

How to Analyze a Short Story or a Novel

To read prose fiction successfully you must bring to the work a vastly different attitude than you bring to a science or history text. While all authors present facts, these are only the bare skeleton upon which the story is then wrought, for the final purpose of all prose fiction is to present a picture of the varieties of human experience. Often an author may leave some of the concrete facts to the reader's imagination, change the order of events and compress the action to heighten certain human characteristics, create a mood, or achieve a symbolic value for the reality upon which the work is based. Through these techniques the author can involve us completely in his tale, influence our attitudes, show us new worlds, expand our personal universe, and enrich the little spheres in which we live. Because of the frequent complexity of prose fiction, the following questions may be of help.

BACKGROUND

- A. Who is the author and during what period of time did he live? Does the century in which he wrote have an effect on the piece of writing you are not reading? IF it does, how does it?
- B. What has the author written? What forms are the works written: short stories, novels, poems?

SETTING

- A. What seems to be the historical time, place and social background of the story? Could the story have taken place in any other place or is it crucial to the events therein?
- B. B> How is the setting presented? With photographic detail, or indirectly through thoughts and actions?
- C. How much time does the action seem to cover? Do the events progress in a simple linear fashion or is the author playing with the time sequence for a specific effect?

PLOT

- A. If there is more than one plot, describe and summarize the main plot as distinguished from the sub-plots.
- B. Is there anything irrelevant in to the main plot?
- C. What is the nature of the conflict (or conflicts)? Are there any complications to the main problem?