

Hints for Reading Fiction¹

Fiction is an imagined creation in verse, drama or prose. Fiction is a thing made, an invention. It is distinguished from nonfiction by its essentially imaginative nature, but elements of fiction appear in fundamentally nonfictional constructions such as essays, biographies, autobiographies and histories. Although any invented person, place, event or condition is a fiction, the term is now most frequently used to mean “prose fiction,” as distinct from verse or drama.

Protagonist:

- The protagonist is the character who is the focus of the forces pressing for some sort of significant development or change. The **protagonist** is not necessarily the “hero(ine)” or the most attractive character or the narrator.
- Who is the **protagonist**?
- Which character is most centrally under development or change?

Narrative Point of View:

- From whose **point of view** is the story told?
 - an **omniscient** narrator: one who knows everyone’s thoughts
 - a **limited** narrator: the narrator cannot see into everyone’s mind but may be able to see into only one character’s mind
- What is the narrator’s point of view?
 - narrator’s point of view **first person**: the narrator speaks as “I”
 - narrator’s point of view **third person**: the narrator talks about “he,” “she” and “it”
- Why has the author chosen to use this particular narrative point of view?
- What are the advantages of this choice?
- What are the disadvantages?

Narrative Action

- Would you describe the story’s action as **static** or **dynamic**?
 - A **static** action or situation is one in which the protagonist does not change – or changes only very slightly – in fortune, character, circumstances or outlook.
 - A **dynamic** action or situation is one in which the protagonist’s fortune, character, circumstances or outlook is very much in the process of change (for better or worse).
- How and why does change occur (or why does it fail to occur) for the protagonist?

Narrative Structure

- Does the novel or short story have a particular structure (chapter divisions, letters, embedded narratives, etc.)?
- How does that structure influence the narrative?
- What is the relationship of the story’s title to the story itself?

¹Adapted from Stephen C. Behrendt’s “How to Read a Story,” <http://www.unl.edu/sbehrend/html/sbsite/docs/readstory.htm>, August 14, 2004 and Vol. 2A, *Longman Anthology of British Literature*, 2003.

Authorial Intentions

- What do you suppose was the author's intent for the reader?
- How did the author hope the reader would respond?
- Does the story exist primarily to be a vehicle for making the reader **feel** something, or does the author want the reader instead to **think** something.
- Is the reader response that the author hopes for an **emotional** or an **intellectual** one?
- Is the story calculated to exercise the reader's emotion, or does it wish to convey some ideological message or doctrine?
 - A story whose primary purpose is to "instruct" or otherwise to convey an ideological "program" would be described as a **didactic** work.

The Reader

- Pay attention to your feelings as you read, as well as when you finish reading. To what extent do your responses reflect your own **personal** experiences (which may be positive or negative)?
- To what extent has the author succeeded in getting you to "experience" something in fiction that you have never actually experienced in "real life"?
- Do your personal emotional responses to the story (as opposed to your intellectual responses) tell you anything significant about the story and the way it has been written?
- Can you identify any particular difficulties that you have in reading and responding to the story? If so, can you identify any source(s) for those difficulties, either in the story or outside it?