

This is excerpted from What to Say About Fiction
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This outline is merely a tool of analysis and being put in the form of questions, it should constantly remind its user that only he/she can provide answers. Hopefully, we can talk to one another about literature, and exchange informed and reasoned opinions about it, but if a given work of fiction is to mean anything to us, if we are to feel and know it completely, we must at one stage wrestle with the work bare-handed, without others as guides or informants. If one were to answer in detail each of the following questions, she/he would most certainly understand and, hopefully, feel the work thoroughly. Not every question is relevant to every work; and in many cases complete answers will overlap with other ones. Also the good reader may well devise new questions to help her/him examine special kinds of fiction such as science fiction or black humor.

These questions should help one to answer the larger and older questions that, for all their commonplaceness, are still fundamental: What is the author trying to do? How has he/she done it? And was it worth doing? Ultimately we should not shun judgment of the story, but we should be certain through our analytical but sympathetic inquiry that we have opened our minds to a unique creation and tried to understand it.

ANALYZING FICTION

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- A. When was the work written? What relation or significance does this date have to preceding, contemporary, and succeeding events -- biographical events, literary publications, and important political, economic, or social occurrences? Is the author qualified to treat the subject? Is she/he biased or inaccurate?
- B. Does the story significantly relate to the work of other writers or to source materials?
- C. What place does the story hold in the author's total work?
- D. Are any circumstances of special interest associated with the composition of the work? Do these circumstances in any way aid in the better understanding of the story itself?

E. Does the author make any useful comments concerning this story or his/her work in general in her/his letters, essays, journals, autobiography?

II. PLOT

A. Can you give a brief synopsis of the story?

B. Does the plot grow out of the characters or out of chance or coincidence? Is it logical and believable?

C. Is there a well unified beginning, middle, and end? At the beginning do we learn what happened, to whom it happen, when did it happen, where did it happen?

D. Is there a strong center of interest and how is it determined -- by the author's statements (but beware the intentional fallacy") or by space, emphasis, and recurrence? Is there a central crucial episode or is the plot more episodic with no one outstanding event?

E. If there is more than one action in the story, which is the main and which the subordinate plots (sub-plots)?

F. Is anything seemingly irrelevant to the main plot? If so, does it serve any purpose?

G. What is the nature of the conflict (or conflicts)? Are there complications to the main problem? Identify the protagonist and the antagonist. Where is the climax or turning point?

H. Is our curiosity aroused? How?

I. What of dilemmas, irony, foreshadowing, flashbacks?

J. Is the conclusion satisfactory? Does the story end with a bang or a whimper?

K. Is the title a good one? Is it helpful in any way?

III. CHARACTER

A. Can you sum up the appearance and important characteristics of each major character?

B. Are there any marked similarities or contrasts among the characters?

C. Are they "masters of their fate" or "victims of circumstance"?

D. Which characters change as the story proceeds? Do they change for the better or the worse?

E. Which characters are distinct individuals (round) and what are types (flat)?

- F. Does every character have a function in the story? What are the functions of the minor characters? Are these minor characters interesting in themselves?
- G. How are the principal characters presented? By the author's description and comment? By representation of the thoughts and actions of the characters themselves? By observations and comments of the other characters?
- H. Are the characters realistically consistent and sufficiently motivated for whatever change occurs in them?
- I. Toward which characters does the author show sympathy? Toward which antipathy?
- J. Are the characters' names suitable or in any way significant?

IV. SETTING

- A. What is the historic time, place, and social background of the story?
- B. Has the setting any influence on plot or characters?
- C. Are any scenes especially appropriate for the action that takes place there?
- D. Is there any use of symbolism in the setting?
- E. How much time does the action cover? How does the author treat time gaps?
- F. Which are the most interesting, striking, or important scenes? How does the author handle them?
- G. How is the setting presented? With photographic detail? Impressionistically through a few suggestive details? Indirectly through thoughts and actions?
- H. Is the setting detailed or generalized? Realistic or stylized? Is it thematically functional or casual, arbitrary, or atmospheric? (Would it make any difference if the story were set someplace else?) Is the setting allegorical or symbolical or merely literal?

V. STYLE

- A. What are the outstanding qualities or features of the style?
- B. How would you describe the author's style? Simple and clear-cut, complex and involved? Smooth and graceful, abrupt and harsh? Richly

- suggestive and implying much, lean and direct? Poetic, sentimental, restrained? Literal or figurative? Concrete or abstract? Specific or general? Formal or informal or colloquial? Consistent or variable?
- C. Does the author's style have individuality? Could another story be recognized by the style alone?
- D. Is there any humor in the story? Is it quiet or broad?
- E. Is the dialog appropriate to the speakers?
- F. How frequent are the dramatic situations? How are they reached, by anticipation or surprise? How treated, by suggestion or in detail? How rendered by dialog or by description?
- G. Are there any different rates of movement in the story? Where and why?
- H. Do you note abuse of digression?
- I. From what point of view is the story written? Is the point of view consistent? Could it have been changed for the better?
1. Omniscient
 - a. Editorial omniscient: author present as narrator and commentator, who summarizes, analyzes, interprets.
 - b. Neutral omniscient: author narrates but does not comment directly; but he/she may use a spokesman character.
 2. Limited
 - a. Third person narration, but point of view of a single character; roving narrator.
 - b. First-person narrator is the protagonist.
 - c. First-person narrator is a minor character or merely an onlooker; a "central intelligence."
 3. Wholly dramatic narration (effaced narrator--extremely rare).
 4. What are the discernible reasons for the choice of the particular point of view? The effects of the choice?
- J. Are any of the sentences or paragraphs particularly striking, meaningful or remarkable for their freshness?
- K. What materials has the author selected, and what does her/his selectivity indicate?
- L. What kind of action or scene does the author choose to expand? What kind to dramatize and what kind to narrate? Significance of his/her selection?

M. What effects does her/his style produce: atmosphere or mood (effect on reader) tone (author's attitude toward his/her material); irony; understatement; hyperbole; sentimentality.

VI. THEME

A. On what levels can the story profitably be read? (Plot, character, emotional effect, theme.) Is this a story of character with the primary interest being in personalities? Of action, primary interest in events? Of setting, primary interest in environment? Of idea, primary interest in thesis or ethical significance?

B. What is the theme or total meaning of the story? Do all the elements support that meaning? Are there other comments of significance -- i.e., minor themes? Does the author raise questions or try to solve them? Is what she/he says worth saying? (Beware, however, of reduction, distortion, or inflation of the story by a specific statement of theme.)

C. What is the ideological climate of the story? What ideas seem to be unconscious assumptions of the author and thus operate tacitly? What ideas become subject matter by being themes? And how are they presented, discursively or dramatically?

D. In what general literary tradition was the story written? Realistic -- attempting to see life as it is with emphasis on the difficulties, absurdities, abnormalities, and ironies? Romantic -- attempting to see larger truths beyond the literal and factual with emphasis on the imagination and sentiment? Naturalistic, fantastic, symbolistic, allegorical, picturesque, etc.

E. Does the author make any use of allegory, parable, symbolism, or myth?

F. Can you now make a judgment of the story?