

A Guide to Reading (and Better Understanding) Literature

(From Dr. Maria Carlson, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Kansas)

Ask yourself this series of questions as you read the literary works assigned for this course. They help you to understand how the author constructed the story, what he wanted to say, and how successful he was in his endeavor. If you can come up with an approximate answer for each question, you will be very well prepared to discuss the readings in class.

I. THEME:

What is this story about? what is its point (say it in no more than 10 words)?

What is the central idea of the work? its message?

How does this abstract, central idea become concrete through the characters and events?

II. SETTING:

Where does the action take place? Any particular reason that this is an appropriate choice?

When does the action take place? Why did the author choose to set the work in this time?

How does time and place of action, the environment of the story, interact with the characters?

III. CHARACTERIZATION:

Who are the principal characters?

What kind of people are they? What motivates them? What is their "psychology"?

Pay particular attention to the following:

What does the narrator say about them?

What do they say about each other?

What do they say about themselves?

What do their actions say about them?

What do they look like (physical description)?

Do they have a past?

IV. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE:

Who is telling the story? (be careful not to confuse the narrator with the author)

Is the narrator omniscient? Of limited knowledge? Third person? First person?

How would you characterize the narrator? (educated/uneducated, cynical/satirical, naive/disingenuous, etc.)

Does the narrator have a particular point of view? Are there other points of view in the work?

What is the narrator's agenda? Why is s/he telling the reader this story?

Does the narrator manipulate the reader? How? Why?

How does the narrator "control" the story?

V. STRUCTURE:

Structure is the conscious patterning, or configuration, of events and situations; plot is the basic element of structure.

Does the work follow the traditional five-part structure?: Exposition; rising action; climax; falling action; denouement

What liberties does the work take with traditional structure? What might this achieve?

Is structure concrete or abstract?

Is there a "frame" or other structural device? Why do you think the author uses it?

VI. STYLE:

What is interesting about the way the story is written?

What are the primary technical aspects of the author's language?

long or short sentences?

dialogue or narrative?

repetition?

lexical levels?

imagery? (natural, organic, animal, mechanical, visual, olfactory, tactile, abstract, etc.)

figurative language? (metaphors? similes? synecdoches? etc.)

allegories? symbols?

What is it about this author's work that makes it specifically his and not someone else's?
Can you tell this writer apart from others by his/her personal style? What are the clues?

VII. EXTRINSIC FACTORS:

How does knowledge of social, political, or economic conditions help you understand the work?

What role does the historical period play in creating or enhancing the meaning of the work?

What of the author's life? friends and colleagues? interests, language, culture?

What is their role in contributing to the meaning of the work?