

Elements of Fiction

When you approach a work of fiction, remember that the term *fiction* comes from a Latin verb meaning *to shape*: fiction is a shaping of reality, not a direct representation of reality. So although fiction may appear to be closely based on actual people, places, or events, in fact its imaginary world cannot be equated to the real world. One cannot, for example, assume that the narrator of a story is the author, even though the character of the narrator may resemble what we know about the author.

On the other hand, fiction may be "true" in the sense that it offers us a convincing view of reality. Fiction is often analyzed according to the criterion of probability -- given this fictional set of circumstances and characters, would the characters act as they do? Or do some of their actions strike us as unconvincing, out of character? While we do not expect fiction to be superficially true to life, we often expect a deeper kind of truth -- we look to fiction, as to all literature, to help us understand the meaning of our own experience.

Good critical writing must be based on a meticulous reading of the literary text. Attend to the details: the turn of phrase used in describing a character, the rhythms of the characters' speech, recurring images. Use any outside sources available to you (the author's ideas about literature, your knowledge of other works by the same author, literary theory, critical texts, etc) but be sure to document them.

One way of focusing your response is to identify an element of the story or novel which presents a problem in interpretation. What leaves you puzzled when you close the book? Why does the author use an unusual point of view, or narrate events out of chronological order? Here are some general questions you can ask about the elements of fiction.

Plot

1. What conflicts are developed within a character, or between one character and another?
2. How does the author prepare us for the main events of the story? Do they take us by surprise, or do we know what will happen?

Characterization

1. How are the characters revealed -- by what they look like, what they say, what others say

about them, what they do or choose not to do?

2. How far does a particular character change or develop, and why?
3. What drives or motivates a particular character?

Point of View

1. Is the story told in the first or third person? Do we see into the minds of all the characters?
2. How does the narrator's character colour our perception of events?
3. Can the narrator be trusted to give us an accurate report of events? Or does the author imply that the narrator sees or tells less than the truth?

Setting

1. How does the author convey the setting?
2. How does the setting contribute to the meaning?

Structure

1. Which scenes or events remind you of others? Are they similar or contrasting?
2. If the novel or story is divided into parts or chapters, why has the author made these divisions? In what way do they correspond to divisions in the material?
3. If you had to divide the work into three or four large divisions, where would you make the breaks, and why? What subtitle might you give to each of the parts you have created?
4. Can you draw a scheme or plan to represent the shape of the novel or story?

Image

1. What unusual or striking or repeated images are present?
2. Do any images take on symbolic meaning?

Theme

1. What ideas are present in the story, either explicitly or implicitly?
2. How do the ideas relate to one another?

Tone

1. How would you describe the tone of the story -- comic, tragic, simple, complex, forceful, gentle, direct, understated, detached, sympathetic, bitter, genial, angry, gay, serious, humorous, restrained, ironic, impersonal, sardonic, cynical . . . ?

Style

1. How does the style or the language in which the story is written reflect its theme or purpose?