

## Strategies for Writing about Literature

(from *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, Barnett and Cain)

### What is interpretation?

Interpretation and meaning can be defined as setting forth the meanings of a work of literature. Although some critics believe that a work of literature has a single meaning, the meaning it has for the author, most critics hold that a work has several meanings.

### What characterizes an effective interpretation?

**Evidence.** In an essay it is not enough to merely assert an interpretation. Your readers can't expect you to make an airtight case, but because you're trying to help readers to understand a work—to see a work the way you do—you are obliged to

- Offer reasonable supporting evidence and
- Take account of what might be set forth as counterevidence to your thesis.

### What is a thesis?

A thesis is the (your) central point of view; it could be an argument, a focus, a main statement, assertion or idea that the body of your essay will be concentrated on elaborating, expanding and providing evidence towards.

### Writing about Fiction

#### Plot

Plot has two meanings: 1) what happens, the basics of the narrative, and 2) the writer's arrangement or structuring of the material into a story. A plot has an **introduction**, a **complication (conflict)** and a **resolution**.

#### Character

Plot and character are inseparable. Plot is a series not simply of happenings, but of happenings that come out of character, that reveal character, and that influence character. What drives characters? What choices do they make? What are the particularities of their personalities (moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities), and given their natures, how do they respond to other characters?

Exercise: you may want to set forth a character sketch, describing some person in the story or novel. You will probably plan to convey three things:  
 appearance,  
 personality, and

character—“character” here meaning not a figure in a literary work but the figure’s moral or ethical values.

In preparing a character sketch, take these points into consideration:

1. What the person says (but remember that what he or she says need not be taken at face value; the person may be hypocritical or self-deceived or biased).
2. What the person does—including, if possible, what the person thinks.
3. What others (including the narrator of the story) say about the person.
4. What others DO (their actions may help indicate what the person could do but does not do), including what they THINK about others.
5. What the person looks like—face, body, clothes. These details may help convey the personality of the character, or they may in some measure help to disguise it.

### **Writing about character:**

An essay about character is necessarily in some degree an interpretation, and such an essay has a thesis or argument holding it together. Usually, however, you will want to do more than set forth your view of a character.

### **Organizing an Analysis of a Character:**

As you read and reread, you will highlight and annotate the text and will jot down notes, recording (in whatever order they come to you) your thoughts about the character you are studying. Reading with a view towards writing, you’ll want to

1. jot down traits as they come to mind (“kind,” forgetful,” “enthusiastic”) and
2. look back at the text, searching for supporting evidence (characteristic actions, brief supporting quotations), and you will also look for counterevidence so that you may modify your earlier impressions.

### **What is a Theme?**

Theme is a point of view, what the story is about, or the concerns that the author is trying to convey.

### **Determining and Discussing the Theme**

First, we can distinguish between *story* and *theme* in fiction. Story is concerned with “How does it turn out? What happens?” Theme is concerned with “What does it add up to? What motif holds the happenings together? What does it make out of life, and, perhaps, what wisdom does it offer?”

### Some solid advice on getting started (necessary preliminary work)

Engage with the text. Ask and jot down questions. Jot down impressions that come to you as you're reading and rereading, these notes will later help form your analysis. Mark the margins of the text as you go along, use post-it notes to keep track of your pages. Keep a notebook as you read.

- Good writers realize that a topic and outline do not appear by magic from the pages of the assigned text.
- Writers must become engaged with the text, asking questions and thinking about it and taking notes to make the topic and outline begin to take shape.

### A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about Fiction

#### *Title*

- ~ Is the title informative? What does it mean or suggest? Did the meaning seem to change after you read the story? Does the title help you to formulate a theme?
- ~ If you had written the story, what title would you use?

#### *Plot*

- ~ Does the plot grow out of the characters, or does it depend on chance or coincidence? Did something at first strike you as irrelevant that later you perceived as relevant? Do some parts continue to strike you as irrelevant?
- ~ Does *surprise* play an important role, or does foreshadowing? If surprise is very important, can the story be read a second time with any interest? If so, what gives it this further interest?
- ~ What *conflicts* does the story include? Conflicts of one character against another? Of one character against the setting, or against society? Conflicts within a single character?
- ~ Are the conflicts resolved? If so, how?
- ~ Are certain episodes narrated out of chronological order? If so, were you puzzled? Annoyed? On reflection, does the arrangement of episodes seem effective? Why or why not? Are certain situation repeated? If so, what do you make of the repetitions?
- ~ List the major structural units of the story. In a sentence or two summarize each unit that you have listed.
- ~ In a sentence summarize the conclusion or resolution. Do you find it satisfactory? Why or why not?

### *Character*

- ~ List the traits of the main characters.
- ~ Which character chiefly engages your interest? Why?
- ~ What purposes do minor characters serve? Do you find some who by their similarities and differences help to define each other or help to define the major character? How else is a particular character defined—by his or her words, actions (including thoughts and emotions), dress, setting, narrative point of view? Do certain characters act differently in the same, or in a similar, situation?
- ~ How does the author reveal character? By explicit authorial (editorial) comment, for instance, or, on the other hand, by revelation through dialogue? Through depicted action? Through the actions of other characters? How are the author's methods especially suited to the whole of the story?
- ~ Is the behavior plausible—that is, are the characters well motivated?
- ~ If a character changes, why and how does he or she change?
- ~ Are the characters round or flat. That is are they complex, or, on the other hand highly typical.
- ~ How has the author caused you to sympathize with certain characters? How does your response—your sympathy or lack of sympathy—contribute to your judgment of the conflict?

### *Point of View*

- ~ Who tells the story? How much does the narrator know?
- ~ How does the point of view help to shape the theme?
- ~ Does the narrator's language help you to construct a picture of the narrator's character, class, attitude, strengths, and limitations?

### *Setting*

- ~ Do you have a strong sense of the time and place? If time and place are important, how and at what points in the story has the author conveyed this sense?

### *Symbolism*

- ~ Do certain characters seem to you to stand for something in addition to themselves? Does the setting—whether a house, a farm, a landscape, a town, a period—have extra dimension?
- ~ Do certain actions in the story—for instance, entering a forest at night, or shutting a door, or turning off a light—seem symbolic? If so, symbolic of what?
- ~ If you do believe that the story has symbolic elements, do you think they are adequately within the story, or do they strike you as being too obviously stuck in?

### *Style*

- ~ Style may be defined as HOW the writer says what he or she says. It is the writer's manner of expression. The writer's choice of words, of sentence structure, and of sentence length are all aspects of style. Example: "Shut the door," and "Would you mind closing the door, please," differ substantially in style.
- ~ How would you characterize style? Simple? Understated? Figurative? Or what, and why?
- ~ How has the point of view shaped or determined the style?
- ~ Do you think that the style is consistent? If it isn't—for instance, if there are shifts from simple sentences to highly complex ones—what do you make of the shifts?

### *Theme*

- ~ Do certain passages—the title, some of the dialogue, some of the description, the names of certain characters—seem to you to point especially towards the theme?
- ~ Is the meaning of the story embodied in the whole story, or does it seem stuck in, for example, in certain passages of editorializing?
- ~ Suppose someone asked you to state the point—the theme—of the story. Could you? And if you could, would you say that the theme of a particular story reinforces values you hold, or does it to some degree challenge them?

