

How to identify techniques and devices in a short story

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Cranes Fly South” by Edward McCourt**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **30 minutes**

Reminder

In the “Writing Guidelines” that are part of the Exit Exam instructions, you will be given a list of techniques and devices that authors may use when writing short stories and essays. When analysing the text prior to writing your essay, note the most obvious techniques and devices that the author has used to develop the main ideas or theme. Remember that you must be able to show **how** the writer uses these techniques and devices.

Instructions

The questions in the exercise below will help you to locate some of the techniques and devices that McCourt has employed in his short story. In “Cranes Fly South,” in addition to the Elements of Literature (plot, conflict, character, setting, diction, tone and point of view of narration) that we reviewed in **Module 1, Exercise 1**, McCourt also develops his main idea by integrating techniques such as symbolism, imagery, repetition and irony. Answer the five questions on techniques and devices in the following exercise in as much detail as possible. Compare your answers with those in the **Answer key** below.

Exercise 1

I Questions (each heading is a technique/device)

Language choice/diction

1. Take a look at the list of words in the exercise on word connotation in **Module 1, Exercise 1**. The contrast of **dark and light** is evident.

- a) Why does McCourt want to convey this contrast?

- b) How does his language choice vivify emotion?

Symbolism

2. a) What does each of the following symbolize in the story?
(You may have identified other symbols as well.)

whooping crane

going south

dark & light

pale sky

b) How does each symbol connect to the theme/main idea of the story?

Imagery

“He wheeled to clutch at Grandpa, but the old man already stood upright, staring out of dim, fierce eyes at the great, white body flung against the pale sky.”

“The great bird rose steadily higher, the black tips of his wings a blurred streak against the whiteness of his body. He swung in a wide arc, flew high above the heads of the watchers by the slough, and then climbed fast and far into the remote pale sky.”

3. Explain what image the description in each of the quoted passages above evokes for the reader? How does each image connect to the theme of the story?

Repetition

4. McCourt uses a lot of repetition in his text in order to convey the mood and atmosphere of the story and alert the reader to his theme. There are several references to **rising** and **falling** (Grandpa, Lee, the old mare). Identify some of these passages in the text. What does this idea of rising and falling mean?

Irony

5. Why is it ironic that it is Lee, the young grandson, who understands that Grandpa needs to see the whooping crane in this final stage of life?

Answer key

Language choice/diction

1. a) McCourt contrasts dark and light to illustrate that if Lee can help his grandpa to see the majestic whooping crane again, it will bring light, hope and brightness to his bleak and dull existence. Lee's goal is to provide Grandpa with a joyful experience in his fading world and life.
- b) The contrast of language paints a picture of how determined and excited Lee feels in helping his grandfather experience the almost heavenly ascension and departure of the whooping crane.

Symbolism

2. **whooping crane** – symbolizes life, triumph, joy, memory of the past
going south – symbolizes leaving the prairie to find a warmer, more comforting place. This symbolizes the grandfather's death and his final contentment in life.
dark/light – symbolizes Grandpa's darkness and hopeless feelings that are overcome by his joyful experience of witnessing the rise and flight of the crane.
pale sky – symbolizes the vast, unknown world/universe and Grandpa's personal ascension/destiny.

Each symbol connects to the theme statements in **Module 1, Exercise 1**. Each sample theme relates an idea connected to the importance of providing meaningful experience in life – even when life is almost over.

Imagery

3. The first passage clearly indicates Grandpa's miraculous revival as he rises from his crumpled position to witness the whooper's rise and flight.

The second passage shows the contrast of the drab, flat world to the incredible, bright ascension of the crane. The whiteness of the bird fades – as the light in Grandpa's eyes also fades and goes out.

The bird's flight is paralleled with Grandpa's experience. Each image connects to the importance of experiencing joy in life.

Repetition

4. The rise likely represents living and the fall represents dying; in essence, the cycle of life.

Irony

5. The irony lies in the fact that a child understands what his grandfather needs to complete the circle/cycle of life, whereas the adults in Grandpa's life would have protected him from experiencing this final joy.

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Reminder

Literary techniques and devices are a combination of components. Literary elements, such as setting, conflict, point of view of narration, and theme, appear in almost all short stories and fall under the heading “Techniques and devices.” Others such techniques and devices are symbol, irony, image, metaphor and simile. **Literary techniques and devices, then, are specific aspects of literature that we can recognize, identify, interpret or analyse and that contribute to the overall meaning of the story.** In **Module 1, Exercise 1**, we worked through exercises on various literary elements in order to derive a main idea in the short story. In **Module 2, Exercise 1**, we worked on specific literary technique exercises to understand how McCourt develops meaning in his story. Here, in this exercise, you will answer general questions about literary devices that should help to reinforce your comprehension of the story.

Instructions

Answer the questions about techniques and devices below. Compare your responses to those in the **Answer key**. Although answers may vary, it is likely your responses will be similar to those in the **Answer key**.

Exercise 2

I Explain how the author employs techniques and devices (as indicated by the words in bold)

1. Describe the influence of the **setting** on the **characters**. How does the setting connect to conflict in the text?

2. How does the **setting** of “Cranes Fly South” **symbolize** the characters’ moods and personalities?

3. What change does the **character**, Lee, go through in the story?

4. How does the author’s **writing style** depict the time and place of the story?

5. Do any of the **characters** in “Cranes Fly South” use regionalisms, colloquial language or non standard speech? If so, what effect does this language have on the overall characterization of Grandpa and Lee?

6. Why is there **repetition** of the words “train” and “thunder” in the story?

7. What kind of **imagery** predominates in the story? Where and why is imagery used in the text?

8. Examine the **narrative point of view**. Is the narrator telling the story from various perspectives or is the story restricted to the perspective of just one character?

9. How is **foreshadowing** used in the text?

10. How is **irony** used in the story?

Answer key

Your answers may vary, but they should reflect similar ideas.

1. The prairie setting, in particular, the flatness and cold, is deliberately contrasted to the “sun all winter” of the south. The desire to be associated with the escape from the prairie and to experience something different is reinforced by the setting. Setting connects to conflict because it creates a barrier, an obstacle to overcome, when Lee takes Grandpa to the slough.
2. The prairie setting represents the entrapment Grandpa feels. The difficulty Grandpa experiences manoeuvring the landscape represents the difficulty he is experiencing in his frailty. The attraction of the challenge of overcoming this obstacle is represented in the energy and youth of Lee.
3. Lee experiences an understanding of the cycle of life and an appreciation of living life to the fullest.
4. The writing style, especially the choice of diction and dialogue, immerses the reader in another time (probably 1950s) and place, the bleak fall prairie.
5. The colloquial language – ain’t, passin’, git, I’ll welt the hide off you – transports the reader to the rural setting of the past.
6. train/thunder: The sensory imagery associated with these words vivifies the flight of the bird.
7. Imagery that predominates: description of the crane, descriptions of Grandpa’s weakened state and his strengthening, and descriptions of the bleak landscape. This adds to the tension and mood of the story.
8. Through the third-person narration, we observe the shared experience between Grandpa and Lee; the reader does follow the story more predominantly through the eyes of Lee, however.
9. Foreshadowing is used when Grandpa says at the beginning of the story “Me, I’m going south, too.” This indicates that Grandpa will die – but will be contented at the end of his life. This is borne out when Lee says, “He’s gone south.”
10. Irony is used to show the reader that the boy’s instinct to assist Grandpa in achieving his dream goes beyond the wisdom of the adult.