5 Basic Literary Devices That Will Deepen Your Fiction

By: S. Alex Martin

June 6, 2014

We all know the basic elements of stories. First you have your characters, then you have places for those characters to go, and then you have things for the characters to do. Now let’s take a deeper look. How can you add depth to your characters, settings, and events? The answer is simple: develop literary devices within your story.

Easier said than done, right? No worries. Here are some effective literary devices that will transform your readers from page skimmers into full-blown story analyzers.

Literary Device #1: Foil and Mirror Characters

[This is arguably the simplest of the devices.](http://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/2014/01/minor-characters-help-discover-theme.html)Foil characters share few or no values or traits. Maybe one character is lazy and boring, and his best friend is energetic and a go-getter. These are foil characters. Put them together, and they’ll highlight each other’s strengths and weaknesses. The most common foil characters are the heroes and villains, who stand for different values and want to achieve separate goals.

Mirror characters are used for a similar purpose. They tend to share several qualities and are used to complement and highlight each other’s traits. Common mirror characters embark on parallel plots, sometimes to achieve a single goal, which tests them and highlights their traits in different ways.

Literary Device #2: Static and Dynamic Characters

Having a variety of characters brings flavor and depth to every story, but you don’t need to dive into the lives of every character in the story, showing every flaw they could possibly have, and explaining their family histories in detail. You don’t know the lives of every person you meet. Some you pass on the street and never see again, some you engage in small talk, and some become your friends.

Stories are the same way. [Some characters will be static](http://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/2014/06/minor-characters.html): background characters who serve basic roles. Most likely they are strangers to the main cast. They don’t have arcs, and readers usually won’t grow attached to them.

Dynamic characters are the people at the forefront of the story. These characters experience the most change throughout the stories. [Villains who grow to have remorse](http://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/2013/07/should-you-ever-redeem-your-bad-guys.html),[heroes who undergo tragedy](http://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/2011/05/are-happy-endings-must.html). These characters will be the most developed. They will form friendships and serve major roles in the events of the story. Readers relate to dynamic characters because [their traits are much more developed on emotional levels](http://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/2010/07/whap-pow-zinghow-can-you-tell-if-your.html).

Literary Device #3: Symbolism

[Attach meaning to objects](http://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/2010/06/how-to-strengthen-your-story-with.html). Things represent other things, usually societal, emotional, or personal. Country flags, the American Eagle, the Holy Land, the Nile River, and more. These all contain meaning. People look at these “objects” and see their country, or pride, or life sustenance. There are *thousands* of meanings. Death, freedom, sacrifice, love, repentance, forgiveness, mercy, help, savior, bravery, treachery… the list goes on and on.

Attach meanings to objects. Ground that into your story. Make it concrete. Symbolism will improve the quality because it can crop up at certain points to remind the main characters what they believe in and are fighting for.

Literary Device #4: Repetition of Ideas

[Repeating certain events or structures will always help ground truth and reality into your story.](http://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/2013/05/3-ways-to-add-repetition-that-pleases.html) Things that happen more than once will not go unnoticed by readers, so use that to your advantage and make those things *important*.

Literary Device #5: Parallelism of Events

Parallelism is my personal favorite story element.  Why?  Because parallelism makes light bulbs go off. Here’s a prime example: in *[Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00728DY9W/ref%3Das_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B00728DY9W&linkCode=as2&tag=httpwwwkmweil-20&linkId=PP3PIASZU3TOEC2Y" \t "_blank)*, we’re told the Tale of the Three Brothers. The first brother died for power, the second died for lost love, and the third greeted death like an old friend. Well, look at the Second War. Voldemort sought ultimate power and died as a result. Snape died for lost love (Lily Potter died at Voldemort’s hand). Harry walked into the forest, ready to die, ready to greet death for the benefit of all.

Parallelism can also be between events, characters, settings, and dialogue. There is no limit. You can easily foreshadow something using parallelism if you an event early on that leads to a similar point later in the story. Readers will be able to analyze events and make connections to other parts of the story. Because parallelism allows for so much flexibility in the plot, you can weave multiple events together.

Have fun with these important literary devices, and most of all, be creative!