

## HOW TO READ A NARRATIVE

In order to understand and be affected by a story, you should –

Answer the following questions about **character**:

- Who is the **protagonist**?
- What is his or her situation?
- Is the protagonist's main struggle **internal** or **external**?
- What are all the obstacles in the protagonist's way?
- What are the protagonist's **personality traits**?
  - Proclivities (talents and tendencies)
  - Idiosyncrasies (unusual quirks)
  - Habits or addictions (smoking, drinking, gambling, video games, cleaning, etc...)
  - Wounds (previous emotional injuries)
  - Values (family, religion, education, career, risk-taking, etc...)
  - Desires
- What are the personality traits of the other characters, and how do they play out in contrast? Is there a character that functions as a **foil**? Is there a **nemesis**, which is the antagonist the protagonist just can't seem to beat?
- What are the protagonist's **physical traits**?
  - Age
  - Gender
  - Race
  - Size
  - Gait – fast, slow, quirky?
  - Manner of speech –
    - Diction
    - Syntax
    - Meter (rhythm)
    - Tone (attitude)
    - Favorite catchphrase
- What are the physical traits of the **antagonist**, the **foil(s)** and all **secondary and tertiary characters**?
- How do the traits of the characters affect their **choices** and hence the **plot**?
- What would you do differently if you were in any of the characters' shoes?
- Which character's shoes would you rather be in?

Answer the following questions about **plot**:

- Where does the **set-up** (or **exposition**) end and the **rising action** begin?
- Is there **foreshadowing**, which is a small, hidden clue early on that hints at what might happen later?
- Are there **flashbacks**, which are temporary shifts to the past that provide information about the present?
- Is there **dramatic irony**, which is when the audience knows something the characters don't?
- Is there **situational irony**, which is when a character or situation takes a surprising turn, for example, when a cop lands behind bars or a dropout opens a school?
- What and where are all the surprising plot twists and turns?
- What is the **climax** of the story?
- How would you rewrite the **resolution**, or **denouement**?

Answer the following questions about **setting**:

- **When** and **where** does this story take place?
- Why do you think the author choose this particular setting?
- How does the setting affect the characters?
- How does the setting affect the plot?
- What would the story be like if it were in another setting?
- How different is this place from where you have been in your lifetime?

Answer the following questions about **point of view**:

- What is the **point of view**?
  - First person "I"
  - Second person "You" (rare)
  - Third person objective (no thoughts or feelings, only words and actions)
  - Third person limited (only the protagonist's thoughts and feelings)
  - Third person omniscient (thoughts and feelings of all the characters as though the narrator were a god-like creature who could see inside the minds and hearts of everyone)
- Does the point of view switch, and, if so, why?
- How does the point of view affect the story?
- How would the story be different if it were written from a different point of view?
- Re-write the first or last paragraph to find out.

Answer the following questions about **literal imagery** (or **sensory details**):

- Does the author paint a vivid picture in the reader's mind or evoke another sensory response using description that is scientific and precise?

Answer the following questions about **figurative imagery**:

- Does the author paint a vivid picture in the reader's mind or evoke another sensory response using **figurative language**, such as similes and metaphors?

Answer the following questions about **symbolism**:

- Are there any **symbols**, or concrete objects that represent larger objects or abstract ideas?
- Are there recurring **motifs**, or patterns of images, symbols and/or ideas, that carry significance?

Answer the following questions about **diction**:

- Does the author use academic words that you have to look up in a dictionary?
- Does the author use a **non-standard vernacular**?
- Does the author make up his or her own words?
- How do the words – their denotations and/or connotations – affect the text and/or the reader?

Answer the following questions about **syntax**:

- How are the author's sentences? Long and labyrinthine? Short and brusque?
- Are the author's words in an atypical (unusual) order, and, if so, why?
- Do you like the sound and flow of the text when it is read aloud?
- How does the author's syntax affect your sensibilities – how does it make you feel?

Answer the following questions about **tone**:

- What is the author's attitude toward the subject matter, the characters, the story and/or the reader?
  - Serious
  - Hostile
  - Apathetic
  - Melancholic
  - Adoring
  - Sarcastic
  - Satirical
  - Other
- How does the diction contribute to the **tone**?
  - List the **denotations** (explicit meanings) and **connotations** (associated meanings) of key words.
- Rewrite a section of the text in a different tone.

Answer the following questions about **theme**:

- What is the author's message in one sentence? What universal life lesson are you, the reader, meant to learn, which is often the same lesson the protagonist learns?
- What are the sub-themes or additional messages in a word (*fear, death, hope, resurrection, love*)?

Answer the following questions about **historical/social/political context**:

- When and where was this story written, and is that significant?
- Is the setting of authorship (when and where it was written) different from the setting of the story?
- Would this story be written now, and, if so, how might it be different?
- *Why* did the author write this story, i.e., what was/is the **author's purpose**?

Answer the following questions about how the story **relates to your life**:

- Do you have anything in common with the protagonist?
- Do you have anything in common with the antagonist(s) and/or the nemesis?
- Which character(s) are you most like?
- Have you experienced any situations like those mentioned in the story?
- If you were ever in a situation that is similar to any of the characters in the story, did you behave in much the same way, or did you make different choices and hence experience a different outcome?
- The story has a message or messages. Have you heard this/these messages before?
- Does this story make you in any way want to change the way you live your life?

Answer the following questions about how the story **relates to another text** you have read:

- Does this story remind you of another story, song, poem, play, movie or game, and, if so, how?

Answer the following questions about how the story **relates to the world**:

- Are there any crises or conflicts in the world that this story reminds you of?
- Does this story want to make you effect social change in any way?

Engage in one or more of these extension activities to reinforce your discoveries:

- Write down newly learned **vocabulary words** and their definitions. Then use them in conversation.
- Rewrite one or more of the scenes in another form such as **song, play or screenplay**.
- Craft a **song** to be sung by one or more of the characters.
- Plan a **mock business** to be owned by one of the characters.
- Draw a **storyboard** of the entire text.
- Divine other creative tasks that help you further appreciate the text and its ideas.
- Write an analysis of the text through the lens of an -ism (Marxism, feminism, postmodernism, etc)