

Introduction

Let's review some of the literary terms 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 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.

Before we explore African American literature in depth, [read this overview](#).

Unit 1: Oral Traditions and Spirituals

SchoolhouseTeachers.com note: Parents should closely monitor children's use of YouTube and Wikipedia if you navigate away from the videos and articles cited in these lessons. We also recommend viewing the videos on a full screen setting in order to minimize your students' exposure to potentially offensive ads and inappropriate comments beside or beneath the video.

African American culture has always drawn on its historical roots in oral tradition for artistic inspiration. Music, both sacred and secular, has lent its rhythms equally to poetry, sermons, and fiction. Oral folktales and spirituals have migration themes often referring to Heaven, Africa, and the North. Spirituals often have their themes presented through Biblical characters, who persevered and were delivered assurances that they were being watched over by a guardian. One example of the allusion to the Bible is with the story of Exodus. In this unit, we will also examine the influence of spirituals and the blues, address the use of vernacular, and explore signifying and its origin in the folktales and storytelling on the plantation

Please view the entire video [found here](#) as Melvyn Bragg explains some of the features of African American language as it developed during slavery and provides examples of the African American vernacular as used in the works of many authors. Take notes as you view the lecture, and afterward, take 5-7 minutes to write a summary paragraph about what you learned from the video.

Although a white author, Joel Chandler Harris's depictions of African Americans have influenced the perception of black characters by both white readers and African American authors. His Uncle Remus tales set a standard for the use of dialect that African American authors either embraced or rejected. Read [this introduction to his life](#), and then study "[Uncle Remus and the Tar Baby.](#)" Take notes about what stands out to you.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was a popular poet in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Read [this introduction to his life](#) and read this article on "[Dunbar's Life and Career.](#)" Now read the following of his poems:

- [When Malindy Sings](#)
- [We Wear the Mask](#)
- [A Cabin Tale](#)
- ["Life's Tragedy"](#)
- ["A Golden Day"](#)
- ["Summer in the South"](#)

It can be difficult to read dialect, and more than one reading may be necessary. Harris and Dunbar have different purposes for using dialect in their texts, and these reasons have been both lauded and criticized by scholars. Write an essay that compares and contrasts the different ways in which Harris and Dunbar use vernacular.

Read the lecture notes related to two of Dunbar's works found here:

- [“On ‘When Malindy Sings’”](#)
- [“On ‘We Wear the Mask’”](#)

Read this [introduction to the genre of spirituals](#) and listen to the recording of “Amazing Grace” found there. Next, [read this article](#) about the origins of spirituals in the African American community.

Read the lyrics of [“Go Down Moses”](#) and [“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”](#) for examples of texts that address themes of perseverance and deliverance. Consider which lines stand out the most in exemplifying these themes. Read each song more than once.

These are lyrics to some of the work songs that have been saved throughout time. Many of them have hidden message in them. Think of them as poetry when you read through each one. This was the one way that slaves were able to express their feelings and emotions.

- [“Hammer, Ring”](#)
- [“It Makes a Long Time Man Feel Bad”](#)
- [“Hoe Emma Hoe”](#)
- [“It’s a Long John”](#)
- [“Wade in the Water,” “Steal Away,” “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” and an unnamed song sung by Harriett Tubman](#)

The history of these songs was passed along from generation to generation. Now that you’ve had a chance to read several of these songs, we will examine them more closely. Choose four of your favorite songs. For each of the songs, please answer the following questions:

- What is the song about? How do you know?
- Why do you think slaves sang this song?
- If you were a slave, how would you feel while listening to or singing this song?
- If you were a white Southerner, what would you have thought of this song?
- List and explain any double meanings in this song.

Now it’s your turn. I would like for you to compose a similar type song in your own words. It can be about anything you want (religious freedom, school, your parents, etc.) Regardless, it needs to be about something you are passionate about. Think of this as your protest song. Try and disguise the lyrics somewhat so that an outside won’t be able to understand what you’re saying exactly. Come up with two verses and one chorus.