ELEMENTS OF FICTION OR NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

The following handouts on the elements of fiction are intended to guide you in your analysis of short stories, novels, and other works of fiction. If used consistently, these questions will provide you with a complete picture of the work you are studying and will help to ensure a thorough analysis of the work of fiction.

You are responsible for bringing these handouts to class EVERY day throughout the year. You are also responsible for obtaining replacement copies if these are misplaced.

Definitions of terms and more thorough discussion of elements are found in your Bedford Introduction to Literature textbook.
SETTING

Setting includes several closely related aspects of a work of fiction. First, setting is the physical, sensuous world of the work. Second, it’s the period in which the action of the work takes place. And third, it’s the social environment of characters: the manners, customs, and moral values that government the characters’ society. A fourth aspect—atmosphere—is largely, but not entirely an effect of setting. You should get the details of the physical setting clear in your mind.

Issues to consider when thinking about the setting of a novel:

Place:
• Where does the action take place? On what planet, in what country or locale?
• What sensuous qualities does the author give to the setting? That is, what does it look like, sound like, smell like, feel like, even taste like?
• Do you receive a dominant impression about the setting?
• What is the impression, and what caused it?

In some works of fiction you may need to consider how the geographical location might be of particular importance. Once you’ve established the elements of setting, what relationship does the setting have to characterization and theme? In what ways does the physical or external setting correspond to or contrast with the psychological or internal landscape?

Time:
• First, at what period in history does the action take place? Many stories occur during historical events that affect the characters and themes in important ways.
• Second, how long does it take for the action to occur? How does the author use the passage of time as a thematic and structuring device?
• Third, how is the passage of time perceived? Time may seem to move very slowly or very quickly depending on a character’s state of mind. Thus, our recognition of a character’s perception of time helps us understand the character’s internal conflicts and attitudes.

Social Environment:
• What is the social environment portrayed in the work—the manners, customs, mores, rituals, and codes of conduct of a society?
• What does the author seem to think of the social environment? (approving? ambivalent? disapproving?)
• How does the social environment affect the characters?

Atmosphere:
...refers to the emotional reaction that we had and—usually—the characters have to the setting of the work. Sometimes the atmosphere is difficult to define, but it is often found or felt in the sensuous quality of the setting.

Additional strategies to analyzing setting:
1. Mark the most extensive or important descriptions of physical place. Underline the most telling words and phrases.
2. Characterize physical locales, such as houses, rooms, and outdoor areas.
3. Explain the relationship of one or more of the main characters to the physical place. Explain the influence that pace exerts on the characters.
4. Arrange the main events in chronological order. Indicate when each major event occurs.
5. Mark passages when a character’s emotional state affects the way the passage of time is presented to the reader.
6. List the historical, factual, circumstances, and characters that occur in the work. Explain their importance and their relationship with themes and characters in the work.
7. List the patterns of behavior that characterize the social environments of the work.
8. Mark scenes in which the author or characters express approval or disapproval of these patterns of behavior.
9. Explain the influence one or more of these patterns has on a character or characters.
CHARACTER

Authors reveal what characters are link in two general ways: directly and indirectly. In the direct method, the author simply tells the reader what the characters are like. When the method of revealing characters is indirect, however, the author shows, rather than tells what the characters are like in four ways: what the character says or thinks, what the character does, what others say about the character, and how others react to the character.

Characters who remain the same throughout the work are called static, whereas those who change through the course of the work are called dynamic. Dynamic characters, especially main characters, typically grow in understanding. The climax of this growth is called an epiphany, a term that Irish author James Joyce used to describe a sudden revelation of truth experienced by the character. The term comes from the Bible and describes the Wise Men’s first perception of Christ’s divinity.

Review Chapter ??? in The Bedford Text for definitions of the terms in the questions below.

These questions will reveal characters and the way they are developed:

1. Is the character flat, static, or dynamic?
2. What steps does he/she go through to change?
3. What events or moments or self-revelations cause these changes?
4. How does what he/she learns help or hinder him/her?
5. What problems does he/she have?
6. How does he/she attempt to solve those problems? What choices does he/she make?
7. What, if any, archetypes or stock characters does he/she represent? (ex: repressed housewife, mad scientist, etc.)
8. If the character is complex, what makes him/her complex?
9. Does he/she have traits that contradict one another and therefore cause internal conflicts?
10. Does he/she experience epiphanies? When? Why?
11. What does the epiphany reveal to the character and to the reader?
12. How does one character relate to the others in the novel?
13. Does he/she have speech mannerisms, gestures, or modes of dress that reveal his/her inner self?
14. Comment on the emotional state of the character?

Keep in mind—the conflicts created thought the plot directly affect character development.
The Nature of Fiction: As a descriptive term, “fiction” is misleading, for although fiction does often include made-up or imaginary elements, it has the potential for being “true”: true to the nature of reality, true to the human experience. Both writers of history and fiction attempt to create a world that resembles the multiplicity and complexity of the real world. What makes fiction different, of course, is its ability to build conflicts, to be imaginative, to order events, and to be dramatic. Writers of fiction celebrate their separateness, distinctiveness, and importance of all individuals and all individual differences. They assume that human experiences, whatever they are, and whenever they occur, are intrinsically important and interesting. Additionally, writers of fiction see reality as welded to psychological perception, as refracted through the minds of individuals.

Writers arrange fictional events into patterns (plot). Review Freytag’s Pyramid.

Probably the most revealing question to ask about a work of literature is what conflict does it dramatize?

Use the following questions to conduct an analysis of plot:

• What is the main conflict? What are the minor conflicts?
• How are all the conflicts related?
  What causes the conflicts?
• Which conflicts are external and which internal?
• Who is the protagonist?
• What qualities or values does the author associate with each side of the conflict?
• At what point does the climax occur? Why?
• How is the main conflict resolved? Which conflicts go unresolved?

Strategies to perform plot analysis to answer “revealing” questions:

1. List the qualities of the protagonist and antagonist(s). How and why do these qualities cause conflicts among the characters?
2. Fold a piece of paper in half vertically, and then list external conflicts of the work on the left side. On the right side, list internal conflicts. Draw a line to connect the external an internal conflicts that seem related. In what way are they related? (cause and effect, coincidental, etc.)
3. List key conflicts. For each conflict, list the ways in which the conflict has been resolved, if any has. Mark the conflicts that are left unresolved.
4. List the major structural units of the work (chapters, scenes, parts). Summarize what happens in each part. What relationship do the actions or conflicts have to the structure?
5. Are certain episodes narrated out of chronological order? What is the effect of the arrangement of “episodes”?
6. Are certain situations repeated? If so, what do you make of the repetitions?
7. Describe the qualities that make the situation at the beginning unstable. Describe the qualities that make the conclusion stable, if in fact it is stable. If the situation remained unstable, explore the reasons and the effects on you as the reader.
8. List the causes of the unstable situations at the beginning and throughout the work.
STYLE

Analysis of style is valuable only when the analysis is connected to the meaning of the work. The author’s diction and syntax is not accidental, nor should the elements of style be considered in isolation.

Broad questions to analyze style:
• How does the content of the novel dictate the form of the work?
• How does the author’s diction and syntax contribute to your understanding of plot, theme, character, and setting?

Choose ONE or TWO pages from a novel or ONE or TWO paragraphs from a short story for the following analysis of style:
1. What is the narrator's attitude toward the scene or event he is describing? How do you know? What reason can be seen for the narrator’s response or attitude? (Reminder: The narrator is not the author.)
2. Not any bitterness, sarcasm, or irony and explain how you know. What is the tone and what seems to be responsible for the tone?
3. If the setting is emphasized, what contributes to the mood of the setting?
4. If there are characters described in the selection, what is their relationship to each other?
5. If there is significant relationship between the setting and the characters, describe what it is and how it is revealed.
6. Examine the diction for any word choices made that particularly enhance the mood or reveal the narrator’s attitude.
7. Examine how verbs used in the passage connote activity or stasis. Is the passage in present, past, or future tense? Is tense significant? Why?
8. Examine how syntax contributes to the overall effect. IF there are any obvious contrasts between sentences, what is the effect?
9. Examine descriptive words or phrases. Are they elaborate, complex, or simple and what is the effect or purpose?
11. What, if any, sensory impressions are evoked? How?
12. Identify and comment on any significant use of contrast or comparison.
13. Identify and comment on the use of repetition of words, phrases, images, or sentence structures.
14. How is the passage organized? Are there repeated structural elements? How do the paragraphs relate to teach other and to the work as a whole?
15. What is the theme of the passage? How do any of the other elements in the passage complement the theme or help reveal it?
16. How would your characterize the writer's style? How does the style complement and contribute to the content of the passage?

NOTE: when writing or speaking about a prose passage, be very specific with references to the passage to support your thesis.
THEME

Three questions to elicit a work’s theme:
1. What is the subject, or what is the work about?
2. Then, what does the work say about the subject, or what is the theme?
3. And finally, in what direct or indirect ways does the work communicate the theme(s)?

One strategy for discovering a work’s theme(s) is to apply frequently asked questions about the areas of human experience. Some are

Human Nature
What image of humankind emerges from the work? Are people, for example, generally good? deeply flawed?

The Nature of Society
Does the author portray a particular society or social scheme as life-enhancing or life-destroying? Are characters we care about in conflict with their society? If so, in what ways do they conflict with that society? Do these characters want to escape from it? What causes and perpetuates the conflict? If the society is flawed, who is it flawed?

Ethics
What are the moral conflicts in the work? Are they clear cut or ambiguous? That is, is it clear to us what is right and what exactly is wrong? When moral conflicts are ambiguous in a work, right often opposes right, not wrong. Don’t forget to examine these issues from the perspective of every character. What rights are in opposition to one another? If right opposes wrong does right win in the end? To what extent are characters to blame for their actions?

Finally, another strategy for discovering a work’s theme is to answer this question:

Who serves as the moral center of the work?
The moral center is the one person whom the author vests with right action and right thought (that is what the author seems to think is the right action and the right thought). Determine the one character who seems clearly good and who often serves to judge the other characters.

To analyze for theme:
1. List the subject or subjects for the work. For each subject, see if you can state a theme in a complete sentence. Put a check next to the subjects that seem most important.
2. Explain how the title, subtitle, epigraph, chapter titles, and names of characters may be related to theme.
3. Describe the work’s depiction of human behavior.
4. Describe the work’s depiction of society. Explain the representation of social ills and how they might be corrected and addressed.
5. List the moral issues raised by the work.
6. Name the character who is the moral center of the work. List his or her traits that support your choice.
7. Mark statements by the author or characters that seem to state or imply these themes.
8. Does the theme of the work reinforce values you hole, or does it to some degree challenge them?