

Ways of Reading a Novel

Writing Resources



“No man is equipped for modern thinking until he has understood the anecdote of Agassiz and the fish:

A post-graduate student equipped with honors and diplomas went to Agassiz to receive the final and finishing touches. The great man offered him a small fish and told him to describe it.

Post-Graduate Student: 'That's only a sunfish.'

Agassiz: 'I know that. Write a description of it.'

After a few minutes the student returned with the description of the *Ichthus Heliodiplodokus*, or whatever term is used to conceal the common sunfish from vulgar knowledge, family of *Heliichtherinkus*, etc., as found in textbooks of the subject.

Agassiz again told the student to describe the fish. The student produced a four-page essay. Agassiz then told him to look at the fish.

At the end of three weeks the fish was in an advanced state of decomposition, but the student knew something about it.”

(Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 1934)

When reading a novel, try to find a sentence or brief passage that captures in miniature your experience of the whole work. This might be a sentence that seems to make an argument at the heart of the work, or that conveys a heightened moment, or whose contortions mirror the complexity of the plot.

It might just as easily be a sentence that describes something relatively mundane or everyday, such as the weather, or a person's face, or the feel of a cat's fur. If you can find such a sentence or passage and describe why it seems to you important, or representative, or revealing (in however loud or quiet a way), you will be going a long way to saying something interesting and insightful about the work as a whole.

So, be interested in the details and quirks of the text and/or pictures. Take pleasure and take the time to notice funny, distinctive, and unusual things. Try to avoid a simply 'thematic', character-based, or plot-based readings of the novel, that doesn't think about the 'how' of the writing.

Ways of Reading a Novel

Writing Resources

Don't just pretend that the characters are real people and the prose a transparent window through which you can get access to their personality or psychology.

17 ways to know things about a novel

1. Voice and narrative. What's the narrator and his/her/its language like? In particular, what's the tone like e.g. ironic, comic, witty, angry, controlled, understated, sermonising, biblical, parliamentary or a mixture? See also no. 4.

2. 'Point of view' A related but different question to 1: who is perceiving or 'focalising' the action?

3. Speech and thought. How are they represented? Directly or indirectly? Free or not? (see Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short, *Style in Fiction*) Does it change?

4. Language. Everything comes through language so there are lots of things to think about here: choice of vocabulary, dialect, syntax, tone, rhythm, repetition, figurative language etc. Language changes, often dramatically and surprisingly, so **remember to look words up in the OED** or in other reliable sources. What is the **rhetoric** like?

5. Narratives only exist in **time** and are structured by it, so ask how time and temporality feature. Look at tenses, tempo, uses of repetition, sequence and order of narration etc.

6. Paratextual material and forms of **framing**: use of titles, footnotes, divisions etc. Scenes of narration, performance or writing are often very revealing.

7. Allusions, references or intertextuality are often a royal road to interpretive insight. Literary students would be lost without good dictionaries and reliable encyclopaedias, so use them.

8. Dialogue. What kinds of dialogue? Who speaks to whom, and when and how? Look at the relation of the oral to the written in the story, and the said to the unsaid.

9. The reader. How is the reader constituted? Is there

an 'implied reader' to the story? Is the reader addressed directly?

10. Gender and the body questions: always good ones to ask, of the narrator, characters and (implied) readers.

11. Mystery, suspense, peripeteia, anagnorisis: ways of thinking about the **process** of the story. For the two later terms, see Aristotle, *Poetics* in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*: they're fundamental terms in any analysis of narrative form.

Beginnings, endings and climactic moments all need special attention.

12. Characterisation. Who is important and why? Who is marginalised or subordinated? What kind or kinds of characters are we offered? How do narrators characterise their characters? How do they characterise themselves? Naming, gender, race and class questions are important here. Is there any sort of system or patterning to the characterisation – through doubling or parallelism, for example?

13. Space, place, 'background' – rarely simply background – and **objects and things (not necessarily the same)**: sometimes as important as the people.

14. Place and Organisation in the text: how do the chapter or other divisions (e. g. the fact of serial publication) affect our reading experience?

15. Affect. What are the affective dimensions and force of the novel like? How and in what way does it want to move you? Does it succeed?

16. Laughter, satire, irony, wit. Don't forget that novelists are often comedians. But what kind of comedy?

17. Structuring – not just through plot but also through **contrast, comparison, parallelism and repetition** – of characters, plots, lexical items, grammatical structures etc etc – are vital to fiction.

Ways of Reading a Novel

Writing Resources

When looking at novels with illustrations or images

1. Remember that it's a **punctual** art. What moment does the artist choose to illustrate and why?
2. How does the picture relate to the **narrative** of which it is a part and the **text** it accompanies? Does it deviate from it or supplement it in any way?
3. What is its **style** (e.g. realistic, grotesque, picturesque) and is it appropriate?
4. What is the **formal** organisation of the picture? Where are we encouraged to look?
5. What does it **allude** to? Other pictures in the same text? Does it make other cultural references or allusions?
6. **Framing, bodies, characterisation, space, place** and **objects** all important here.
7. Remember to use **high quality reproductions** so you can see the detail.
8. If the novel has **photographs**, did the novelist take them? Are they **found photographs**? Did the novelist work with a **collaborator**? What does this say about artistic collaboration?
9. Are the images **degraded** somehow? If they are repeatedly photocopied, what is the reason?

Where appropriate, research what the author thinks about the relationship between text and image.