African American Literature
Bethanie Frank

Week 1: Review of Literary Terms

Let’s review some of the literary terms that you will need to be familiar with for this course.

Protagonist: A protagonist is the central character or leading figure in poetry, narrative, novel, or any other story. A protagonist is sometimes called a “hero” by the audience or readers. A protagonist generally experiences some sort of change or transformation in his or her character throughout the story.

Antagonist: The antagonist is the opposing force in a story. It could be a human enemy, or it could be non-human, like an animal, or something less tangible, like fear. The antagonist plays an important role in story development. Think about a favorite movie you like to watch. If there is conflict in a story or movie, it is because there is some sort of antagonist. The protagonist in the story is seeking resolution; the antagonist resists such resolution, but all good stories need antagonists.

Climax: The high point in the action of the story. This is usually near the end of the story.

Conflict: A problem or struggle between the protagonist and antagonist. Without conflict, there is no plot.

Theme: The main idea of a story or the point an author wants to make. In literature, the theme is not usually directly stated but is inferred. Artists and authors use details, character, point of view, and setting to communicate a theme.

Character: A person (or animal with human characteristics) in a literary work. Characters can be described physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially, and philosophically.

Point of View: The attitude or outlook of the narrator or character(s).

Plot: The action that makes up the story. Plot is the sequence or order of events that take place in a story.

Setting: The location of a story or work of art in time and space. The setting may be a time in history, a geographical place, or an imaginary location.

Mood: The feeling that the author tries to convey throughout the story; the atmosphere or emotional condition created by the piece, within the setting.

For practice, take a book that you are either reading now or have read in the past and are very familiar with, and try to identify the protagonist, antagonist, climax, conflict, theme, character, point of view, plot, setting, and mood of the story. Some may have more than one answer, such as conflict, setting, etc.