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In 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 (ESV), Paul explains how the stories of others' sins provide examples that instruct, warn, and humble us:

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

As with portrayals in unbiblical literature, Paul is referring to stories of people who acted on wrong beliefs and turned away from God. Nevertheless, he says that their examples instruct us. They show us the results of believing and acting on lies, so that we might not repeat bad experiences.

Also, these examples warn and humble us. They show us that we must not imagine ourselves above temptation. People just like us have made these bad choices, and we are not above repeating their mistakes!

Now, we know that unbiblical literature will not present itself as being wrong in its portrayal of reality, morality, and values. Yet, when students are taught to read and evaluate unbiblical literature in light of Scripture, they can be instructed in the same way that the examples of the ancient Israelites instruct Paul's readers.

Unbiblical literature is not easy to read. It will grieve us and tempt us to doubt God. At times, it will present attractive pictures of things that we know do not satisfy. However, as Paul concludes in this passage, God is faithful. We can trust Him that if we approach unbiblical literature, not out of the desire to gratify our curiosity about sin, but rather with a desire to learn how to better love Him and love other people, He will preserve and guide us in our interactions with that literature.

HOW IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE WORKS

Content

Content is *what is expressed through a literary work*. It is generally composed of the topic and themes of a work and the work's portrayal and interpretation of reality, morality, and values. A discussion of content will, for us, usually include discussion about how a work's meaning and message relate to the beliefs of its author, most particularly his beliefs about what is real (reality), what is right or wrong (morality), and what is valuable (values).

It is worth remembering, as you begin to think about content, that "meaning" can be a slippery term. It may refer to the author's message or to the significance of the work as it appears to the reader (regardless of what the author intended to convey). The term may even be used to reference the mood or atmosphere of a work, if that mood or atmosphere contributes to the overall effect of the whole.

When studying literary content, it is often useful as a rule of thumb to remember our definition of language: "*Words and methods of combining them for the purposes of expression, communication, and naming.*" If you want to know whether you have uncovered all the main meanings and messages of a work of literature, ask yourself, "Have I identified all the significant things that this work expresses and communicates?"

Form

Form refers to *the artistic elements that embody, express, and/or enhance the content of a work of literature*. Form concerns the artistic shape of a literary work, and the artistic patterns and techniques used to make it. Form may also include questions about the way a work is structured, the selection of particular techniques and literary elements, and the harmonious arrangement of those parts. In imaginative literature, the techniques chosen are those that appeal primarily to the imagination.

In literary studies, the word “form” and its derivatives (“formal, formally,” etc.) are understood just a little bit differently than they are in everyday speech. When we speak of “formal” in the everyday, we mean something like “rigidly defined and limited” or “dressed up and on best behavior.” When we speak of “formal” in literature, we are referring to the work’s “structure” or “the way it is patterned,” or even “the way it is ornamented.”

Forms give a structure for thought; they allow writers to arrange their ideas and develop them in an orderly and patterned way that makes sense and is pleasing to the human mind—God seems to have made us to enjoy patterns! Forms also allow the reader to anticipate the direction that the writer is taking, and therefore to receive the pleasure of a fulfilled expectation. Many a reader has triumphantly exclaimed, “I *knew* he would win! He just had to, because he’s the hero!” When a writer sets up a “virtuous underdog” character and then follows the familiar pattern of making him succeed, the reader receives pleasure from it.

Storytellers can also create powerful effects by arousing expectations and then artfully refraining from fulfilling them. One sees this very often in adventure stories, when it seems as if the hero *must* fail, but then succeeds instead. God arranged the real-life story of the gospel in this way too: He allowed it to seem as though sin and death were going to overpower Jesus, but then triumphantly foiled everybody’s expectations (to our everlasting joy!) by raising Christ from the dead.

In a way, form is a kind of game—a game that is the most fun when both writer and reader know the rules. That is one reason why we will be learning about all different kinds of literary forms and their rules in the course of this year’s studies.

Content and Form Together

It is perhaps most useful to think of content and form as the *what* and *how* of literature. Content is meaning; form is artistic arrangement of parts that make up a whole. To talk about content is to talk about *what* a literary work is saying (what meaning or message its content conveys). To speak of form is to speak of *how* it is being said—how the content is being conveyed through an artistic arrangement of parts that make up the whole work.

In several elements of literary works, content and form are so closely entwined that it is often difficult to consider them separately. Telling them apart can be like trying to say where a person’s body ends and his soul begins.

For example, one might say that a plot is an arrangement of events. It is a matter of form. “Aha,” another replies, “but the events themselves are meaningful! They are content!” The same problem occurs with respect to characters. Is a character primarily a selection and arrangement of human traits, or is it primarily a meaningful personality which the artist has imagined and described? That’s a hard question!

Fortunately, it turns out that literary analysis is not about dividing everything in a story, poem, or play into two neat piles of content and form. Instead, literary analysis is more about applying the principles of “meaning through form” and “form follows function” to literature.

Meaning Through Form

“Meaning through form” is a phrase used by Leland Ryken to describe the relationship between content (synonymous with the meaning of a piece of literature) and form. In all literature (including imaginative literature), he says, “Everything that is communicated . . . is communicated through the form in which it is embodied” (Ryken 20). The principle of meaning through form is that *the audience receives the author’s meaning through various elements of form which he uses to embody and convey it*. We receive the meaning through description, techniques, patterns, characters, plots, images, and other elements of artistic form.

For example, let’s return to the psalm that speaks of waiting for God “more than watchmen for the morning” (Psalm 130:6). Here we see meaning—the reality of waiting and longing for God—coming to us through the artistic form of a particular image of watchmen waiting for the morning. By imagining the lonely watchmen silhouetted against the cold stars, waiting for dawn, we receive a fuller sense of the psalmist’s meaning.

Form Follows Function

The principle of form follows function states that *an author will mold the formal elements of his work in such a way that they serve his purposes for the artistic work as a whole*. In other words, when a literary craftsman sits down to write, he will choose and make the form of his work and each of its parts into shapes that function the way he wants them to. The idea that form follows function helps us to recall that meaning and form in a literary work are also like a gem in a gold setting on a ring.

The setting must be carefully crafted to enhance the gem, just as literary forms must be artistically selected, arranged, and presented in such a way as to set off the author's meaning and message. Or, if we were describing a work of literature as a kind of clock, the gears and cogs in the back are carefully selected, arranged, and set running in such a way as to give the time (meaning) on the clock face that the maker wants to show.

The principle of meaning through form and the principle that form follows function together help us understand the way content and form interact. These two principles are part of the foundational knowledge that will help us to understand both the audience's and the author's perspectives. Applying these two principles from these two perspectives will allow us to work from form to content and from function to form, and to discover the complete meaning and artistry of the whole work of literature.

Perspectives

There are at least two basic perspectives from which we can consider a piece of literature. These two are the audience's perspective and the author's perspective. If literary works were like clocks, then the audience's perspective would be the one that looks at the clock face, whereas the author's would be that of looking at the cogs and gears in the back that make the clock go.

If a clock were like a story, the audience's perspective would allow us to see first its fine artistic surface, the personality of its characters, and the progression of its plot (like the movement of the hands on a clock face). If we looked a little deeper, we would see that these moving hands actually mean something: they tell us what time it is, and at the end of the hour they might also chime to emphasize that it is now 1 o'clock, or midnight, or what-have-you.

Similarly, the personalities and events in a story mean something; they show us something of the author's worldview, communicating a meaning and message—his beliefs about reality, morality, and values. Just as a clock reflects the time and communicates it to us, a piece of literature seeks to reflect some part of reality, interpreting it and communicating to us what is true (though of course a literary work, like a clock, can be “off” sometimes, if its author's beliefs do not truly reflect reality).

Looking from the audience's perspective, we can seek to understand and enjoy the way that the meaning of a story comes to us through its forms, just as a child might enjoy learning to read time from the hands on a clock.

Looking at a story from the author's perspective, we are like a clockmaker who knows that he wants to show the correct time on the front of his clock, but must put together a number of moving parts so that they will work together accurately and smoothly as a whole. He doesn't want them to break down, causing the hands on the clock face to stop or wander.

If an author were to take us on a tour of his book as a clockmaker might show us the inside of the clock tower, we would begin to see how elements like the characters' conflicting desires and interests labor together to bring us the meaning of the story—just as surely as the cogs and wheels of a clock work together to show the correct time to bystanders on the street. And, if we were in the author's study or the clockmaker's tower, we would come to admire the cleverness of the artist as we sought to understand just how he did it.

Looking from the author's perspective helps us to appreciate artistry more deeply as we see how all the elements in a work of literature (the cogs and wheels on the back of our clock) work together to make up the meaning and pleasure of the whole. Understanding the author's perspective can also help us to interpret the author's work more accurately.



It is true that sometimes genres may be multiplied or combined in a single work of literature, as in a Shakespearean play, which is all three—story *and* poem *and* play. However, even in such cases, one of the three will be dominant. You will notice that no one goes around referring to Shakespeare’s plays as poems or stories! They are predominantly *plays*, and that is how everybody refers to them. So, again, if you can figure out which of the three major genres is most dominant in the work you are studying, then you have already narrowed your genre options by about two thirds!

In fact, the only kind of poetry that *cannot* be combined with story or drama is non-narrative poetry, because by definition it does *not* tell a story, whereas the other two do—and even in that case non-narrative poems are sometimes embedded in plays (and, for that matter, in stories). Movies, also, are performed stories that may include poetry. For instance, a perfectly good movie could be filmed in which the dialogue is poetry (such as a movie adaptation of one of Shakespeare’s plays).

Though they can be mixed and matched, each of the three types of imaginative literature requires somewhat different abilities and gifts from the author. It is rare and wonderful to find a literary artist who can excel in each and combine them effectively. That is one reason why the world regards William Shakespeare with wonder—because he was a man who had superb gifting in poetry, drama, *and* storytelling, and he was able to blend all three together in his plays.

Once you have landed firmly in a major genre, begin to look for more specific characteristics of both form and content, and ask yourself whether what you find is like any of the genres that you know of within that major genre.

Here is one last thought on the task of discerning genre in an imaginative work: “You won’t always be able to do it—and that’s okay.” Some works are such a patchwork quilt of genres (and modes too!) that it is impossible to categorize them in any but the broadest terms. When that happens, don’t let it nettle you. Literary artists are, after all, not as concerned about neat categories as they are about making a good literary work.

If none of the terms that you have seem to apply to the work you are studying, then just try to carefully and accurately describe the characteristics of the work, and don’t let it bother you that you don’t have terms to describe it. If there *are* terms for it, your teacher will probably mention them in class. If not, it just means that you are reading a very unique work, and that’s no reason not to enjoy it! Also, remember that the same goes for works whose mode is not easily discerned.

The Story

Story is one of the three major genres of fictional literature. A story is *a piece of literature that has at least one character, plot, and setting and that uses narrative as its primary medium of expression.*

- ❑ Character: We can define a character simply as *a personality in a story.*
 - ❑ Most of the time this means a *human* personality.
 - ❑ However, in some stories these personalities are supernatural beings or even animals or objects.
- ❑ Plot: A plot is *the arrangement of events in a story such that they have a beginning, middle, and end.* As a rule, a piece of literature *must* have a plotline that includes all three in order to be counted as a story.
- ❑ Setting: A setting is *a location or situation in time, space, and culture which forms the background for a work of literature.* There may be more than one setting in a given story.
- ❑ Narrative: Narration is *telling about characters and events in one or more settings.*
 - ❑ “Narrative” is an English word derived from the Latin verb *narrare*, which means “to tell.”
 - ❑ It has come to be basically synonymous with the word “storytelling.”

A work can be classified as story only if it has all four of these things. Some would add that a story must have a central conflict which is developed and then resolved in its plot. This is a helpful addition to the definition of narrative. As an example of a story, consider the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector from Luke 18:9-14:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The story clearly has two characters: the Pharisee and the tax collector. God might also be considered a character in the story, for though He does not speak, He does make a judgement about each man’s soul in the story.

This parable also clearly has a plot in which approximately four events are *narrated*: the two men going up to the Temple to pray, the prayer of the Pharisee, the prayer of the tax collector, and their return to their homes.

Finally, there are a few settings: the Temple and the historical period of the Ancient World in Jesus' time.

Stories, however, are so much more than characters, settings, and plot. The joy of them is something you understand very well if you have ever curled up with a grand story and a cup of hot chocolate on a snowy day. It is the sheer pleasure and comfort of enjoying a well-told tale, which most children know.

Storytelling and story-hearing aren't pleasures that people outgrow either; adults as well as children flock to movies and songs that tell stories. In everyday conversation, we are always narrating tales about "what happened today" or "the time when I ran into a grizzly bear while out camping" or "how I fell in love with my husband (or wife)." People never seem to *stop* telling stories, nor to stop wanting them! It would appear that God made us to love stories. And as long as we continue to love narration—as long as we want to know "what happens next"—stories will always offer us great delight.

So, stories give delight. Great stories, however, offer us something more: wisdom. You might be surprised to hear that if you've made any kind of a habit of reading stories, then you *already know* that they teach or offer wisdom. However, you might not *know* that you know it.

Teaching in a story is teaching by example. As one proverb says, "never underestimate the power of an example." We feel like we can touch and test a worldview that we find in the lives of characters in stories. Perhaps because of this, examples can win full trust from the people who experience them. Do you believe that examples are powerful? Well, let's test the idea with (what else?) an example of our own. This simple experiment may help you to see whether you know what you know.

The first step is to read the Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector which we quoted above. Then, supposing that you want to know how God views repentance, you would ask yourself which man would you say embodies the Lord's perspective? Well, obviously the tax collector. After all, he's the one who went away forgiven.

The man who went away forgiven is the man who demonstrates Jesus' teaching about repentance, because he's the one with the happy ending. Only a crazy person would deliberately choose to imitate the Pharisee.

Just like that, without a single word that tells you how to interpret the story, you have arrived at a correct conclusion about how Jesus views the topic of asking for forgiveness. Also, if this was your first time reading the story, then that might be a new conclusion. The story would have given you a new understanding of God's perspective on this topic.

You would have been given a new understanding. That means you would have *learned* something through the example of the Pharisee and the tax collector! You see? Stories teach by examples of worldviews in action, and one of the great things that they have to offer is a wider understanding of what people (storytellers, after all, are people) believe about reality and life on earth.

Through such pictures of worldviews in action, stories give wisdom about life, reveal things that are ordinarily shadowy, sharpen and enrich our beliefs about God, and warn against dangerous lies. Sadly, sometimes they also give us foolish advice for living, hide things that are true, or present false portrayals of God. Even these, however, we can use to understand our neighbors better, to know what we believe more thoroughly by contrasting it with them, and to learn how to distinguish between what is true and what is false but attractively portrayed.

The Poem

Poetry is *highly compressed language, typically written in lines, which may be metrical or non-metrical and characteristically uses imagery as its main medium of expression*. Poems make up the category of poetry, which is one of the three largest categories of literature. In order to be a poem, a piece of literature must have a few characteristics that distinguish it from other basic forms of literature:

- ❑ Poetry is the densest possible use of language. A poem is a compressed piece of literature in which—at its best—every word and sometimes every syllable, sound, or even every piece of punctuation, is meaningful.
- ❑ Poetry uses the image as a basic medium of expression. Imagery is used to describe thoughts and feelings, characters, plot, setting, and themes, in the majority of poems.

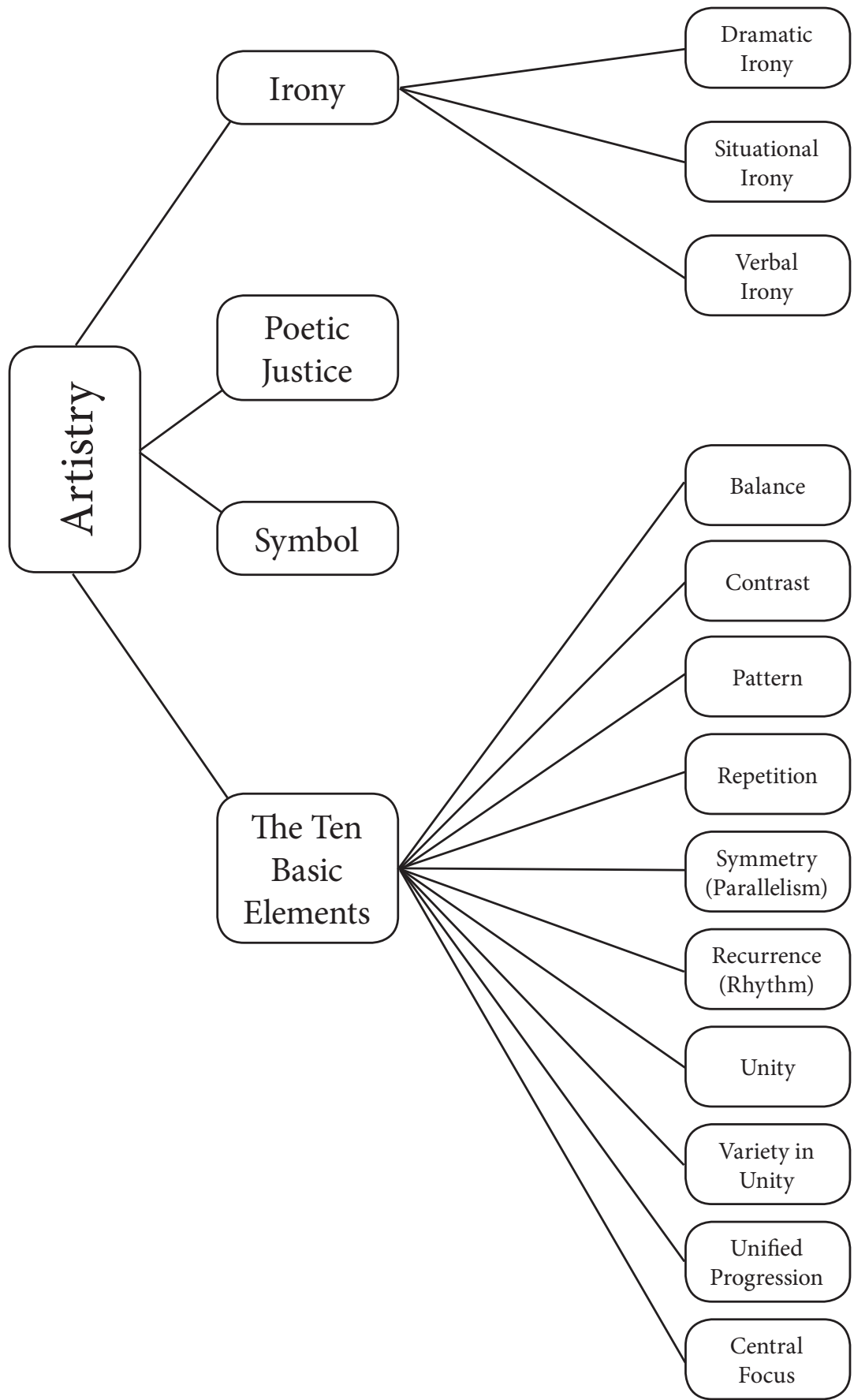
Besides compression of language, the thing that most distinguishes poetry distinctly is that poets tend to think in images, and readers of poetry must follow suit.

ARTISTRY

More than any other single analysis category, artistry is the one that focuses on understanding the artistic excellence of literary craftsmen. We define artistry as *the selection and arrangement of elements in such a way that the artist's purposes for the whole are fulfilled*. Thus, the literary analysis category of artistry *deals with the selection and arrangement of elements in a literary work*. In this category, we look at examples of artistic elements, meaning through form, form follows function, and some devices of artistry such as irony, poetic justice, and symbol.

Here, you can write notes on the author's use of meaning through form and form follows function. You can point out examples of these principles in the author's description of characters, his arrangement of the plot, his use of settings, or his style and texture. You could also note ways in which his use of the ten elements of artistry or devices such as irony or poetic justice are chosen to function as forms that carry meaning.

Any literary forms that you identified for any of the other analysis categories are fair game for your notes on meaning through form or form follows function. All literary forms are used to convey some kind of meaning, since all of the function together to make up a literary work. However, ones such as imagery, symbolism, allegory, irony, and experiments in living are all particularly obvious examples of meaning through form. Your goal is to make notes on *how* the author is using them.



Ten Basic Artistic Elements

There are at least ten elements of artistry which can be found in all the arts, including music, painting, dance, etc. These are pattern, central focus, unity, variety in unity, balance, contrast, symmetry, repetition, rhythm, and unified progression.¹ These ten basic artistic elements can play a role in more specific artistic devices. For example, contrast is a key to the artistic device of irony. We will study some particular devices and techniques that are associated with the various artistic elements in the following section. For now, though, enjoy learning about the ten basic elements of artistry.

Remember, the goal of teaching you these ten aspects of artistry is not that you create a long list of examples to show how the literary work you are studying contains each element. Instead, step back and look at the whole literary work with an appreciative eye. What catches your attention, artistically speaking? Is it that pattern of repeating sounds? Is it the unity of the whole? Is it variety within unity? If you notice and are pleased with any of these elements, the goal is that you will make a note to yourself and share your pleasure with your teacher (and with other students, if you are not the only one) in class.

Pattern (Design)

A pattern is *an arrangement of parts in such a way that they form a recognizable unit or a series of units*. For example, if you take three pencils and arrange them in a triangle, you have made a pattern. Using more pencils, you might make a series of triangles across the top of the table, or arrange triangles back-to-back to form a new pattern: a star.

In literature there are many patterns. Events in a plot have patterns; the behavior of characters often follows patterns; images are sometimes arranged in patterns, and even the way sentences or lines of poetry are arranged can be patterned.

There are many, many examples. For instance, in 1 and 2 Kings, we see a pattern of events in which an Israelite king rises to the throne, does or (much more often) fails to do what is right in the eyes of God, and dies, to be replaced by a new king. Or, in 1 Samuel, we see King Saul following a pattern of behavior in which he does something he knows is wrong (such as disobeying God or attacking David), then repents in apparent sincerity, then goes on to do the same thing again.

If there are any patterns you find particularly lovely or interesting in the work you are studying, try to name and describe them.

Unity

Our English word “unity” comes from the Latin *una*, which means “one.” Unity in artistry is *the arrangement of parts in an artistic piece such that all of them work together to make up one whole and/or serve one primary purpose*. In a work of literature, every element is ideally united in support of the author’s purpose(s), and every element contributes to the unified effect of the story on the reader.

Does the book in front of you display unity in any particularly striking or powerful ways? Can you see how the various parts contribute to the author’s purpose, or how they all contribute to the story’s total effect on you? If you can see these things, try describing them!

Central Focus

Central focus is *the center of a whole arrangement or something that repeats itself at the center of each part of the whole arrangement*. For example, the central focus in a daisy would be the yellow center of the flower. A central focus in a daisy-chain would be the yellow center that is repeated in each flower.

A literary example of the daisy chain would be the plot of Israel’s relational history with God throughout the Old Testament. All events in this story are arranged around the moments where Israel repents, returns to God, and is restored in its relationship with Him, just as the white petals of each daisy in a chain are arranged around their yellow centers.

Is the work in front of you arranged in such a way that its most important thought or image is at the center, or in such a way that a certain thought or image repeats at intervals throughout the story? If so, you might write down what the central focus is and why you think the author chose to emphasize it this way.

¹ This list of ten elements is based on a similar list provided by Leland Ryken in *Words of Delight*, p. 16.