

# Figurative Language

## To get you thinking

- Can you say what two things are being compared in each of the following phrases?

### Phrase

### Elements

My love is like a red, red rose.

Lover & flower

The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_

The minister waddled up to the speaker's platform, ruffled his plumage importantly, and addressed the crowd.

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_

Shared beliefs are the foundation of any society.

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_

The old man in the corner was well known for spinning yarns.

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_

- Are these “special” uses of language? Would you find any of them in everyday conversation?

## Theory

The term “figurative” language has traditionally referred to language which differs from everyday, “nonliterary” usage. Figures were seen as stylistic ornaments with which writers dressed up their language to make it more entertaining, and to clarify the meanings they wanted to convey. According to this view, literary devices such as *metaphor*, *simile*, *rhythm*, and so on, embellished “ordinary” language, and so forced readers to work harder at making meaning in a text. Nowadays we recognize that all language is in some sense “figurative”: there are very few ways of talking and writing about the world that do not make use of comparisons, symbols, and so on.

The following are some important figures.

### **Simile**

The comparison of two elements, where each maintains its own identity. For example: “My love is like a red, red rose.” Here a person is compared to a flower in a way that suggests they have certain features in common, such as beauty, fragility, and so on.

### **Metaphor**

The merging of two elements or ideas, where one is used to modify the meaning of the other. For example: “The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.” Here the image of the moon in a cloudy night sky is merged with that of a sailing ship on stormy seas, so that some characteristics of the latter are transferred to the former.

### **Metonym**

The use of a part to represent a whole, or the use of one item to stand for another with which it has become associated. For example, in the news headline “Palace Shocked by Secret Photos,” the palace stands for the royal family and their aides.

### **Personification**

The description of a nonhuman force or object in terms of a person or living thing. For example, “The gnarled branches clawed at the clouds.” Here, the tree branches are given the characteristics of grasping hands.

### **Symbol**

The substitution of one element for another as a matter of convention rather than similarity. For example, in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, the serpent is used as a symbol of temptation. In the ceremonies of the modern Olympics, white doves symbolize peace and freedom. Language itself is also symbolic, since words and meanings are associated purely by convention.

Because so much of our language is “figurative” rather than literal, there is always room for disagreement about the meanings of words, phrases, and texts. Different groups of readers may well “decode” such language in different ways, according to their beliefs, values, and social practices. In exploring the language of “literary” and “nonliterary” texts, we need to consider the range of readings made possible by figures of speech, and how this range of possibilities is limited or closed off by other features in the text and by specific ways of reading.

## Practice

The following extract is from Colin Thiele’s story “The Shell.” In these passages, some of the figurative language has been set in **bolder** type.

The green sea swept into the shallows and **seethed** there **like slaking quicklime**. It surged over the rocks, tossing up spangles of water **like a juggler** and catching them deftly again behind. It raced knee deep through the clefts and crevices, twisted and tortured in a thousand ways, till it swept **nuzzling and sucking** into the holes at the base of the cliff.

The shell lay in a saucer of rock. It was a green cowrie, clean and new, **its pink undersides as delicate as human flesh**. All around it the rocks dropped away sheer or **leaned out** in an overhang streaked with dripping strands of **slime like wet hair**. The waves spumed over it, hissing and curling, but the shell **tumbled the water off its back** or just rocked gently **like a bead in the palm of the hand**.

[In the course of the story two fishermen are swept from the rocks by a wave “like a hand.” The story concludes with two policemen searching the beach for the bodies.]

The first man searched down along the shore and stopped near a rock exposed by the ebb. “Look at this shell,” he called. “It’s a beauty. A green cowrie.”

“**Blood money! The sea’s buying you off!**” He watched distastefully as the first man reached down and closed his fingers beneath the smooth pink underside of the shell, **as delicate as human flesh**. And the sea came **gurgling** gently round his shoes, **like a cat** rubbing its back against his legs.

[Note: quicklime = a fizzy, acid solution]

1. Quote words or phrases from the extract as follows:

Figures	Quotations
A phrase which <i>personifies</i> the sea	
A <i>simile</i> which makes the sea seem playful	
A <i>metaphor</i> which compares the sea to a baby	
A <i>simile</i> which makes the sea seem calculating	
A <i>symbol</i> of trading	

2. What characteristics are given to the sea by these comparisons? Make your selections by matching items from the two lists below.

Comparison	Characteristics
The juggler	capricious (changeable, selfish)
The baby	ruthless
The trader	innocent, not responsible
Quicklime	skillful, playful
The cat	damaging

Can these items be matched up in more than one combination? Is there room for disagreement about what figurative expressions might mean?

3. Which of the following reasons might explain why the sea has been characterized as a living thing?

- because it makes the story more entertaining?
- because Western cultures see life in terms of a competition between humans and nature?
- because it provides a mythical explanation for events that otherwise seem meaningless?
- the characterization is purely accidental?

## Summary

Figurative language is that which provides the reader with comparisons, substitutions, and patterns that shape meaning. Literary texts sometimes make concentrated use of figurative language. However, most language is figurative in some sense, because words do not have single, objective meanings.

See also: *imagery*

# Figurative Language

# Foregrounding and Privileging

## To get you thinking

- In the space below, write the meaning these words have in “everyday” use. (Use a dictionary if you are unsure.)

foreground:

privilege:

- Underneath these definitions, indicate how these terms might be applied to the study of literary texts. What could they refer to?

## Theory

In every text we read, some features seem more obvious or prominent than others. This kind of *emphasis* is often explained with the terms *foregrounding* and *privileging*. We can say that foregrounding refers to the emphasis placed on certain features of the text (words, phrases, and so on), whereas privileging refers to the degree of importance attached to particular meanings.

Particular elements of a text are not foregrounded or privileged by the text itself. They are the combined effect of ways of organizing the text (textual organization) and ways of reading (reading practices).

Certain features in a text may be emphasized through a variety of techniques, including the selection of detail, repetition, exaggeration, and contrast. When some aspects of a text are emphasized in this way, we say that the concepts they refer to have been foregrounded.

For example:

In this extract from Charles Dickens's novel, *Hard Times*, repetition and selection of detail have been used to foreground the "mechanical" style of the teacher, Mr. Thomas Gradgrind. (The scene is set in a nineteenth-century schoolroom.)

"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of service to them . . ."

The scene was a plain bare monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker's forefinger emphasised his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve . . .

"Girl number twenty," said Mr. Gradgrind, squarely pointing with his square forefinger, "I don't know that girl. Who is that girl?"

"Sissy Jupe sir," explained number twenty, blushing, standing up, and curtseying.

"Sissy is not a name," said Mr. Gradgrind. "Don't call yourself Sissy. Call yourself Cecilia."

We could say that this extract foregrounds the rigid discipline of Thomas Gradgrind's approach to teaching through repetition ("Facts") and through details such as the numbering of the students.

Dickens's novel is often read as an attack on "cold and unfeeling" forms of education. Read in this way, the text seems to place a higher value on emotions and relationships than on "cold facts." That is, in foregrounding the "mechanical," it *privileges* the personal/humane. However, different readings of the text might place the emphasis elsewhere. To a culture which values factual knowledge over feelings, this text might seem to offer a positive image of rigorous instruction. In such a reading, the same textual details might be *foregrounded*, but an opposing set of values would be *privileged*.

By exploring a text in terms of foregrounding and privileging, we can begin to see how certain attitudes and values are promoted by particular readings.

# Practice

This next extract is from Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, a text which is now seen as offensively racist in many respects. It is narrated by Charlie Marlowe, the captain of a steamer traveling down the Congo during the European invasion of Africa.

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies steamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at.

1. This description of the people in the boat can be read as *foregrounding* physical appearance. It describes the people as mere bodies, as something “to be looked at.” Underline the words and phrases from the passage which emphasise the physical appearance of the people. For example, “the white of their eyeballs.”
2. European culture has traditionally privileged the mind over body. Mind and “spirit” have been regarded as having a higher value than the body. In this passage, the foregrounding of the Africans’ bodies has a number of effects:
  - it obscures the mental and spiritual qualities of the Africans;
  - by associating the Africans with nature (the surf) it sets them up as a “reverse image” of the European narrator (who therefore represents “culture”);
  - it constructs the narrator as “mind” rather than body.

Through this process the Africans are “made visible,” while the European captain remains hidden and escapes description and judgment. In this way the European perspective is privileged, and readers are invited to take up this privileged position. We can demonstrate this by asking some questions of the passage. Indicate your answers to the questions below: African or European?



Who looks or sees in the passage?

Who is looked at or seen?

Who “knows” in the passage?

Who is “known”?

Who takes comfort?

Who is comfort taken from?

Who is presented as body?

Who is presented as mind?

Which of these positions has the most power?

3. Which of the following might be effective ways of counteracting these effects of privileging? Rank the possibilities from 1 (most effective) to 5 (least effective).

- Alternating the narration between two points of view—African and European.
- Refusing to read the book.
- Remembering that the work is fictional, and arguing that it has no effect on the “real world.”
- Publishing and promoting African accounts of the European invasion.
- Reading “against the grain”—reading the book as racist propaganda by foregrounding the European’s role and privileging the Africans’ perspective.

What difficulties might there be in these courses of action?

## Summary

Foregrounding refers to an emphasis placed on certain features of the text (words, phrases, and so on), whereas privileging refers to the promotion of particular values and meanings. Foregrounding and privileging are the combined effects of textual organization and reading practices.

See also: readings  
reading practices

# Foregrounding and Privileging

# Gaps and Silences

## To get you thinking

- Can you make sense of these passages by filling in the gaps?

As sound waves travel \_\_\_\_\_ the air they enter \_\_\_\_\_ ears and bump against \_\_\_\_\_ ear drum. The ear \_\_\_\_\_ is made of extremely \_\_\_\_\_, sensitive skin and the \_\_\_\_\_ waves make it vibrate. \_\_\_\_\_ nerves in the skin \_\_\_\_\_ the vibrations and pass \_\_\_\_\_ message to the brain.

(*Sensations*, WA Education Dept.)

Mr Jones, of the \_\_\_\_\_ Farm, had locked the hen-houses \_\_\_\_\_ the night, but was \_\_\_\_\_ drunk to remember to \_\_\_\_\_ the pop-holes. With the ring \_\_\_\_\_ light from his lantern \_\_\_\_\_ from side to side, \_\_\_\_\_ lurched across the yard, \_\_\_\_\_ off his boots at \_\_\_\_\_ back door, drew himself a glass of \_\_\_\_\_ from the barrel in the \_\_\_\_\_, and made his \_\_\_\_\_ up to bed, where Mrs \_\_\_\_\_ was already snoring.

(*Animal Farm*, George Orwell)

- What factors enable you to “make sense” of the text? Is it the structure of the text itself, your own knowledge and experiences, or a combination of the two?
- What similarities are there between this activity and the “normal” process of reading?

## Theory

No text can offer its readers a complete and balanced “window on the world.” Texts are made up of elements selected from a cultural system, such as language, and arranged according to certain conventions. In this way, texts are like the toys that children make out of blocks and constructor sets. The objects they make are only rough approximations of houses,

cars, and airplanes. What makes these things meaningful is the information supplied by the child: memories, imagination, playfulness.

Like these toy houses, texts offer only a particular impression or version of reality, shaped by the basic elements from which they are made. For a text to mean anything at all, readers must apply a set of procedures to “decode” the signs and fill in background information. Readers make meaning with texts by supplying readings that are already available in the culture. A line such as: “he behaved like a prince,” for example, invites readers to make use of a range of memories and beliefs about princes, romantic love, men and women, and so on.

The “spaces” of a text can be described in many ways. Modern approaches often speak of them as “gaps and silences.” *Gaps* are places where the text does not bother to stitch things together but instead relies on “common sense” assumptions from the reader. For example, here is an extract from a news report.

Miss Smith is the second girl to be reported missing this week. She was last seen hitchhiking along a city street late on Monday afternoon.

Police have issued a warning to young girls not to go out alone at night.

These sentences do not say outright that there was a connection between Miss Smith’s hitchhiking and her disappearance; it is assumed that readers will make the connection. But the link is not obvious. It relies on very specific cultural knowledge about “the way the world works.” In order to construct the dominant reading of this passage, readers must assume:

- that the girl was kidnapped while walking;
- that she was kidnapped by a male;
- that this would be less likely to happen if she was accompanied;
- that she was taking a risk by hitchhiking; and so on.

If we resist the invitation to fill this gap with the conventional assumptions, the text’s incompleteness becomes very obvious. It then becomes clear that the message requires readers to reproduce “unconsciously” a very strange set of assumptions about what “natural” behavior is!

*Silences* result from the fact that textual gaps enable readers to avoid questioning certain cultural values. In the above example, the text remains silent about the behavior and motivations of *men*, even though it could have been written by a woman or a man. This has the double effect of

making safety on the streets a woman's problem, and of vaguely implicating all men in the disappearance. The text could have said: Police have issued a warning for *men* not to go out at night. This would certainly make the streets safer.

In fact, by substituting this statement for the original, we can make ourselves aware of many silences in this text. By mapping these silences we can reveal that the text operates in the interest of some groups in the community, and against the interest of others.

## Practice

This extract comes from “The Doll’s House” by Katherine Mansfield. (The letters and **bolder** type refer to the activities that follow.)

[T]he school the Burnell children went to was (A) **not at all the kind of place their parents would have chosen** if there had been any choice. But there was none. It was the only school for miles. And the consequence was that (B) **all the children in the neighborhood, the Judge’s little girls, the doctor’s daughters, the storekeeper’s children, the milkman’s, were forced to mix together.** But the line had to be drawn somewhere. It was drawn at the Kelveys. Many of the children, including the Burnells, (C) **were not even allowed to speak to them.** Even the teachers had a special voice for them, and a special smile for the other children when Lil Kelvey came up to her desk with a bunch of (D) **dreadfully common looking flowers.**

Like all texts, this one requires readers to supply a great deal of knowledge in order to “make sense” of the writing. The **bolder type** sections of text highlight gaps which readers fill on the basis of “common sense.” What information must readers supply in order to produce the dominant reading of this passage? (Some possible readings of the **bolder type** sections are provided below. Use them to fill in the table.)

“Gap”	Information
(A)	_____
(B)	_____
(C)	_____
(D)	_____

Possible readings:

- i. children can be harmed by association with those whose values and behavior are different to their own;
- ii. gifts can be judged in terms of the social standing of the person who gives them;
- iii. society is divided into “class” groups on the basis of wealth and status, which equate with the (male?) parent’s profession;
- iv. some schools have a higher social standing than others, and these are sought after by parents of high social standing.

We can sum up the “missing information” in this way: “Members of a culture try to maintain or improve their social standing, and avoid associating with those of significantly lower class.” The text itself does *not* include this information, however. This suggests that such knowledge functions as “common sense” among members of our culture. By assuming that all readers can supply this information, the text can remain *silent* about the question of social class. It presents class snobbery as a problem of personal beliefs and attitudes, and so fails to challenge those aspects of social organization which are the basis of class divisions.

## Summary

Gaps are places in the text where readers are invited to make connections by drawing on their “common sense” understanding of the world. *Silences* result from the fact that textual gaps enable readers to avoid questioning certain cultural values.

See also: reading practices  
ideology

# Gaps and Silences

# Gender

## To get you thinking

- Here are some assertions about differences between men and women. For each statement, check whether you think the difference is due to biology or culture.

	Biology	Culture
Women can give birth; men cannot.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Men are more aggressive than women.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Men are stronger than women.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women are better at childrearing than men.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women are less competitive than men.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Men find it harder to be monogamous than women.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Do you think all of these statements are true? Which, if any, would you challenge?

## Theory

We all know that there are some basic biological differences between the sexes. But there are also a great many differences created by culture which have nothing to do with biology. These cultural factors are called *gender* differences.

Primary sex differences between males and females remain the same in all cultures. Gender differences vary greatly from one culture to another. In Western societies, males are expected to be active, competitive, domineering, and authoritative. Women are expected to be passive, cooperative, submissive, and caring. But these masculine and feminine characteristics are completely reversed in some societies. This shows that the differences are not “natural,” but cultural.

In the activity above, you were making distinctions between sex and gender. In many areas of society, these distinctions are hidden, with the result that gender differences are often thought to be “natural”—like a person’s anatomy. The problem with this is that gender is used as a means of social organization. It is a technique for producing inequalities between men and women.

Cultures create gender through social practices such as education, employment, and childrearing. These activities slot men and women into different positions of power. Traditionally, women have been raised to take on domestic roles such as wife and mother, while men have been prepared for more powerful positions as wage earners and decision makers. They have even been given personality characteristics which match these positions.

These “dividing practices” are supported by myths about the “natural” differences between men and women. In our culture, novels, plays, films, and other kinds of text have been important in maintaining these myths. They encourage us to believe that there are naturally occurring moral, intellectual, and emotional differences between males and females. By reading such stories as “reflections of life,” people come to accept their images of men and women as natural. This is why it is important to challenge both the texts we read and the way we have been trained to read them.

## Practice

Here are two very common storylines which reinforce dominant beliefs about men and women.

An ambitious young woman decides to pursue a career rather than marry and have a family. She works hard, and achieves her goal, but despite her success she is unhappy. She realizes that she no longer has any friends. Then, she meets a stranger in unusual circumstances. After initially disliking each other, she and the man fall in love. Happy at last, the woman gives up her career and settles down to raise a family.

A sensitive young man suffers at the hands of his male colleagues, who tease him because of his gentleness. The women where he works treat him as a joke. One day, he meets up with a very shy, plain-looking woman. They fall in love, and for the first time the young man begins to feel wanted. Then, in unusual circumstances, the woman is placed in

danger. The young man risks his life to save her, and in the process proves himself braver than his colleagues. His life is changed. People treat him with new respect, he gains a promotion, and marries his sweetheart, who takes off her glasses, lets down her hair, and is revealed to be very beautiful.

1. Stories of this kind are structured around pairs of ideas about what men and women should be like. Suggest some of the oppositions which are supported by these storylines by filling in this table.

Masculine	Feminine
career-oriented	family-oriented

2. Here are some cultural practices which slot people into masculine and feminine roles. Number the items from 1 to 12, indicating which ones you think are most obvious, and which are the least obvious, in shaping gender.

- |                           |                  |                     |
|---------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Sport & recreation        | Common sayings   | School subjects     |
| Children’s toys           | Codes of dress   | Religious practices |
| Family structures         | “Literary” texts | Children’s games    |
| Traditions(e.g.,marriage) | Fairytales       | Occupations         |

3. Which factors do you think might be most powerful, and hardest to change—those which are obvious, or those which are largely unnoticed? Why?



## Summary

Gender refers to the social categories of masculinity and femininity. These categories are related to sex differences in complex ways, but they are produced by culture, not biology.

See also: **feminist criticism**  
**representation**

Gender

# Genre

## To get you thinking

- Sort these items into groups by applying the rules below.

apple	bananas	cauliflower	tomatoes
potatoes	beans	peanuts	cabbage
lettuce	avocado	carrots	zucchini

- Sort by *features*. Choose two categories (e.g., “fruits”/“vegetables,” or “above ground”/“below ground”).
- Sort by *use*. Choose two categories (e.g., “eat raw”/“cook” or “main meal”/“snack”).

## Theory

*Genre* comes from the French language and means a kind or type. In literature study it often refers to different categories of writing. Traditionally, the major genres were poetry, prose, and drama. These broad types of writing were distinguished by their features, and they were often broken down into subgenres. Poetry, for example, might be subdivided into “lyric” and “epic.” We can also speak of different genres within a particular medium. Common film genres, for example, are: Western, romance, horror, thriller, action movie, and so on.

Categorizing texts in this way is more complicated than it seems. This is because texts are not simply classified on the basis of their features, but on the basis of rules for reading that are shared by the members of a community. This is similar to the way fruit and vegetables are classified. Some communities regard the tomato as a fruit, and hardly ever cook it; others see the tomato as a vegetable, and rarely eat it raw. In the past, some people believed it to be a deadly poison, and did not eat it at all. In a similar way, the reading practices which prevail in a community will provide a range of “genre categories” through which texts will be read.

For example, we can see this in David Lynch's TV series *Twin Peaks*. Released in the late 1980s, *Twin Peaks* was read by some people as a comedy, by others as a soap opera, by others as a satire. The series contained features which supported a range of generic readings, and people made sense of it by applying rules that were most familiar to them. This suggests that texts are always read "through" genre—that genres are like colored spectacles that we can change but never remove. They are rules which always *limit* the way writers and readers construct meaning in texts, but which are essential in *enabling* us to read at all.

The reason for raising issues of genre when studying a text is that genre categories function to promote certain values by shaping our reading practices. This can have a powerful effect on the meanings which readers produce. It is important to note that genres are tied to the activities of certain institutions, such as publishing houses, schools, and the media. These institutions organize their production and use of texts through genres. Publishers market their books in categories (fantasy, romance, thriller). Schools and universities often plan courses of study around genres (tragic drama, lyric poetry, the short story). The media produce and promote texts through genre (soap operas on TV, human interest stories in news broadcasts). In each case, genre enables and constrains the reading of the text.

## Practice

Here is a brief summary of the folktale "Little Red Riding Hood."

- Mother sends RRH to grandma's house.
- She warns RRH not to leave the path and not to talk to strangers.
- RRH meets the wolf, who asks where she is going.
- The wolf gets to grandma's house first, and eats the old woman.
- When RRH arrives, she notices grandma's unusual appearance.
- The wolf reveals that he plans to eat RRH.
- A passing woodcutter rescues RRH and slays the wolf.

1. Which features of the “Red Riding Hood” story would be emphasized if the following genre categories were applied to it? Match the “genre” with a possible emphasis below.

Genre	Emphasis
Horror	the woodcutter’s rescue
Mystery	the killing of grandma, the wolf
Fantasy	the talking, scheming wolf
Moral fable	the disguised wolf
Romance	the danger of leaving the path

2. How does each genre “contain” or construct femininity, through the image of the young girl in the story? Suggest genre categories which might promote these readings. Use the list above to get you started in filling in the following chart.

Reading	Genres
RRH is a helpless female who needs to be rescued by a capable man.	
RRH is an “innocent” girl who must keep herself safe from predatory creatures.	
RRH is a perceptive girl who quickly sees through the wolf’s disguise, and so shows she can take care of herself.	

## Summary

Genres are categories set up by the interaction of textual features and reading practices, which shape and limit the meanings readers can make with a text.

See also: conventions

text

“reading” entries

Genre

# Identification

## To get you thinking

- Using a table layout, make a list of some people you think are a lot like you, or who you want to be like. List the reasons for your choice in the right-hand column.

Person

Reasons

Movie star:

Friend, relative:

Fictional character:

## Theory

Identification is a psychological term. It describes a process in which people develop a sense of who they are by forming relationships with those whom they admire or wish to be like. Small children, for example, often seem to model their behavior on that of parents and friends. Adults, too, might emulate the views of people they admire—whether these are personal acquaintances, or even famous public figures. When people form such attachments, we can say that they *identify* with the other person.

In reading stories and watching films, a similar process seems to occur, and so it is common to speak of readers *identifying* (or forming an *identification*) with the main character in a novel. This happens when features in the text combine with reading practices in order to “equate” the reader with the character. This kind of identification plays a powerful role in reproducing certain values and beliefs.

For example, many “thriller” movies contain scenes in which a young woman alone is being stalked by an unseen pursuer. In these scenes the camera generally places the viewer in the position of the hidden assailant: we see the frightened woman “through the assailant’s eyes.” In this way, the viewer is positioned alongside, or “equated to” the assailant. This

matching up of viewer and character directs attention away from the assailant and onto the potential victim. In this way, readers are encouraged to produce a reading in which the woman's distress—rather than the assailant's motive—becomes the focus of the plot.

Many people want to challenge this kind of reading, and this is why some modern approaches to literary study (such as feminism) emphasize the importance of reading “against the grain” and refusing to identify with the reading position that is offered.

## Practice

Here are two extracts from John Fowles's novel *The Collector*. The story concerns a young man who kidnaps and imprisons a woman he is infatuated with. The first extract is narrated by the man, Frederick Clegg.

That was the day I first gave myself the dream that came true. It began where she was being attacked by a man and I ran up and rescued her. Then somehow I was the man who attacked her, only I didn't hurt her; I captured her and drove her off in the van to a remote house and there I kept her captive in a nice way. Gradually she came to know me and like me and the dream grew into the one about our living in a nice modern house, married, with kids and everything.

1. In what ways do textual features and reading practices (ways of reading) encourage identification with Frederick Clegg in this passage? Consider, for example, how the reading might be changed if the object of Clegg's “dream” were a child.

This second extract is narrated by the woman, Miranda Grey, who is kidnapped and imprisoned by Frederick Clegg and who dies of pneumonia as a result:

Deep down I get more and more frightened. I wish I knew judo. Could make him cry for mercy. I feel the deepest contempt and loathing for him, I can't stand this room, everybody will be wild with worry. How can he love me? How can you love someone you don't know? He desperately wants to please me, but that's what madmen must be like. . . . I'm so frightened. I can't understand why my chest hurts. As if I've had bronchitis for days. But he'd have to get a doctor. He might kill me, but he couldn't just let me die. Oh, God, this is horrible.

2. Here is a list of statements readers might support. Readers who identify with Frederick Clegg will support some; readers who identify with Miranda Grey will support others. Indicate with FC or MG the statements which might be supported in each case.

Deeds must be judged in terms of a person's intentions. \_\_\_\_\_

Intentions must be weighed against consequences. \_\_\_\_\_

Clegg's actions can be seen as chivalrous and romantic. \_\_\_\_\_

Clegg's actions are immoral and criminal. \_\_\_\_\_

Women secretly want to be "swept away" by men. \_\_\_\_\_

Domination is unacceptable in any relationship. \_\_\_\_\_

3. To what extent does the use of two points of view help to overcome the problem of identification?

4. Consider these questions in relation to the double point of view:

- Will readers construct a balanced and neutral reading of the story, or will one character's point of view tend to dominate?
- If so, which one, and why?
- Will this be true for all readers?

## Summary

Identification occurs when textual features and reading practices combine to construct an equivalence between the reader and characters in the text. When this happens, the values and beliefs of the text and the reader reinforce each other.

See also: [character](#)

# Identification



# Ideology

## To get you thinking

- Whose views seem to be expressed by these common beliefs? Check your choice in each box.

### Belief

Material possessions are important for a happy life.

Men are the stronger sex; women should let them take charge of things.

There are right and wrong ways of reading a literary text.

### Viewpoint

Manufacturers  
 Consumers

Men  
 Women

Casual readers  
 Critics

- How can you explain the fact that such beliefs are often thought to be true even by people they might work *against*?

## Theory

People often use the term *ideology* to refer to *someone else's* political beliefs: for example, “socialist ideology.” This implies that the other person’s beliefs are false or biased, and that one’s own beliefs are true and neutral. But are there any “neutral” beliefs and values?

Groups of people who share similar interests develop specific ways of looking at the world. Manufacturers might see the world in terms of profit and loss; workers might see it in terms of fair payment and exploitation; priests might see it in terms of good and evil.

Some theories of culture argue that powerful groups can succeed in passing on their view of the world to others, so that one way of thinking tends to dominate. In this way, groups of people come to think and act in particular ways, even though those ways may not serve their best interests. They might even come to think of this as a “natural” state of affairs.

“Ideology” can be said to refer to ways of thinking and acting which work to the advantage of particular groups of people, but which are thought to be neutral or “natural” and true.

Ideologies are spread from one group to another through cultural practices such as education, employment, marketing, and childraising, and through texts such as novels and films. This can occur because the control of these practices is generally in the hands of particular groups of people. Their values are reproduced and passed on to people as “knowledge.” In the case of literature, the values of white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class males have tended to dominate, because these are the people who exercised control over schooling, publishing, and so on. Thus, much of what was claimed to be objective literary “knowledge” was ideological. Today there is a greater diversity among theories of literature, but competing theories all serve specific interests. There are *no* neutral approaches to literature.

Ideologies can be resisted. When groups of people begin systematically to study their place in society, they may begin to question the values they have been taught to live by. Movements such as Marxism and feminism are examples of this process. The theories and practices of these groups are aimed at overturning the *dominant* ideology in favor of new forms of social organization and new values or ideologies.

## Practice

This is an extract from the Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson in the 1770s. It is intended to reflect a set of neutral beliefs and values.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

1. Underline parts of the text which can be read as implying the following ideologies:

■ gender ideology    ■ religious ideology    ■ political ideology

