information stored on it. When you read a text, you retrieve the information stored in it. The music is **not** on the CD; it occurs as you listen. The meaning is **not** on the page; it occurs as you read.

**Meaning comes before explanation:** The story or poem can be meaningful to you without your being able to explain that meaning. The response notebooks, discussions, and papers will help you explain—articulate—the meanings the literature has for you.

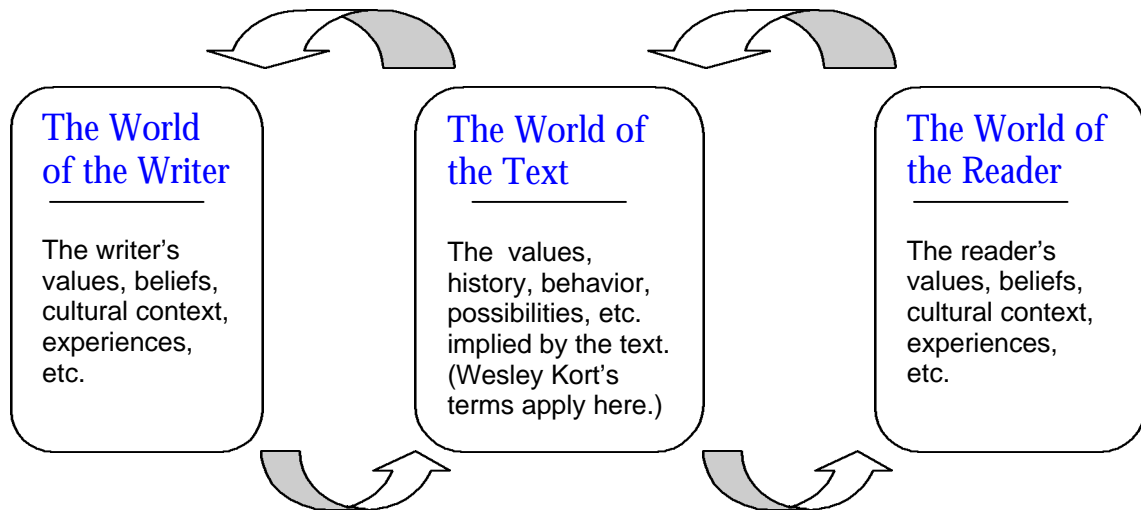
When you listen to music, its meaning is a function of the music itself and your “world”: your tastes, attitudes, experiences, beliefs, fantasies, values, etc. The same is true when you read a novel, a story, or a poem.

This perspective applies to other media, such as visual arts, film, stage drama, or mime.

## The Diagram

Here is another version of the diagram I put on the board in class. It is also on the Web.

The arrows show the ways that the three worlds influence each other.



## The Hero's Journey

In a classic study, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell describes a pattern found throughout the world's myths, epics, legends, fiction, etc. (Note that this pattern doesn't fit all narrative.)

The hero's journey consists of a simple pattern:

- > The hero leaves home.
- > The hero crosses a boundary into a strange territory.
- > In this strange territory, the hero is tested and initiated.
- > The hero returns home, enriched by his experience.

## Leaving Home

The hero can leave home for a variety of reasons, such as:

- the third son being sent out to seek his fortune, as in fairy tales
- the home's being destroyed by enemies
- the hero being driven away as a misfit or criminal
- the hero going away to carry out a mission
- the hero setting out to seek fame and fortune

## Being Tested and Initiated

The hero can also be tested and initiated in a number of ways:  
confronting monsters

- fighting in war
- fighting human enemies
- solving puzzles, riddles, or enigmas
- undergoing rituals
- struggling with natural perils
- confronting the gods—or God

Very often the hero receives help during his trials. His helpers can be other people, gods, or animals.

## Returning Home

The hero returns home changed by his experiences. He has grown up, perhaps become disillusioned. Many stories deal with the hero's maturation.

The hero's reward is not always material goods. Sometimes the hero receives new powers, but most often the hero's reward is an enlarged understanding or a grasp of truth which he didn't have before his experience.

Often, the hero finds that he no longer fits in at home.

These notes leave out a lot of Campbell's details, but I hope they are enough to give you the basic idea.

This pattern is found throughout stories. In *Gilgamesh*, the hero leaves home twice:

- Once to kill Humbaba
- once to grieve Enkidu and seek immortality.

Perhaps Gilgamesh's first adventure isn't sufficient to initiate him. He doesn't seem changed by it. His second adventure does change him.

Think about this pattern applied to *The Odyssey*. Odysseus's real hero's journey is his effort to return home to Ithaca. He faces monsters and divine enemies, as well as forces of nature in his voyage. He is helped, not only by Athena but Hermes, as well as the Phaiakians. Odysseus is tempted, especially by Calypso.