**CRITICAL READING: A GUIDE**

**A Guide Designed for His Year 1 Students   
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This is a guide to what you might look for in analyzing literature, particularly poetry and fiction. An analysis explains what a work of literature means, and how it means it; it is essentially an articulation of and a defense of an interpretation which shows how the resources of literature are used to create the meaningfulness of the text. There are people who resist analysis, believing that it 'tears apart' a work of art; however a work of art is an artifice, that is, it is made by someone with an end in view: as a made thing, it can be and should be analyzed as well as appreciated. There are several main reasons for analyzing literature:

1. The ultimate end of analysis is, first and foremost, a deeper understanding and a fuller appreciation of the literature -- you learn to see more, to uncover or create richer, denser, more interesting meanings. I have a brief page on the ideas of [depth, complexity and quality](http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/1F95/depth-etc.php) as they relate to literature.
2. Secondly, as literature uses language, images, the essential processes of meaning-making, analysis can lead to a more astute and powerful use of the tools of meaning on the reader's part.
3. Thirdly, analysis should also teach us to be aware of the cultural delineations of a work, its ideological aspects. Art is not eternal and timeless but is situated historically, socially, intellectually, written and read at particular times, with particular intents, under particular historical conditions, with particular cultural, personal, gender, racial, class and other perspectives. Through art we can see ideology in operation. This can be of particular use in understanding our own culture and time, but has historical applications as well. See my brief page on [ideology](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/ideology.php) for an expansion of this.
4. A fourth function of analysis is to help us, through close reading and through reflection, understand the way ideas and feelings are talked about in our culture or in other times and cultures -- to have a sense both of communities of meaning, and of the different kinds of understanding there can be about matters of importance to human life. Art can give us access to the symbolic worlds of communities: not only to the kinds of ideas they have about life, but also to the way they feel about them, to the ways they imagine them, to the ways they relate them to other aspects of their lives.

You might also look at my page [On the Uses of Studying Literature](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/uses.php)

**II: Analyzing fiction**

The analysis of fiction has many similarities to the analysis of poetry. As a rule a work of fiction is a narrative, with characters, with a setting, told by a narrator, with some claim to represent 'the world' in some fashion.

The topics in this section are [plot](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#fplot), [character](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#fcharacter), [setting](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#fsetting), [the narrator](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#fnarrator), [figurative language](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#ffigure), [the way reality is represented](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#frepresentation), [the world-view](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#fideology).

**1. Plot.**

As a narrative a work of fiction has a certain arrangement of events which are taken to have a relation to one another. This arrangement of events to some end -- for instance to create significance, raise the level of generality, extend or complicate the meaning -- is known as 'plot'. Narrative is integral to human experience; we use it constantly to make sense out of our experience, to remember and relate events and significance, and to establish the basic patterns of behaviour of our lives. If there is no apparent relation of events in a story our options are either to declare it to be poorly written or to assume that the lack of relation is thematic, mean to represent the chaotic nature of human experience, a failure in a character's experience or personality, or the lack of meaningful order in the universe.

In order to establish significance in narrative there will often be coincidence, parallel or contrasting episodes, repetitions of various sorts, including the repetition of challenges, crises, conciliations, episodes, symbols, motifs. The relationship of events in order to create significance is known as the plot.

**2. Character.**

Characters in a work of fiction are generally designed to open up or explore certain aspects of human experience. Characters often depict particular traits of human nature; they may represent only one or two traits -- a greedy old man who has forgotten how to care about others, for instance, or they may represent very complex conflicts, values and emotions. Usually there will be contrasting or parallel characters, and usually there will be a significance to the selection of kinds of characters and to their relation to each other. As in the use of setting, in fact in almost any representation in art, the significance of a character can vary from the particular, the dramatization of a unique individual, to the most general and symbolic, for instance the representation of a'Christ figure'.

**3. Setting.**

Narrative requires a setting; this as in poetry may vary from the concrete to the general. Often setting will have particular culturally coded significance -- a sea-shore has a significance for us different from that of a dirty street corner, for instance, and different situations and significances can be constructed through its use. Settings, like characters, can be used in contrasting and comparative ways to add significance, can be repeated, repeated with variations, and so forth.

**4. The Narrator.**

A narration requires a narrator, someone (or more than one) who tells the story. This person or persons will see things from a certain perspective, or *point of view*, in terms of their relation to the events and in terms of their attitude(s) towards the events and characters. A narrator may be external, outside the story, telling it with an ostensibly objective and omniscient voice; or a narrator may be a character (or characters) within the story, telling the story in the first person (either central characters or observer characters, bit players looking in on the scene). First-person characters may be *reliable*, telling the truth, seeing things right, or they may be *unreliable*, lacking in perspective or self-knowledge. If a narration by an omniscient external narrator carries us into the thoughts of a character in the story, that character is known as a *reflector character*: such a character does not know he or she is a character, is unaware of the narration or the narrator. An omniscient, external narrator may achieve the narrative by telling or by showing, and she may keep the reader in a relation of *suspense* to the story (we know no more than the characters) or in a relation of *irony* (we know things the characters are unaware of).  
In any case, who it is who tells the story, from what perspective, with what sense of distance or closeness, with what possibilities of knowledge, and with what interest, are key issues in the making of meaning in narrative. For a fuller discussion, see my page [Narrative point of view: some considerations](http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/2F55/pt_of_view.php).

**5. Figurative language.**

As in poetry, there will be figurative language; as in drama, this language tends to be used to characterize the sensibility and understanding of characters as well as to establish thematic and tonal continuities and significance.

**6. Representation of reality.**

Fiction generally claims to represent 'reality' (this is known as representation or *mimesis*) in some way; however, because any narrative is presented through the symbols and codes of human meaning and communication systems, fiction cannot represent reality directly, and different narratives and forms of narrative represent different aspects of reality, and represent reality in different ways. A narrative might be very concrete and adhere closely to time and place, representing every-day events; on the other hand it may for instance represent psychological or moral or spiritual aspects through symbols, characters used representatively or symbolically, improbable events, and other devices. In addition you should remember that all narrative requires selection, and therefore it requires exclusion as well, and it requires devices to put the selected elements of experience in meaningful relation to each other (and here we are back to key elements such as coincidence, parallels and opposites, repetitions).

**6. World-view.**

As narrative represents experience in some way and as it uses cultural codes and language to do so, it inevitably must be read, as poetry, for its structure of values, for its understanding of the world, or world-view, and for its ideological assumptions, what is assumed to be natural and proper. Every narrative communication makes claims, often implicitly, about the nature of the world as the narrator and his or her cultural traditions understand it to be. The kind of writing we call "literature" tends to use cultural codes and to use the structuring devices of narrative with a high degree of intentionality in order to offer a complex understanding of the world. The astute reader of fiction will be aware of the shape of the world that the fiction projects, the structure of values that underlie the fiction (what the fiction explicitly claims and what it implicitly claims through its codes and its ideological understandings); will be aware of the distances and similarities between the world of the fiction and the world that the reader inhabits; and will be aware of the significances of the selections and exclusions of the narrative in representing human experience.

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**III: Analysis of Prose in Fiction**

Someone is always speaking in a novel -- whether it is a narrator who is not a character within the fiction, or a character within the narrative. Consequently both the particular ideas, attitudes, feelings, perspectives of that speaker, and the concerns and attitudes of the novel as a whole, will be presented through the prose The analytical reader needs to understand what information is conveyed and how it is conveyed. The following is a guide to some things to look for, and contains:   
A. [prose](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#pprose): [the language](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#prlanguage); [sentence structure](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#psentence); [imagery and setting](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#primagery); [discourse features](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#pdiscourse).   
B. [characterization](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#pcharacterization)   
C. [genre and tradition](http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.php#prgenre)

**A. The Passage as Prose.**

1. **The language:**
   1. What kind of language is used? Here are some possibilities:

Is the language:

* + 1. abstract or concrete language
    2. language of emotions or of reason
    3. language of control or language of openness
  1. What are the connotations of the language? How much language is connotative? What areas of experience, feeling, and meaning are evoked? When Conrad writes that a gate was "a neglected gap," we have to take notice, as a gate is not ordinarily a gap, nor is the issue of neglect or care usually applied to gaps. Conrad intends to imply, to connote, certain qualities through his language use.
  2. How forceful is the language (see also imagery and sentence structure)?
  3. what aspects of feeling are supported or created by the sound of the language?
     1. by the vowel and consonant sounds -- soft or hard long or short
     2. by how the words go together -- e.g. smoothly, eliding, so that one slides into the other, or separated by your need to move your mouth position.

1. **Sentence structure:** Meaning is created by how the sentences sound, by how they are balanced, by the force created by punctuation as well as by language:
   1. by the stresses on words, and the rhythm of the sentence
   2. by the length of the sentence
   3. by whether the sentence has repetitions, parallels, balances and so forth
   4. by the punctuation, and how it makes the sentence sound and flow.
2. **Imagery and setting:** Images and use of setting can tell you a great deal about a character, a narrator, a fictional work:
   1. Imagery as figurative language: what sort of metaphors, similes and analogies does the speaker use, and what does that tell you about their outlook and sensibility?
   2. Images as motifs: are their recurring images? What ideas or feelings are aroused by them, what people or events are brought to mind by them?
   3. Imagery as setting: How is the setting used? To create a sense of realism? To create mood? To represent or create a sense of states of mind or feelings? To stand for other things (i.e. symbolic or allegorical -- as for instance Wuthering Heights and Thrushcroft Grange in *Wuthering Heights* might be said to stand for two ways of viewing the world or two different sociological perspectives, and jungle in *Heart of Darkness* might be said to stand for the primeval past or for the heart of humankind)?
3. **Discourse features**
   1. how long does the person speak?
   2. are the sentences logically joined or disjointed, rational or otherwise ordered, or disorderly?
   3. what tone or attitude does the talk seem to have?
   4. does the speaker avoid saying things, deliberately or unconsciously withhold information, communicate by indirection?
   5. to what extent and to what end does the speaker use rhetorical devices such as irony?

**B. Characterization** The idea here is that the various features of the prose, above, will support features of characterization which we can discuss in somewhat different terms.

1. What ideas are expressed in the passage, and what do they tell you about the speaker?
2. What feelings does the speaker express? What does that tell you about them? Are their feelings consistent?
3. Does the character belong to a particular character type or represent a certain idea, value, quality or attitude?
4. What is the social status of the character, and how can you tell from how they speak and what they speak about?
5. What is the sensibility of the speaker? Is the person ironic, witty, alert to the good or attuned to evil in others, optimistic or pessimistic, romantic or not romantic (cynical, or realistic?).
6. What is the orientation of the person -- how aware are they of their own and others' needs, and of their environments?
7. How much control over and awareness of her emotions, her thoughts, her language does the speaker have?
8. How does the narrator characterize the character through comment or through description?

**C. Genre & Tradition**

Different traditions and genres tend to use language and characters and setting and plot differently, and this may show in individual passages. Is it a satire, a comedy, a tragedy, a romance? Is it a novel of social comment, an exploration of an idea? (There are more kinds.) Is it in a certain sub-genre like a detective novel, science fiction, etc.? Is it an allegory or a satire, is it realistic or more symbolic? How does this genre, sub-genre or tradition tend to use setting, characters, language, mood or tone? Does this one fit in?

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