

Literary Titles as Narrative Gateways: Exploring Novels, Drama, and Poetry

Nino Kemertelidze, Professor

Independent researcher, Tbilisi, Georgia

Meri Giorgadze, PhD

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

[Doi:10.19044/esj.2025.v21n41p1](https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2025.v21n41p1)

Submitted: 31 January 2025

Accepted: 25 March 2025

Published: 05 October 2025

Copyright 2025 Author(s)

Under Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0

OPEN ACCESS

Cite As:

Kemertelidze, N. & Giorgadze, M. (2025). *Literary Titles as Narrative Gateways: Exploring Novels, Drama, and Poetry*. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 21 (41), 1.

<https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2025.v21n41p1>

Abstract

Titles play a pivotal role in literature, serving as both a gateway and a symbolic microcosm of the narrative. This paper examines the role of literary titles as narrative gateways across various genres, including novels, drama, and poetry. By analyzing titles from plays, classic novels, and poetic works, the study explores how titles serve as entry points into the thematic and emotional landscapes of diverse literary forms. Through this exploration, the paper demonstrates the significance of titles in shaping reader expectations and enhancing the interpretive experience across different genres. This study categorizes literary titles into five distinct groups: descriptive titles, misleading titles, revelatory titles, titles borrowed from other literary works, and thematic titles. The study highlights how titles enhance narrative engagement, reflect thematic depth, and create intertextual connections. Through this classification, the paper emphasizes the aesthetic, philosophical, and interpretive dimensions of titles in literary fiction, offering insights into their enduring significance.

Keywords: Literary titles, classification, thematic resonance, interpretation, reader's expectations, Hamlet, The Catcher in the Rye, The perfect Day for Bananafish, The Picture of Dorian Gray

Introduction

Titles play a pivotal role across all forms of literature and media, serving as the first impression and a powerful framing device that shapes readers' expectations. A well-chosen title offers insight into the contents, themes, or tone of a work, sometimes hinting at the emotional or intellectual journey awaiting the reader. K. Rakusan considers that a title is the key element of any publication. Despite being composed of just a few words, or even a single word, it has the power to shape the entire impact of a text (Rakusan, 2016). Titles may serve as concise summaries or even provocations, designed to capture attention and stimulate curiosity. This is particularly important in an era where readers are inundated with information. A compelling title can distinguish a work amidst numerous choices. According to M. Kozma, there is a unique relationship between a title and the literary text it accompanies. As the reader delves into the work, the title requires a mandatory return to it, for its true significance emerges only when considered in the context of the fully read text. In non-fiction, a title often provides clarity on the subject matter, helping readers immediately gauge whether the work aligns with their interests (Kozma, 2016). In fiction, however, titles become more than mere signposts – they transform into thematic hints, symbols, metaphors, or other stylistic devices that enrich the narrative and resonate throughout the story. A title is very essential in every style but the given paper aims to discuss it in the style of literary fiction.

Importance of title

In belles-lettres, or literary style, the title assumes a unique role, often bearing profound symbolic significance. Works in the mentioned style prioritize aesthetic qualities, emotional depth, and the exploration of the universal truth. Here, titles are created with special care, embodying not only the surface-level themes but also the underlying philosophical or emotional currents of the narrative. Unlike more straightforward titles that may summarize content, a belles-lettres title is usually crafted to evoke a particular mood or idea that encourages deeper interpretation. Take, for instance, Oscar Wilde's (1854 - 1900) novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890): the title hints at an object central to the story while also suggesting deeper layers about vanity, identity, and the moral decay of its protagonist. In such works, titles are often poetic, employing literary devices like metaphor, irony, or ambiguity to deepen the reader's engagement and interpretation.

Moreover, in belles-lettres literature, a title can act as an invitation to the reader's own introspection, a kind of dialogue between the reader and the text. The title becomes an entry point into the world where readers may project their own thoughts and experiences. For example, Jerome David Salinger's (1919 – 2010) novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) evokes imagery that

remains enigmatic until one reads the novel, where its symbolic resonance becomes clear. The title encapsulates Holden Caulfield's complex worldview and desire to protect innocence, which is central to the novel's emotional gravity. In this way, belles-lettres titles are not merely descriptive; they are a form of art within the art, capturing the core of the work's literary and emotional essence, often in just a few words.

Thus, a title in belles-lettres is not merely an identifier but rather a condensed version of the work's aesthetic and philosophical identity. It operates as a gateway into the narrative, preparing the reader for the literary journey ahead and often enhancing the themes through nuance, symbolism, and poetic resonance. Far from being a secondary element, the title is integral to the text's overall impact, inviting readers to uncover the layers of meaning embedded within the literary work.

Classification of title

This article aims at presenting classification of title in literary fiction. Based on meticulous analysis of works by British and American authors, titles are categorized into the following groups:

The first group – descriptive titles

In the first group are analyzed descriptive titles characterized by straightforwardness, as they clearly indicate the main subject, protagonist, or central theme of the text. Descriptive titles serve as a direct introduction to the content, providing readers with immediate insight into what the work is about. This category is one of the most traditional and enduring forms in literary history, as it emphasizes clarity and accessibility.

Descriptive titles often include the name of the protagonist or the central figure of the narrative. For instance, *David Copperfield* (1850) by Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870) presents the reader with the name of the story's main character, signaling that the novel will explore the life, challenges, and development of this individual. Similarly, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe (1660 – 1731) provides an unequivocal clue that the text revolves around the adventures and survival of its titular character. By focusing on names or clear references, descriptive titles act as a gateway into the world of the text, helping readers form initial expectations.

Another characteristic of descriptive titles is their ability to foreground the main theme or plot. For example, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) by Mark Twain (1835 – 1910) not only introduces the protagonist but also encapsulates the adventurous nature of the narrative. Titles like *Hamlet* (1605) and *King Lear* (1606) by William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) indicate not only the central characters but also promise an exploration of their dramatic and tragic arcs. The title *Hamlet* immediately introduces the protagonist, setting

the stage for a deep exploration of his internal struggles, moral dilemmas, and the overarching themes of revenge and existential questioning. Similarly, *King Lear* signals the tragic descent of a monarch from power to madness, inviting audiences to witness the unraveling of his authority and the profound consequences of his decisions. These titles function as concise previews, offering audiences insight into the core conflicts and emotional landscapes that define the plays. By highlighting the central characters and hinting at their respective journeys, the titles set the tone for the dramatic and tragic arcs that unfold, thereby enhancing the audience's engagement and anticipation. This explicitness makes descriptive titles a reliable tool for engaging a wide audience, as they reduce ambiguity and cater to readers seeking specific themes or stories.

The primary function of descriptive titles is to offer clarity. By directly naming the subject or theme, these titles create a transparent relationship between the title and the narrative. This approach is particularly effective in periods where readership was expanding, such as during the 18th and 19th centuries, as it allowed authors to attract readers with titles that were easy to recognize and understand. For instance, *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë (1816 – 1855) directly introduces the protagonist, setting the stage for the novel's deep exploration of her personal journey, struggles, and growth.

Descriptive titles also serve as a mnemonic device, making works more memorable. Names like *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) or *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) become synonymous with the literary works they represent. This strong association between the title and the content contributed to the timelessness of many works in this category, as readers and scholars can easily identify them by their titles alone.

While descriptive titles provide clarity and accessibility, they may lack the intrigue or subtlety found in other categories of titles. Readers encountering a title like *David Copperfield* may have clear expectations of the content, but such titles might not spark the same level of curiosity or interpretative engagement as more ambiguous or metaphorical titles.

However, the evolution of literature has not diminished the significance of descriptive titles. Instead, they continue to coexist with more complex and experimental forms of titling, offering a balance between straightforwardness and artistic expression.

The second group – misleading titles

The second group of titles in literary fiction is characterized by their ability to subvert readers' expectations. These titles are crafted to evoke a particular impression or assumption about the text, only for the narrative to diverge significantly from these initial expectations. This technique effectively intrigues readers, compelling them to delve into the text to uncover

its true meaning. Such titles are often layered with ambiguity or misdirection, serving as a narrative tool to deepen the complexity of the work.

Misleading titles challenge the reader by establishing an initial framework that contrasts with the actual subject matter. For instance, consider the title *Wild Flowers* by Erskine Caldwell. At first glance, one might anticipate a poetic or botanical exploration. However, upon reading the narrative, it becomes apparent that the title is a metaphor for something entirely different, such as human resilience, beauty in adversity, or the fragility of life. This discrepancy between expectation and reality enriches the reading experience, forcing readers to question their assumptions and engage more deeply in the text.

Similarly, *Go, Lovely Rose* (1953) by Herbert Ernest Bates (1905 – 1974) presents a title that seemingly celebrates the beauty of a rose, conjuring images of romantic or pastoral themes. However, upon further exploration, it becomes evident that the title encapsulates themes of fleeting beauty, mortality, or unfulfilled desire. This subversion of expectations draws attention to the contrast between surface impressions and underlying themes, which is a hallmark of this category.

In Jerome David Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, the title initially suggests a pastoral or agrarian setting, perhaps tied to nostalgic or idyllic memories. Yet, the novel itself delves into the disillusionment and alienation of adolescence in a modern, urban environment. The seemingly incongruent title captures the protagonist Holden Caulfield's yearning to preserve innocence, symbolized by his dream of being "the catcher in the rye" who saves children from falling into the corruption of adulthood. The unexpectedness of the title's meaning amplifies the thematic depth of the narrative.

Another notable example is *The Lottery* (1948) by Shirley Jackson (1916 – 1965). Before reading, the title might evoke thoughts of luck, fortune, or celebration. However, by the story's end, the term lottery is recontextualized to signify a horrifying ritual, thus creating a chilling juxtaposition between expectation and reality. The title gains its full impact only in the story's shocking conclusion, forcing readers to reconsider their assumptions.

Oscar Wilde's fairy-tale *The Happy Prince* (1888) also epitomizes this group. The title suggests a tale of joy and contentment, possibly focused on the life of a cheerful royal figure. Contrary to this expectation, the story reveals a deeply poignant narrative of sacrifice, compassion, and sorrow, with the titular prince's happiness rooted in his selflessness and empathy. This inversion of the reader's initial interpretation highlights the profound moral and emotional undertones of the text.

Misleading titles often serve as an invitation for readers to engage in interpretative discovery. They are not merely labels for the narrative but are integral components of the storytelling process, challenging readers' perspective and enhancing their appreciation of the text's themes and messages. This category of titles underscores the authors' deliberate choice to manipulate expectations as a narrative strategy.

The third group – revelatory titles

The third group of titles, which is termed "revelatory titles," includes those whose full significance becomes apparent only after the reader completes the text or reaches its climax. These titles initially appear enigmatic, ambiguous, or even unrelated to the narrative but acquire profound meaning once the story's thematic essence, plot resolution, or symbolic undertones are fully understood. The delayed revelation of their meaning not only intrigues the reader but also establishes a deeper connection between the title and the narrative's ultimate message.

Revelatory titles challenge the reader to engage in an active process of interpretation. These titles may initially appear confusing or unrelated to the story. However, as the story unfolds, they act as a thread that ties the seemingly dissimilar elements of the plot or themes together. Their purpose often lies in emphasizing the central motif, moral, or emotional climax of the work, compelling readers to revisit the title with a new perspective after finishing the story.

One primary characteristic of such titles is their reliance on subtlety and layers of meaning. They are not meant to provide a straightforward description or immediate clarity but rather to function as a kind of riddle. In this way, they mirror the literary journey itself, offering clarity only at the end of the text.

A quintessential example of a revelatory title is Jerome David Salinger's story *A Perfect Day for Bananafish* (1948). Upon encountering the title, the reader may initially wonder about its peculiar choice of words, seemingly unrelated to the narrative. However, as the story unfolds, the title's connection to themes of innocence, disillusionment, and trauma becomes evident, particularly through the symbolic use of the *bananafish*. By the end, the title underscores the protagonist's psychological state and the tragic resolution of the plot, leaving the reader with a lingering sense of its significance.

Similarly, Elizabeth Bowen's (1899 – 1973) story *Tears, Idle Tears* (1936) presents a title that appears poetic but elusive at first. As the story progresses, the emotional undercurrents and unspoken grief of the characters imbue the title with meaning. The word *idle* evokes the poignancy of

unacknowledged or purposeless sorrow, which resonates deeply with the story's thematic exploration of longing and missed opportunities.

Revelatory titles are particularly effective in literary works that aim to provoke thought, evoke strong emotions, or leave a lasting impression. By withholding their full meaning until the end, these titles create a sense of mystery and anticipation that sustains the reader's engagement throughout the narrative. Moreover, they often contribute to the interpretive richness of a text, as readers may return to the title after finishing the story and discover layers of meaning.

This technique also aligns with the narrative strategies of modernist and postmodernist literature, where ambiguity and open-endedness are celebrated. Authors use such titles not only to intrigue their audience but also to invite multiple interpretations, making the reader an active participant in the storytelling process.

The fourth group – titles borrowed from other literary works

The fourth group unites titles taken from other literary works. They rely on pre-existing texts to establish a connection between the new work and the borrowed source. By referencing an earlier literary creation, such titles evoke specific themes, ideas, or cultural connotations, enriching the interpretive possibilities of the text. The borrowing often signals an intellectual engagement with the source material, inviting readers to draw comparisons, uncover parallels, or reinterpret the meanings of both the original and the borrowing texts.

One of the most iconic examples of this group is William Faulkner's (1897 – 1962) novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), which takes its title from Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth* (1623). In the play, Macbeth famously laments life as "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." By choosing this phrase as the title, Faulkner hints at the existential despair and chaotic inner lives of his characters, particularly Benjy Compson. This enriches the novel by framing its fragmented narrative as a reflection of a meaningless, turbulent existence.

Similarly, John Ernst Steinbeck's (1902 – 1968) novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) borrows from another Shakespearean play, *Richard III* (1597). The original line, "Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this sun of York," introduces themes of political upheaval and personal transformation. Steinbeck's title, however, inverts the optimism of Shakespeare's text, presenting a novel steeped in moral decay and societal disillusionment, reflecting the darker undertones of contemporary America.

A more poetic example is Aldous Huxley's (1894 – 1963) collection of stories *Brief Candles* (1930), a phrase also borrowed from *Macbeth* "Out, out brief candle!"

Another notable instance is Elizabeth Bowen's story *Tears, Idle Tears*, the title of which originates from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's (1809 – 1892) poem of the same name (1847). The line in Tennyson's work evokes ineffable sadness and longing, themes mirrored in Bowen's narrative. This title also intersects with the third group, as its full significance emerges through the story's unfolding emotions and its poignant conclusion.

Titles like *Go, Lovely Rose* by Herbert Bates further illustrate this category. Taken from Edmund Waller's (1606 – 1687) 17th-century poem of the same name (1645), the title draws on the poem's themes of beauty, mortality, and ephemerality. In the context of a story, such a title suggests layers of symbolic meaning, contrasting expectations from its poetic origin with the narrative content, thus overlapping with the second group of the presented classification.

Maya Angelou's (1928 – 2014) autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) takes its title from Paul Laurence Dunbar's (1872 – 1906) poem *Sympathy* (1899), where the "caged bird" symbolizes the author's own struggles.

Similarly, Truman Capote's (1924 – 1984) *In Cold Blood* (1966) borrows its title from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (1623), reflecting the novel's exploration of a real-life murder case.

These examples illustrate how titles borrowed from other literary works can enrich a text by invoking themes and connotations from the original sources. Titles borrowed from other literary works operate on multiple levels, enriching the reader's experience by creating a dialogue between the original source and the borrowing work.

The fifth group - thematic titles

The use of thematic titles in literature represents a powerful method of encapsulating the essence of a work, often revealing a deeper, overarching idea that resonates throughout the entire narrative. Unlike titles that are grounded in specific plot points or characters, thematic titles emerge as unifying metaphors that reflect the central philosophical, existential, or emotional currents running throughout a text. These titles capture the larger theme or mood of the work without directly referencing any one element, thereby inviting readers to explore a more nuanced and often symbolic interpretation of the text.

For instance, Aldous Huxley's *Brief Candles*, which draws its title from a reference to *Macbeth* (*Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more*), exemplifies how a thematic title can symbolize the fleeting nature of existence. The phrase *brief candles* evokes a visual image of life's fragility – an ephemeral light that flickers for a short moment before fading

away. This overarching theme of transience, mortality, and the vain pursuit of significance runs throughout the collection of stories, with each individual narrative exploring aspects of human vulnerability, futility, and the search for meaning. By drawing on a famous literary reference, Huxley's title not only encapsulates the work's thematic core but also invites readers to consider the intersection of life's brevity and the persistence of human desires.

Another notable example of a thematic title is Oscar Wilde's *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). Wilde, known for his mastery of wit and symbolism, uses the title as a metaphor for the story's central exploration of identity, beauty, and decadence. The pomegranate, historically a symbol of fertility, temptation, and renewal, serves as a multifaceted symbol throughout the narrative. It evokes notions of forbidden fruit, longing, and the cyclical nature of life, all while merging into the larger theme of self-exploration and the pursuit of unattainable desires. The title, thus, acts as a unifying symbol, enveloping the text in a web of associations that enhance the thematic exploration of Wilde's work.

In both *Brief Candles* and *A House of Pomegranates*, the titles transcend the literal confines of the stories themselves, offering a sense of cohesion and philosophical depth that binds together diverse elements of the narrative. These titles encourage readers to see beyond individual plot points or characters and to consider the broader human condition that the author seeks to portray. They challenge readers to recognize patterns, recurring motifs, and underlying themes that may not be immediately apparent in the details of the story but are integral to the work as a whole.

Conclusion

Thus, descriptive titles play an introductory role in works across genres by offering readers immediate clarity about the subject or theme of the work. Their ability to directly reference the protagonist or central idea makes them timeless and universally recognized. By bridging accessibility and narrative focus, descriptive titles have established themselves as an essential category in the study of literary titling conventions.

The second group of titles reflects a sophisticated interplay between reader perception and textual reality. By leading readers down one path only to unveil a different reality, these titles enrich the literary experience, encouraging a deeper connection to the text and its thematic intricacies.

Revelatory titles occupy a unique space in literary fiction, as their significance emerges only when the narrative's emotional or thematic core has been unveiled. They encourage readers to approach the text with curiosity and reflection, rewarding them with a deeper understanding upon completion. Through examples like *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*, *Tears, Idle Tears*, it is clear how such titles enhance the literary experience by linking their meaning

to the essence of the narrative. This group highlights the interplay between ambiguity and revelation, cementing the title as a critical element of storytelling.

Titles borrowed from other literary works demonstrate the creative interplay between new narratives and their literary antecedents. By drawing from the rich well of literary history, these titles elevate the text, making it a part of a larger, ongoing conversation about art, meaning, and the human experience.

Thematic titles stand as essential tools in literary analysis, functioning not only as gateways to understanding the narrative's thematic elements but also as a means of inviting deeper reflection on the text's universal themes. Authors such as Huxley and Wilde skillfully employ these titles to reinforce their works' conceptual richness and to create an overarching resonance that guides the reader's interpretation. Whether through the fleeting light of *Brief Candles* or the lush, layered symbolism of *A House of Pomegranates*, these titles serve as focal points that unify the text and offer profound insights into the shared human experiences of beauty, mortality, and longing. In academic and literary contexts, recognizing the significance of such titles enhances our understanding of the text's deeper meanings, serving as a testament to the enduring power of language and symbolism in shaping narrative worlds.

Thus, titles in literary fiction transcend their role as mere identifiers, serving as powerful tools for engaging readers, encapsulating themes, and enriching narrative meaning. The classification discussed in this study highlights the diverse functions of titles, from providing clarity to creating interpretive challenges and intertextual dialogues. By examining examples across genres and periods, the paper underscores how titles shape readers' expectations, deepen thematic resonance, and contribute to the artistic and philosophical identity of a work. Recognizing these dynamics enhances our appreciation of literary creativity and the enduring importance of titles in storytelling.

Conflict of Interest: The authors reported no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

Funding Statement: The authors did not obtain any funding for this research.

References:

1. Bizzoni, Y., Feldkamp, P., Lassen, I. M., Jacobsen, M., Thomsen, M. R., & Nielbo, K. (2024). Good books are complex matters: Gauging complexity profiles across diverse categories of perceived literary quality. arXiv. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2404.04022>

2. Booth, W. C. (1983). *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
3. Gibbons, A., & Whiteley, S. (2018). *Contemporary Stylistics: Language, Cognition, Interpretation*. Edinburgh University Press.
4. Gibraltarskaya, O. N. (2017). The Forms of Author's Presence in Prosaic and Dramatic Literary Work. *International Journal of Language and Literature*, 5 (1), 79-86.
5. Jacobs, A. M., & Kinder, A. (2022). Computational analyses of the topics, sentiments, literariness, creativity and beauty of texts in a large corpus of English literature. arXiv. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2201.04356>
6. Kemertelidze, N. & Giorgadze, M. (2024). *Unlocking the Secrets of Language: A Journey through English Stylistics*. Lambert Academy Publishing.
7. Kozma, M. P. (2016). Title as a Way to Decode Literary Texts. *Linguistics*, 10-1, Orenburg State Pedagogical University, 85-87.
8. Rakusan, K. (2016). The importance of titles. Pulsus Group. Retrieved from <https://www.pulsus.com/scholarly-articles/the-importance-of-titles.html>
9. Stanzel, F. K. (1984). *A Theory of Narrative* (C. Goedsche, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
10. <https://projectnarrative.osu.edu/about/what-is-narrative-theory> (retrieved 5.02.2025)