

# ANALYZING SHORT STORIES/NOVELS

When analyzing fiction, you should consider the plot, setting, characters, point of view, imagery, symbolism, tone, irony, and the theme.

## PLOT

Plot refers to what happens in the story - events and thoughts which make up the story's basic structure. The plot is usually composed of an **introduction**, **rising action**, a **climax**, **falling action** and an **ending** that ties the story together. All plots contain a **conflict**: a struggle between two or more opposing forces. The conflict may be internal (person vs. self) or external (person vs. person, person vs. nature, person vs. society, or person vs. fate).

- What is the story about? What are the main events in the story, and how are they related to each other?
- Are the main events of the story arranged chronologically, or are they arranged in another way?
- To what extent is this a "formula" story? How is the story narrated? Are flashbacks, summaries, stories within the story used?
- Is the plot fast-paced or slow-paced?
- How do the thoughts, behaviours, and actions of characters move the plot forward?
- What are the conflicts in the plot? Are they physical, intellectual, moral or emotional? Are they resolved? How are they resolved? Is the main conflict between good and evil sharply differentiated, or is it more subtle and complex?
- What is the climax of the story and at what point in the story does the climax occur?
- Is the ending of the story happy, unhappy, or indeterminate? Is it fairly achieved?
- Does the plot have unity? Are all the episodes relevant to the total meaning or effect of the story? Does each incident grow logically out of the preceding incident and lead naturally to the next?
- What use does the story make of chance and coincidence? Are these occurrences used to initiate, to complicate, or to resolve the story? How improbable are they?

## SETTING

Setting refers to the location of a story or novel in terms of place, time, social environment, and physical environment.

**Place:** the geographical location of the story - a country or a city, a large city or a small village, indoors or outdoors, or both.

**Time:** the period in history, the season of the year, the day of the month, and/or the hour of the day in which the events of the story occur.

**Social environment:** the location of characters and events in a particular society and/or a particular social class (lower, middle, or upper class).

**Physical environment:** the details of the location in which the story takes place. These physical details often indicate the emotional state of the characters or the relationship between characters.

- What is the setting of the story?
- Where and when does the action take place?
- How does the setting affect characters in the story?
- Does their environment give them freedom, satisfaction, or enjoyment, or does their environment make them feel trapped, dissatisfied, or unhappy? Why?
- Be able to describe the social forces and institutions that shape the characters and their lives: political, social, economic, philosophic, religious, educational, etc.
- Determine to what extent, if at all, the characters are influenced by nature.

## **CHARACTERS**

Characters are the people (or animals!) in a story. The term character refers to people's outward appearance and behaviour and also their inner emotional, intellectual, and moral qualities. Most stories have a main character (the protagonist or hero/heroine), whose personality traits move the plot forward and contribute to conflict. Many stories also have at least one minor character, who is not the focus of the story but who still plays an important role. Sometimes characters provide contrasts with one another.

- Who is/are the main character(s) in the story? What does the main character look like?
- Describe the main character's situation. Where does he/she live? Does he/she live alone or with others? What does the main character do for a living, or is he/she dependent on others for support?
- What are some of the chief characteristics (personality traits) of the character? How are these characteristics revealed in the story? How does the main character interact with other characters? Note the degree of complexity of his/her behaviour, thought, and feelings; their appearances, their habits, mannerisms, speech, attitudes and values. What is the main character's attitude towards his/her life? Is he/she happy or sad, content or discontented? Why?
- What sort of conflict is the character facing? How is this conflict revealed? Is it resolved? If so, how?
- What means does the author use to reveal character? Are the characters sufficiently dramatized? What use is made of character contrast?
- Are the characters consistent in their actions? Adequately motivated? Plausible? Does the author successfully avoid stock characters?
- Is each character fully enough developed to justify his role in the story? Are the main characters round or flat?
- Is any character a developing character? If so, is his change a large or a small one? Is it a plausible change for him? Is he sufficiently motivated? Is the change given sufficient time?

- At the end of the story, is the main character different from how he/she was at the beginning of the story? In what way has the character changed? What has caused this change?

## POINT OF VIEW

Point of view is the perspective from which a story is told. The author creates a narrator to tell the story. It is through the narrator's perspective (through the narrator's eyes and mind) that readers learn what is happening in a story. **Do not make the mistake of thinking that the narrator of a story is the author.** Remember that the point of view and the narrator are tools created and used by the author in order to tell a story in a certain way. The narrator of a story does not necessarily express the author's opinions.

- What point of view does the story use? Is the story told from a first-person perspective, in which the narrator is one of the characters in the story, and refers to himself or herself as "I"? Or is the story told from a third-person perspective, in which the narrator is not one of the characters in the story or may not participate in the events of the story?
- Is it consistent in its use of this point of view? If shifts are made, are they justified?
- What are the advantages of the chosen point of view? Does it furnish any clues as to the purpose of the story?
- Is the narrator reliable or unreliable? Does he/she have a limited knowledge or understanding of characters and events in the story? Does the narrator know almost everything about one character or every character, including inner thoughts?
- Look for a first person narrator, an omniscient narrator (one who knows all and tells all), a "central observer," who seems to be looking over a main character's shoulder and seeing more than the character possibly can.
- Decide whether the narrator assists the story or needlessly confuses it.
- Does the author use point of view primarily to reveal or conceal? Does he ever unfairly withhold important information known to the focal character?

## IMAGERY

Imagery refers to the collection of images in a work of fiction: the mental pictures created by the author's words. Writers use concrete images to go beyond physical description in order to express feelings and states of mind. Most images are created through words that appeal to the reader's five senses.

For example, a pink flower may appeal to the reader's sense of sight or smell and bring forth pleasant associations with springtime or a holiday memory. The colour green suggests youth and life; white, purity.

- What scenes, moments, descriptive passages, phrases, or words stand out in your reading of the story?
- Did a particular image make you feel happy, or frightened, or disturbed, or angry? Why?

- Which of your five senses did this image appeal to? · What do you associate with this image, and why? What do you think the author wants you to feel about a certain image?
- How do you think your reactions to the imagery in the story contribute to the overall meaning of the story?

## **SYMBOLISM**

A symbol is something that represents something else. It is an image of an event or a physical object (a thing, person, or place) that is used to represent something non-physical such as an idea, a value, or an emotion. Authors use symbols to suggest meaning. A heart, for example, symbolises love. One symbol may suggest more than one meaning.

- What are some of the symbols in the story?
- Are there any objects which seem to have a symbolic meaning? What are their meanings?
- Do any people act as symbols in the story? What do they represent?
- Do aspects of the story's setting seem symbolic? In what way?
- Is one symbol used throughout the story or do the symbols change?

## **TONE**

Tone refers to the author's attitude or position toward the action, characters, narrator, subject, and even readers of the story. To determine the tone of a story, the reader must examine the language the author uses and decide what effect the author's choice of words has.

- What is the author's attitude toward actions or events?
- Is the story humorous or tragic or frightening? Does the author want you to laugh or cry, to feel happy or sad, to experience anger or fear?
- What is the author's attitude toward characters or the narrator? Does the author like or dislike, trust or mistrust the characters or the narrator? Is the author sympathetic toward, admiring of, hostile toward, critical of, or sentimental about one or more of the characters or the narrator?
- What is the author's attitude towards the subject matter? How does the author feel about an idea or concept? Is the author sarcastic about, indifferent to, bitter about, curious about, thrilled by, critical of, outraged about, shocked by, frightened about, scornful of, sentimental about, or sad about a subject such as love, death, marriage, family, government, social class, money, religion, or war? · What is the author's attitude towards the subject matter? How does the author feel about an idea or concept? Is the author sarcastic about, indifferent to, bitter about, curious about, thrilled by, critical of, outraged about, shocked by, frightened about, scornful of, sentimental about, or sad about a subject such as love, death, marriage, family, government, social class, money, religion, or war?

## **IRONY**

Irony refers to the unexpected difference or lack of agreement between appearance and truth or between expectation and reality. Irony is apparent when an author uses language to create a deliberate contrast between appearance (what seems to be true) and truth (what is true), or between expectation (what was hoped for) and reality (what actually happens). Often readers know or understand something that a character in a story does not.

- Is the situation ironic? Is what happens in the story different from what you or what characters hoped for or expected (for example, when a character expects that a certain action will result in victory when in fact that action results in defeat)?
- Do characters have ironic thoughts? Does a character believe something that is actually different from the truth (for example, when Character A believes that Character B is a good person, but the truth is that Character B is evil, so that Character A's trust in Character B results in disaster)?
- Do characters say things that are ironic? Does a character say something that, either intentionally or unintentionally, means the opposite of what it seems to say (for example, when Character A says to Character B, "I understand you now" and Character B interprets that to mean, "I believe you, I trust you" and acts accordingly; but Character A really means, "I understand now that you are a deceitful person and I don't trust you anymore")?

## **THEME**

A theme is a truth that a story reveals. A theme is rarely directly stated by the author. Instead, the reader must discover the theme by questioning and examining the meaning from details in the story. Usually themes deal with general areas of human experience, for example: the nature of humanity or society, the relationship of human beings to the environment, or the question of moral responsibility.

- What was the author's purpose in writing the story?
- Does the story have a theme? What is it? Is it implicit or explicit?
- Is there more than one theme? Does the theme support or oppose popular notions of life? Does the theme offer a new insight into human experience or does it support an old (traditional) one?
- What lesson or message does the author want the reader to understand from the story?

## **GENERAL QUESTIONS:**

- What light is thrown on the story by its title?
- Did you enjoy reading the book? What aspects of the book gave you pleasure, and why? Does the story chiefly offer escape? purpose?