

A Guide to Reading and Interpreting Short and Long Fiction

Fiction is narrative. It must have plot (stasis, disruption, stasis), character, meaning. The roots of the modern novel and short story are long and complex, going back beyond recorded history. Stories have been told to mark an occasion, set an example, warn about danger, procure food, or explain what seemed inexplicable. People tell stories to communicate knowledge and experience in social contexts. As far as we know, stories are a natural product of the way the human brain works. Long before we had written text, stories were oral. Members of society memorized them and passed them down, generation to generation. Early forms of stories include: fairy tales, exemplums, animal tales, warning narratives, anecdotes, fables, ballads, legends, rumors, myths, riddles, proverbs, and jokes.

Human Potential

In the event of storytelling, the mind is preoccupied by a concern with an action or behavior that needs to be verbalized, or calls for verbalization. Stories have always been compelled to respect the genre's penetrating gaze into the dark side of human beings portrayed as animals in a dog-eat-dog world. Fables, inspired by Aesop, employ animal characters in this respect to pose a question: Can human beings rise above animals? Modern stories may use humans as the characters, but the question remains central.

Moral Behavior

The world or setting of the fairy tale creates a counterworld to the reality of the storyteller and listeners. Together, storytellers and listeners collaborate through intuition, as well as conscious conception, to form worlds filled with naive or simple morality. Fundamental to the feel of a fairy tale is its moral pulse. It tells us what we lack and how the world has to be organized differently so that we receive what we need. In modern fiction, that need to outline or reinforce moral concepts is manifested in complex themes.

Individual Expression

A thousand years ago, a Japanese woman, Lady Murasaki, a writer who many believe wrote the first text most resembling a novel, explained the impulse for telling stories came from a need for self-expression. From that time forward, written fiction has grown, expanded and become the central form of social expression, carrying on the tradition of commenting on and critiquing human behavior.

Stories ought to judge and interpret the world.
- Cynthia Ozick

Consider the following as you read fiction:

1. Every element in a story—character, conflict, plot, theme—is controlled by the way writers handle the *point of view* they have chosen (first-person, third person-limited omniscient).
2. The writer's *style*—the conscious choice of words, the phrasing—is determined by the point of view he or she employs.
3. Beginning with the first crucial paragraph, the writer uses words to create a *context*, which evolves from paragraph to paragraph to the crucial final paragraph.
4. The literal statements work within the overall context, and within the immediate context of any given paragraph, to enable the writer to *imply* what is not explicitly stated.
5. What is implied (or evoked or conveyed indirectly) in a story usually has a more powerful effect than what is obviously stated because *implication* stimulates the reader's own emotions, imagination, and intellect.
6. The reason why writers use various *technical devices* is to create contexts and implications or to stimulate some specific response from the reader; as the reader becomes involved, the reader's experiences become richer and more complex, and the effects are deeper and more lasting.
7. *Contrast* and *comparison* are simple devices that enable the writer to call your attention to the use of symbols and irony, among other things.
8. To respond to the writer's use of a *symbol*, an *allusion*, or to *irony*, a reader must be intimately, intricately, and actively involved in the process of reading and responding; the result is a much richer experience than if the reader were only passively reacting to literal statements.
9. With considerations 1 through 8 in mind, a person who is studying the nature and effect of fiction, as opposed simply to reading it as one usually does, may more fully respond to all the experiences the writer has imagined for the reader.
10. Is the story written in a specific genre? If so, does it depart from the limited elements of that genre? Or does the story draw on aspects of several genres?

Review Questions That Apply to Most Fiction

1. Who is the protagonist?
2. When and where is the setting?
3. What is the story or plot?
4. What is the central conflict?
5. What is the point of view?
6. What are the characteristics of the style that derive from the point of view?
7. What is the external context? What is the general context? What are some of the most significant immediate contexts?
8. What other techniques or devices does the author use?
 - Comparison and Contrast
 - Symbolism
 - Allusion
 - Irony
9. To what genre does the story belong (if relevant)?
10. How do the preceding considerations suggest them or meaning?

Truth may be stranger than fiction, but fiction is truer.
- Frederic Raphael

Elements of Fiction

Analyzing and writing about fiction is generally focused on the elements of fiction: plot, character, point of view, setting, theme, symbol, and style.

Plot: Generally the least interesting aspect of a story, in part because most stories are archetypal in nature and fall into familiar patterns. Critics have identified anywhere from four to seven basic plots that all stories ever told fall under. So, plot is like the framing of a house. It's the structure that holds up and showcases all the other elements, and those story lines tend to be familiar to us all. Students who have little experience analyzing fiction tend to spend too much time retelling the plot. In general, when writing an analysis of a story, just drop small reminders of the key points of plot when you analyze.

The exception to this rule are when a plot surprises your expectations by, for instance, rearranging the chronology of events, or otherwise presents things in nonrealistic ways. When this happens in a story, the plot may indeed prove fertile ground for analysis and may be the basis for an interesting essay.

Characters: The actions, motivations, and development of individual characters are the basis for good discussion and analysis. How does the author reveal a character to the reader? How does a character grow and develop over the course of a story? Sometimes, analyzing or writing about the antagonist or a secondary character can be more interesting than writing about the protagonist.

To analyze or write about a character, you will probably plan to convey three things:

- Appearance
- Personality
- Character—the individual's moral or ethical values

In preparing a character sketch, take these points into consideration:

1. What the person says (remember that what he or she says need not be taken at face value; the person may be hypocritical or self-deceived or biased).
2. What the person does—including, if possible, what the person thinks.
3. What others (including the narrator of the story) say about the person.
4. What others do (their actions may help indicate what the person could do but does not do), including what they think about others.
5. What the person looks like—face, body, clothes. These details may help convey the personality of the character, or they may in some measure help to disguise it.

Point of View: The perspective from which a story is told makes a big difference in how the audience perceives it. Keep in mind that first-person narrators can be unreliable,

as they do not have access to all vital information, and their own agendas can often skew the way they see events.

3rd Person Narrators: In writing about or discussing a 3rd-person narrator, speak of “the narrator” or “the speaker” not of “the author.”

Omniscient Narrator: knows everything that is going on and can tell us the inner thoughts of all the characters. The omniscient narrator may editorialize, pass judgments, reassure the reader, and so forth, in which case he or she may sound like the author.

Selective or Limited Omniscient Narrator: takes up what Henry James called a “center of consciousness” revealing the thoughts of one of the characters but (for the most part) seeing the rest of the characters from outside only. Sometimes, it may seem that the story is being narrated by the selected character, but it's not, because we still get information about that character from the outside.

Effaced or Objective Narrator: This narrator does not seem to exist, for he or she does not comment in his or her own voice and does not enter any minds. The reader hears dialogue and sees only what a camera would see. Still, the narrator can seem cold or reportorial, which contributes to the tone of a story.

1st Person Narrators: In writing or discussing a 1st-person narrative, after an introductory remark to the effect that the character tells the story, use the character's name or pronoun in speaking of the narrator.

1st-Person or Participant Narrator: The “I” who narrates the story and may be either the major character in it or may be a minor character or witness to the events. If the writer creates an *innocent eye* 1st-person narrator, it highlights the discrepancy between the narrator's imperfect awareness and the reader's superior awareness. Such a narrator becomes an **unreliable narrator**, due to the fact that the narrator is either naïve, or senile, or morally blind, or insane, or caught in a rage.

Setting: While settings may merely be a backdrop for a story, more likely they play a meaningful role in the story. Setting includes time and place, therefore it will include social structures and expectations that constrain or limit characters' actions, or play a role in shaping the characters' personalities. In stories with conflicts centered on the individual vs. society, or the individual vs. nature, the setting's importance is generally significant.

Foreshadowing: This strategy, which works in conjunction with the withholding of information, builds suspense and tension. Stories have a least three lives: 1) when we read the story, sentence by sentence, trying to turn the sequence of sentences into a consistent whole; 2) when we have finished reading the story and we thinking

back on it as a whole; and 3) when we reread a story, knowing already even as we read the first line how it will turn out in the end.

To identify foreshadowing, read, then reread the story looking for details that are relevant to the ending. Underline these details and jot down notes in the margins like “images of emptiness” or “later turns out ironically.”

Theme: All short stories have at least one theme—an abstract concept such as love, war, friendship, revenge, art, etc.—brought to life and made real through the elements of fiction. Novels will have multiple themes. Through exploration of theme(s), the author conveys something about it, takes a position on that aspect of the theme. For example, stories about war might either message that war is destructive, or war is glorious, or war is necessary. What happens in the plot and to the characters by the end of the story is usually how we determine the thematic message.

Symbol: Authors choose their images and motifs with purpose. Animals, plants, colors, objects in a given culture acquire symbolic meaning over millennia. That connotative meaning lights up around the basic dictionary meaning of words like a glow. Careful readers attend to that subtext as they read. Are the yellow roses given as a gift from one character to another just the color the flower shop had on sale, or are they sending a specific message of infidelity or jealousy? Determining the potential double meaning of objects in a story enrich and deepen the story’s layers. Even if the writer incorporated the object unconsciously, he or she is writing out of a long history of reading and association, which is likely impacting their choices subconsciously. And regardless, the story is now creating meaning through its interpretation by another reader.

Style: When we talk about style, we are usually analyzing tone or language. Language is built with words and syntax, or word order. What kind of diction is the writer using to convey the story? Is it formal, elevated and elegant, or casual, coarse and vulgar? Are the sentences short and telegraphic, or long, loose and/or accumulative? How does dialogue reveal character? Does the text make you feel sad or angry or lighthearted? Diction or word choice shape tone. Lots of dark and brooding words make the reader feel dark and brooding too. Lots of light, happy words can make the reader feel light and happy.

*A wondrous dream, a fantasy incarnate,
fiction completes us, mutilated beings burdened
with the awful dichotomy of having only one life
and the ability to desire a thousand.*

- Mario Vargas Llosa

Getting Ideas for Discussing/Writing About Fiction

The following questions can help stimulate ideas about stories. Not every question is relevant to every story, but if after reading a story and thinking about it, skimming over these questions might help you get ideas.

Title

Is the title informative? What does it mean or suggest? Did the meaning seem to change after you read the story? Does the title help you to formulate a theme?

If you had written the story, what title would you use?

Plot

Does the plot grow out of the characters, or does it depend on chance or coincidence? Did something at first strike you as irrelevant that later you perceived as relevant? Do some parts continue to strike you as irrelevant?

Does *surprise* play an important role, or does foreshadowing? If surprise is very important, can the story be read a second time with interest? If so, what gives it this further interest?

What *conflicts* does the story include? Conflicts of one character against another? Of one character against the setting, or against society? Conflicts within a single character?

Are the conflicts resolved? If so, how?

Are certain episodes narrated out of chronological order? If so, were you puzzled? Annoyed? On reflection, does the arrangement of episodes seem effective? Why or why not? Are certain situations repeated? If so, what do you make of the repetitions?

List the major structural units of the story. In a sentence or two, summarize each unit that you have listed.

In a sentence, summarize the conclusion or resolution. Do you find it satisfactory? Why, or why not?

Character

List the traits of the main characters.

Which character chiefly engages your interest? Why?

What purposes do minor characters serve? Do you find some who by their similarities and differences help to define each other or help to define the major character? How else is a particular character defined—by his or her words, actions (including thoughts and emotions), dress, setting, narrative point of view? Do certain characters act differently in the same, or in a similar situation?

How does the author reveal character? By explicit authorial (editorial) comment, for instance, or, on the other hand, by revelation through dialogue? Through depicted action? Through the actions of other characters? How are the author’s methods especially suited to the whole of the story?

Is the behavior plausible—that is, are the characters well motivated?

If a character changes, why and how does he or she change? (You may want to jot down each event that influences a change.) Or did you change your attitude

toward a character not because the character changes but because you came to know the character better?

Are the characters round or flat? Are they complex, or on the other hand, highly typical (for instance, one-dimensional representatives of a social class or age)? Are you chiefly interested in a character's psychology, or does the character strike you as standing for something, such as honesty or the arrogance of power?

How has the author caused you to sympathize with certain characters? How does your response—your sympathy or lack of sympathy—contribute to your judgment of the conflict?

Point of View

Who tells the story? How much does the narrator know? Does the narrator strike you as reliable? What effect is gained by using the narrator?

How does the point of view help shape the theme? After all, the basic story of Little Red Riding Hood—what happens—remains unchanged whether told from the wolf's point of view or the girl's, but if we hear the story from the wolf's point of view, we may feel that the story is about terrifying yet pathetic compulsive behavior; if from the girl's point of view, about terrified innocence and male violence.

Does the narrator's language help you to construct a picture of the narrator's character, class, attitude, strengths, and limitations? (Jot down some evidence, such as colloquial or—on the other hand—formal expressions, ironic comments, figures of speech.) How far can you trust the narrator? Why?

Setting

Do you have a strong sense of the time and place? IS the story very much about, say, New England Puritanism, or race relations in the South in the late nineteenth century, or Midwestern urban versus small-town life? If time and place are important, how and at what points in the story has the author conveyed this sense? If you do not strongly feel the setting, do you think the author should have made it more evident?

What is the relation of the setting to the plot and the characters? (For instance, do houses or rooms or their furnishings say something about their residents? Is the landscape important? Would anything be lost if the descriptions of the setting were deleted from the story or if the setting were changed?)

Does the author employ *pathetic fallacy* in the story; for example, does nature seem to respond to the events or the characters in a relevant way? For example, does the rain begin just as a character dies?

Symbolism

Do certain characters seem to you to stand for something in addition to themselves (archetypes)? Does the setting—whether a house, a farm, a landscape, a town, a period—have an extra dimension?

Do certain actions in the story—for instance, entering a forest at night, or shutting a door, or turning off a light—seem symbolic? If so, symbolic of what?

If you do believe that the story has symbolic elements, do you think they are adequately integrated within the story, or do they strike you as being too obviously stuck in?

Style

Style may be defined as how the writer says what he or she says. It is the writer's manner of expression. The writer's choice of words (diction), of sentence structure and of sentence length (both syntax) are all aspects of style. Example: Lincoln begins the Gettysburg Address by speaking of "Four score and seven years ago," that is by using language that has a biblical overtone. If he had said, "Eighty-seven years ago," his style would have been different.

How would you characterize the style? Simple? Understated? Figurative? Or what, and why?

How has the point of view shaped or determined the style?

Do you think that the style is consistent? If it isn't—for instance, if there are shifts from simple sentences to highly complex ones—what do you make of the shifts?

Style is the element within in which tone, mood and atmosphere are largely established and developed.

Theme

Do certain passages—the title, some of the dialogue, some of the description, the names of certain characters—seem to you to point especially toward the theme? Do you find certain repetitions of words or pairs of incidents highly suggestive and helpful in directing your thoughts toward stating a theme?

Is the meaning of the story embodied in the whole story, or does it seem stuck in, for example, in certain passages of editorializing?

Suppose someone asked you to state the point—the theme—of the story. Could you? And if you could, would you say that the theme of a particular story reinforces values you hold, or does it to some degree challenge them?

*The good end happily, the bad unhappily—
that is what fiction means.*
—Oscar Wilde

Fiction is nothing less than the subtlest instrument for self-examination and self-display that mankind has invented yet. Psychology and X-rays bring up some portentous shadows, and demographics and stroboscopic photography do some fine breakdowns, but for the full perfume and effluvia of being human, for feathery ambiguity and rank facticity, for the air and iron, fire and spit of our daily mortal adventure there is nothing like fiction: it makes sociology look priggish, history problematical, the film media two-dimensional, and the National Enquirer as silly as last week's cereal box.
—John Updike
