

Questions for the Analysis of Prose Fiction

As you begin to grapple with the potential meaning and significance of a prose narrative, it may help to have a few fundamental questions in mind. Answering these questions will probably not lead directly to the kind of insight that is the basis for a good critical essay. Still, having such questions at hand can help to focus your thinking and can help you to develop a clearer image of just what is distinctive and interesting about any given narrative.

1. **Setting.** Where does the story take place? What images and values are associated with each setting? Why? Are specific contrasts/parallels developed between different settings? Does the narrative affirm the values associated with one setting over the values associated with another?
2. **Character.** Are the characters "round" or "flat" or is there a mix of both? Are characters drawn with particular objective detail or do they exist chiefly as verbal creatures? What attributes, behaviors and/or values are associated with each character? Do you see any striking parallels or oppositions between characters? If so, what might be the significance of these parallels/oppositions? How do the characters fit in the socio-economic world represented in the narrative? Which of the characters have power and which don't? What is the source of characters' power? How is their power exercised and to what purpose? How do the characters relate to the protagonist(s)?
3. **Plot.** What does the protagonist (or protagonists) hope to achieve? Why? What difficulties will the protagonist have to overcome? What are the key events that either further or hinder the protagonist's cause? More abstractly (particularly for works that are not really protagonist-centered): what tensions are dramatized in the narrative, what constitutes the conflicting ideas, viewpoints or ideologies that make up the tensions, and how are those tensions resolved?
4. **Narration.** Describe the form of narration—that is, first person/third person, stream-of-consciousness, omniscient, limited-omniscient, retrospective, etc. Is the form of narration consistent throughout the work, or are there shifts of narrators, perspectives? Why?
5. **Symbols.** Are there recurrent symbolic images in the narrative? If so, what do they symbolize and what meanings do they bring to the narrative?
6. **Form and Structure.** How does the narrative compare formally to other narratives from the same author or from the same historical moment? What place does it hold in the collection of that author's works or, more generally, in the development of the literary tradition?
7. **History.** Does the narrative dramatize some real historical event or person? Does it comment—implicitly or explicitly—on some social or cultural or ideological issue that was prominent in the moment of its composition? Are the thematic concerns of the narrative still relevant today? If so, how? And what key differences do you see between current issues and the historical issues presented in the narrative?