

Defining Style

Style in literature is the literary element that describes the ways that the author uses words — the author's word choice, sentence structure, figurative language, and sentence arrangement all work together to establish mood, images, and meaning in the text. Style describes *how* the author describes events, objects, and ideas.

One easy way to understand literary style is to think about fashion styles. Clothes can be formal and dressy, informal and casual, preppy, athletic, and so forth. Literary style is like the clothes that a text puts on. By analogy, the information underneath is like the person's body, and the specific words, structures, and arrangements that are used are like the clothes. Just as we can dress one person in several different fashions, we can dress a single message in several different literary styles:

Original

"No sich uh thing!" Tea Cake retorted. (Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1978, p. 205.)

Informal

"Nothing like that ever happened," Tea Cake replied.

Formal

"With great fortune, that happenstance did not become a reality," Tea Cake stated.

Journalistic, after Ernest Hemingway

"It did not happen," Tea Cake said.

Archaic, after Nathaniel Hawthorne

"Verily, it was a circumstance, to be noted, that appeared not to so much have been a reality as to have evolved as a thing that had not yet come to be," Tea Cake impelled.

The style that an author uses influences how we interpret the facts that are presented. Wording and phrasing can tell us about emotions in the scene, the setting, and characters. If you're still not convinced, consider the differences between the following sentences:

He's passed away.
He's sleeping with the fishes.
He died.
He's gone to meet his Maker.
He kicked the bucket.

The version of that sentence that a writer chooses tells us a lot about the situation, the speaker, and the person being spoken to (the audience).