

QUESTIONS WE SHOULD ASK WHEN WE READ A WORK OF FICTION

PLOT AND STRUCTURE

- A. How does the author handle time? Is it simply sequential?
- B. Are there episodes or scenes? How many of each? In what order do they occur?
- C. Has the author used parallel actions? Why?
- D. Does the pace of the story remain constant? If not, how has the author modified it?
- E. Has the author used flashback or stream of consciousness techniques? To what end?
- F. Does the story ending seem inconclusive or unfinished? Does it end with revelation? Whose? Open or closed plot?
- G. Is there a climactic moment in the story? Why does it occur in that particular time and place?
- H. Who is the protagonist? The antagonist? What are the conflicts--physical? Intellectual? Moral? Emotional? Is the main conflict between sharply differentiated good and evil, or is it more subtle and complex?
- I. Does the story have unity? Are all episodes relevant to the meaning or effect of the story? Does each grow logically out of the preceding incident and lead to the next? Is the ending happy, unhappy, or indeterminate? Is it fairly achieved?
- J. What use does the story make of chance and coincidence? Are these occurrences used to initiate, to complicate, or to resolve the story? How improbable are they?
- K. To what extent is this a "formula" story?

CHARACTERIZATION AND CONFLICT

- A. Who is the central character? What are the character's values. Do the values bring the character into conflict with other characters? With society?
- B. What methods has the writer used to describe the character: physical description, settings, dialogue, action?
- C. Has the author deliberately introduced a protagonist vs. antagonist method of characterization?
- D. Has the author deliberately chosen symbolic names for any of the characters?
- E. Does any character change significantly in the course of this story? How does the author present the change? Is the character aware of the change? Are others? Does it affect any of the relationships among the characters of the story?
- F. What use is made of character contrasts?
- G. Is each character developed fully enough to justify a role in the story? Are the main characters round or flat?

POINT OF VIEW

- A. Through whose eyes does the reader see the story's action?
- B. Has the author used a first person narrator? If so, does the narrator speak primarily about himself/herself?

C. Does the author use a third person narrative? Do you learn what someone thinks or feels as well as what he does? Or does the writer shift, in the third person, from character to character and probe each one?

D. Can the reader identify with a major character?

E. What is the author's attitude toward the characters and their situations? How do you know?

F. What advantages has the chosen point of view? Does it furnish any clues as to the purpose of the story?

G. If the point of view is that of one of the characters, does this character have any limitations which affect his interpretations of events or persons?

STYLE

A. Has the writer used narrative primarily? Dialogue? Why?

B. Does the author use symbols? To what effect? Where? Does his title have more than one possible meaning?

C. What kinds of sentences does the author write? Highly descriptive? Consistently long? Or short? What effect does the style have on the story?

D. Does the writer use metaphorical language? Do the characters use colloquial speech patterns? Does the writer prefer more formal sentences? Why does the writer choose the language? What effects are intended?

E. How much use does the writer make of sensory perception? Is the description largely visual? Other than visual?

SETTING

A. What kind of setting does the author use? Does the setting serve to further the story? If so, how?

B. Does the setting develop mood, contrast, character?

C. How does the setting relate to the theme of the story?

D. Is the story independent of its specific setting? Could another setting be employed as effectively? Explain.

THEME

A. What is the central theme of the story?

B. How is the theme communicated? Does the author voice the theme in his own persona?

C. Is the theme stated directly? Must you infer the theme from the action of the story?

D. How do the details of the story support the theme? Do any details seem irrelevant? How do they fit into the story?

E. What symbols does the author use? How do they reveal the theme?

F. Has the author used characterization to make his theme clear? Has he used plot primarily?

G. Does the theme reinforce or oppose popular notions of life? Does it furnish a new insight or refresh or deepen an old one?

IRONY

A. Does the story anywhere utilize irony of situation? Dramatic irony? Verbal irony? What functions do the ironies serve?

EMOTION AND HUMOR

A. Does the story aim directly at an emotional effect, or is emotion merely its natural byproduct.

GENERAL

A. Is the primary interest of the story in plot, character, theme, or some other element?

B. What are the characteristics of the author's style? Are they appropriate to the nature of this story?

C. What light is thrown on the story by its title?

D. Does the story offer chiefly escape or interpretation?

ANALYZING CHARACTERS IN LITERATURE

1. What are the conflicts and their resolutions that may lead us to a better understanding of the character? What problems does he face? Resolutions?

2. How does your character relate to other characters in her story? That is, who do they think of him/her? What do they say? How do they act toward him/her? Look closely at these interactions to learn more about your character.

3. Is your character credible? Could he/she actually be a living, breathing human being? How does the author make the character seem so real?

4. How does the author describe your character, if, in fact, he actually gives description? What, then, is the author's opinion of the character? Pay attention to physical/behavioral characteristics given by the author.

5. How does your character act? Are his actions consistent with his speech? If not, what is significant about any inconsistencies? Is your character strong or weak?

6. What does the character say about himself, about his situation? What insight do we gain about the character from what he says about himself? How does the character present this information (a confidante, a soliloquy, dramatic monologue, dramatic dialogue, first-person narration)?

7. What is your reaction to this character? Are you sensitive to him and to his situation? Do you feel empathy toward him/her? Does he deserve what he "gets" in the story, or is his/her fate undeserved?

8. What method of character disclosure is used in the story you've chosen to discuss?

9. What other elements of fiction seem to be important in this story (e.g., point of view, setting, plot, style....)? Of course character is important in this story, but are there any other elements which deepen our understanding of character?

10. Does your character undergo a change (or changes)? Do we see, then, several sides to this character, or does he remain static? That is, what is his purpose in the static? Is there any significance in this? Is he/her simple or complex?

11. Is your character a major character in the story, or does he play a minor role? If minor, what does he "do" in the story? That is, what is his purpose in the story?

12. What is your character's CONSISTENT PRINCIPLE?

13. Does this character say anything to you personally? How do you relate to him/her?

14. What motivates your character to action? What has shaped him, his thoughts, his feelings, his philosophies?

15. What are the central incidents in the story that reveal primary characteristics of your character?

NOVEL

Definition

The novel is an extended prose narrative. Novels are fictional narratives representing a way of life or an experience. They range from slight recollections of a small part of life or an experience to the most complete and detailed accounts imaginable; and they vary from the lightest to the most serious experiences and events faced by man.

Analyzing the Novel

When one analyzes a novel, he "breaks up" the total work into separate elements so that he may discover the craftsmanship and artistry of its author. In this way he comes to a deeper appreciation of the novel.

1. **Theme:** The basic idea or general truth the author is trying to present; the statement he makes about a topic. If the novel, for example, is about love (topic), what does the author say about it (statement): Love is cruel, Love is kind, Love is the source of all sorrows.

2. **Philosophy:** The beliefs expressed by the author through his characters and commentary. Does any specific character speak for the author?

3. **Characters:** The persons who act and are acted upon in the novel. The characters serve to carry the author's theme. In considering characters, the reader must note (1) each character's own actions, (2) the dialogue between the character under analysis and others, (3) what the author says directly about a character, and (4) what others say about the character under analysis.

4. **Structure :** The way the author selects and arranges the details of his story.

5. **Time:** The arbitrary division of existence in a novel. The most common varieties of time in literature are (1) chronological, in which all things follow in their natural sequence; (2) flashback, in which the author leaves the present time through recollection of a character, dream of a character, or director narration to tell of an incident that happened at an earlier time; and (3) overlapping, in which the author progresses to a certain point with one character or group, then switches to another character or group and brings them to the same point.

6. **Style:** The author's technique of writing. Consideration should be given to his sentence length... his punctuation or lack of it; his diction (word choice) and vocabulary; his use of symbols, metaphor and simile constructions, and other forms of figurative language; and his uses of idiom, slang, and vernacular speech.

7. **Point of View:** The way in which the author views the story; who tells it. The most widely used points of view are (1) all knowing--omniscient, in which the author knows and portrays the thoughts and action of all the characters--he is always aware of what will happen at every point of the story; (2) first person, in which the story is told from the limited knowledge of the narrator--all thoughts and actions are seen through his eyes; (3) partial omniscient, in which the author limits his awareness of thoughts and actions to one character; and (4) objective, in which the author sees and records without expressing an opinion or comment.

8. **Plot:** The situation or story itself; what is happening between the characters.

9. **Conflict:** The struggle that grows out of the interplay between two opposed forces, for example, the hero and the villain. Often the conflict is internal; two elements in the character of one man struggle for mastery—a sense of responsibility, a wish for independence. External conflict occurs when a character struggles against another character or against an element outside himself, such as nature, society...Frequently, of course, an author combines both types of conflict in a novel.

10. **Settings:** The location of the story; the physical, spiritual, supernatural, or extraterrestrial background. Setting is determined by the physical (either real or imaginary) site, the time period, and the general environment of the story (lower class, high society, religious, etc.).

11. **Tone:** The author's attitude toward the subject and audience as implied in the novel. Is he mocking? cynical? humorous? angry? sad?

12. **Symbols:** The devices that stand for themselves and, at the same time, for something deeper and more meaningful. Does the author use a central symbol in his work? a series of symbols? What does he intend them to mean?

13. **Title:** What is the significance of the title? How is it related to the novel? Does it have meaning in terms of the novel's theme or setting?