

Teaching guide: A02 - the ways in which meanings are shaped

AS and A-level English Literature now require students to analyse a range of ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts. Within this, English Literature A welcomes a particular focus on the structures of texts as a form of constructing meaning. In both examination and NEA responses, however, students should select those ways they think most relevant and appropriate to the discussion of their chosen texts.

Comments on the ways in which meanings are shaped must be more than mere feature-spotting; they need to be relevantly integrated into students' arguments and discussions and grounded in understanding of the whole text. Strong essay responses often demonstrate perceptive and assured overview as well as provide analysis of detail.

Students may find the following useful in starting to think about some of the ways in which meanings are constructed in their chosen texts. The ways listed are not exhaustive nor will discussion of all of these be relevant to all texts.

The ways that meanings are shaped in drama texts

Students will necessarily explore the dramatic methods chosen by playwrights to convey meaning: dramatic structure, stagecraft, dramatic characterisation and dramatic speech and language.

Dramatic structure

Students will consider how meaning is enhanced by the organisation of events in a play; how playwrights add to the significance of certain events by the position of those events in the play's narrative; what characters know and don't know at specific times. Meanings might be constructed by:

- conventions of structure in both traditional and modern drama e.g. a classic five-act Shakespearian play includes: introduction, exposition, complication, crisis, resolution and denouement; a classic three-act 'well-made play' can be in real time (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*)
- the division of the play into acts and scenes
- the use of features such as sub-plot, frame, the 'Green World' etc.
- linearity, chronological events, flashbacks, climax, anti-climax, cyclical effect, repetition

- how the drama is set up and resolved in the opening and ending of the play
- conflict and change
- naturalistic, non-naturalistic dramatic effect
- choice of setting
- use of an allegory
- inclusion of protagonist, antagonist and catalyst.

Stagecraft

Students should consider the text as incomplete in written form, a blueprint for performance that needs the directors' and actors' input and interpretation, and should note how little or how much direction and specific detail playwrights give about aspects of stagecraft such as:

- stage directions
- lighting
- music/sound/sound effects
- set
- costume
- disguise
- status
- contrast
- act opening/ending
- scene opening/ending
- entrance/exit with opening and closing lines
- dramatic irony
- pace
- tension/suspense/surprise
- twist
- comic relief.

It is important to note that students should not offer their own suggestions for appropriate costume, or other stagecraft techniques, where textual detail is sparse.

Dramatic characterisation

Students should consider the range of strategies used by playwrights to create and develop characters such as:

- how characters are established
- how characters are presented: physical appearance or suggestions about this; actions and motives for them; what they say and think; how they interact with others; what others say and think about them
- how far the characters conform to or subvert stereotypes
- the function of minor characters
- relationships between characters.

Dramatic speech and language

Students should consider the ways in which playwrights organise speech and language such as:

- dialogue
- use of monologues
- soliloquy
- asides
- functional and literal
- metaphorical, poetic, symbolic (e.g. 'there is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth' *A Streetcar Named Desire*)
- Shakespearian conventions of verse and prose
- the use of character to act as a mouthpiece for the playwright – authorial intrusion
- a character's personal vocabulary and syntactic patterns that project a certain way of seeing the world, which fits with/subverts stereotypes.

The ways that meanings are shaped in poetry texts

Students will necessarily explore the poetic methods chosen by poets to convey meaning: poetic structure, poetic imagery and sound effects. Analysis will reflect the conventions of relevant poetry movements (e.g. Metaphysicals, Cavaliers, Romantics, Victorians, Modernists etc.) and relevant poetic form (e.g. elegy, ballad, lyric, dramatic monologue, sonnet etc.).

Poetic structure

Students will consider how meaning around subject matter and attitudes and ideas is shaped through such aspects as:

- stanza length (e.g. couplet, tercet, quatrain, sestet, octave etc.), shape, regularity
- line length, shape, regularity
- end-stopped lines, caesura, enjambment
- contrast
- motif
- cumulative effect (e.g. development of an argument, telling of a story)
- climax and anti-climax
- shift in mood or tone
- linear structure, cyclical structure.

Poetic imagery

Students will consider how subject matter, attitudes and ideas are conveyed using:

- image
- simile
- metaphor
- symbol
- use of colours
- concrete images
- abstract images
- personification
- pathetic fallacy
- natural imagery, pastoral imagery
- symbol, motif
- conceit
- diction, military diction, biblical diction.

Sound and sound effects

Students will consider how subject matter, attitudes and ideas are conveyed using:

- voice
- tone
- alliteration
- sibilance
- rhyme
- rhythm
- pace
- sound repetition
- meter and regularity
- variation in meter
- open vowels
- rolling vowels
- hard or soft consonants
- plosive consonants
- onomatopoeia.

The ways that meanings are shaped in prose texts

Students will necessarily explore how writers use narrative structure, time and place, characterisation and point of view to shape meaning in their prose narratives.

Narrative structure

Students will explore how the events in a story are organised. Exploration of different possible narrative structures might include:

- simple chronology, framed narratives, use of flashbacks, cyclical structure, shifts in time and place, use of multiple narrators, foreshadowing, analeptic/proleptic narrative, stream of consciousness
- episodic novel, epistolary structure, autobiographical or diary form
- organisation by volumes, chapters, sections.

Students will also consider:

- how authors privilege certain events by their position in the narrative

- the privileged position of beginnings and endings in terms of narrative structure and their importance in introducing and concluding key aspects of setting, character, themes and context
- development of an incident, an idea or the story, suspense, tension
- contrast, twist, shift in tone, climax, anti-climax.

Time and place

Students will consider the importance of the time in which the story is set to the detail of the narrative; how the narrative is structured around time; how the author creates meaning through the locations used in the narrative such as:

- ways of using time and sequence to add complexity to a narrative (e.g. use of flashback, different narrators for different time periods)
- ways of describing settings through specific authorial methods
- how choice of place(s) can symbolise aspects of characters and relationships.

Characterisation

Students will consider the range of strategies used by authors and readers to create and develop characters such as:

- how characters are presented: physical appearance; their actions and motives; what they say and think; how they interact with others; what others say and think about them; any direct or implicit revelation of author's/narrator's attitude to them
- how realistic or unrealistic the presentation of character is
- the effect of 'gaps' in the reader's knowledge of a character
- the focus given to different characters at particular points in the novel
- use of symbolism
- caricature
- empathy or lack of towards a character
- conflict associated with a character
- pathos associated with a character
- characters as a vehicle for the author's views, through direct or indirect speech.

Point of view

Students will consider the perspectives (often shifting), through which the narrative is presented and the methods used by the author to present those perspectives such as:

- different types of narration e.g. first person, second person, third person; third person narrative that privileges the perspective of a given character; third person narrative with character as the centre of consciousness; singular or multiple narrators
- events seen from different points of view (e.g. physical, ideological, perceptual); points of view which are privileged, those which are marginalised, those which create narrative gaps
- categories of speech and thought (e.g. direct, indirect and narrator's representation of speech/thought acts); the ambiguity created where indirect/free indirect speech/thought is not attributed to a particular character; patterns of or changes in a character's speech/thought across or at certain points of the novel
- reliable and unreliable narrators: self-reflexive narrator; the narrator who draws attention to the novel's artifice; intrusive narrator; omniscient narrator; narrative intrusion; subjective and objective narrators.