

ANALYZING FICTION

The following will help answer the fundamental questions for literature: What is the author trying to do? How has he done it? Was it worth doing?

If all of the following questions are answered in detail, the reader will certainly understand a work thoroughly. Not all of these questions are applicable to every work, and in some cases complete answers will overlap with other questions. A good reader may even devise new kinds of questions for special kinds of fiction, such as science fiction. At the least, however, these questions will help the reader formulate his/her thoughts on a work of fiction.

WARNING: Writing out the answers to these questions will not produce a literary essay. The questions are a guide to reading and thinking, not an outline for an essay.

PLOT

1. Give a **brief** synopsis of the story.
2. Is the plot logical and believable? Does it grow out of the characters, or does it depend on coincidental events?
3. Is there a well-defined beginning, middle, and end?
4. Is there one central episode, or is the plot more episodic with no one outstanding event? If there is more than one action, is there a main plot with sub-plots?
5. Is anything seemingly irrelevant to the main plot? If so, does it serve any purpose?
6. What is the nature of the conflict? Is there a climax or turning point?
7. Is curiosity aroused? Does the author make use of dilemmas, irony, foreshadowing, flashbacks?
8. Is the conclusion satisfactory? Why?
9. Is the title a good one? Does it help to define the plot?

SETTING

1. What is the historic time, place, social background of the story?
2. Does the setting influence the plot or characters?
3. Are any scenes especially appropriate for the action that takes place there? Would it make any sense if the story or certain scenes were set elsewhere?
4. Is there any use of symbolism in the setting?
5. What are the most striking scenes?
6. How is the setting presented? With photographic detail? Through a few suggestive details? Indirectly through thoughts and actions?
7. How much time does the action cover? How does the author treat gaps in time?

CHARACTERS

1. Can you sum up the appearance and important characteristics of each major character? Which characters change during the story? Are the changes consistent and sufficiently motivated?
2. Are there marked similarities or contrasts among characters?
3. Which characters are distinct individuals (round characters)? Are there any simple types (flat characters)?
4. Does every character have a function? Are any minor characters foils, or are they interesting in themselves?
5. How are the main characters presented? Description by author? Through their own thoughts and acting? Through comments of others?

STYLE

1. Can you describe the author's style? (e.g., Simple? Involved? Poetic? Colloquial?) Does it have individuality? Could you recognize another story by this writer by style alone?
2. Is there any humor?
3. Is the dialogue appropriate to the speakers?
4. What is the point of view? Is there a reason for the choice of point of view? What is the effect of this choice?
5. What kind of action does the author choose to expand? What kind to dramatize? What kind to narrate?
6. What effects does the author's style produce in mood (the effect on the reader)? In tone (the author's attitude)? In irony or understatement or sentimentality?

CLASSIFICATION

1. On what levels can the story profitably be read—is it mainly a character study? Or a story of action? Setting? Or is the primary interest an idea or thesis?
2. What is the theme or total meaning? Do all the elements support this meaning? Does the author raise questions or try to solve them?
3. Does the author make use of allegory? Parable? Symbolism? Myth?

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY BACKGROUND

NOTE: *Research materials may be needed here especially for understanding the context of the work.*

1. When was the work written? What significance does this date have for contemporary events? Does the story relate to significant political, social, or economic events?
2. What place does this story hold in the author's total body of work? Does the author make any useful comments on this story in his letters, essays, journals, or autobiography?
3. In what literary tradition (realism, romanticism, etc.) was the story written? Does it fit the tradition?

Adapted from *Literature in Critical Perspectives* (778-781)