

A Method for Interpreting Literature

Interpreting a work of literature involves a four-step procedure, outlined below.

The first two steps involve gathering data about the work by paying close attention to details in it without interpreting them yet. The third step involves examining all the collected data and offering a tentative analysis of the work based on that evidence. The fourth step involves combining your tentative analysis with the work's context, leading you to an interpretation of the work that considers the work's internal structure as well as relevant cultural issues in the author's society. You cannot interpret a work without first completing steps 1-3.

Step 1: Defining and Summarizing

- * Make sure you understand the basic "plot" of the work - who the main characters are, what actions or events take place, and so on. You should be able to summarize "what happens".
- * Know all the words in the work. Make note of each and every word that you don't know, look them up in a dictionary, and write down a brief definition. Writing the definitions down helps you to remember them later.

Step 2: Describing

- * Look for words or phrases that seem to be particularly important or unusual and consider them more closely. What are the specific connotations of the word, and how does it differ from other, similar words? Speculate about the author's attempted effect in using this particular word instead of another. For example, the word "saunter" is related to a word like "walk," but it connotes a particular kind of walking: a relaxed, leisurely stroll (in contrast to a hurried, quick stride, a proud strut, etc.).
- * Look also for larger images that seem to be important. For instance, if an author spends a lot of time describing people's eyes, think about what eyes might connote: vision, reading, possibly blindness, etc. Don't try to interpret the meaning of whole work based on these images, though - just write down a few ideas that you have about the image(s). Remember: here, you're still gathering data.
- * To find key words and images, try reading the work out loud to listen for rhythms and sounds. Look also at features like punctuation and, for poetry, line and stanza breaks.

Step 3: Analyzing

- * Look for connections between the variety of words and images that you identified (step 2), as well as between them and the basic plot of the work (step 1). For instance, if a character "saunters" whenever certain events occur in the work, how could that be important? What might it say about the character? Similarly, if
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the same character gets a certain look in his eye at those same points, what might that mean? How does "sauntering" relate to the look in the eye? How are that character's eyes similar to or different from other characters' eyes? These particular questions are just examples intended to model the general process of looking for patterns in a work to arrive at a preliminary analysis of it.

* In building your analysis, remember that the author does not necessarily agree with his or her characters. The author might be trying to illustrate an idea through the characters, even making fun of them to make fun of what they represent. Many authors use irony, so they may not actually mean what their works say on the surface.

Step 4: Interpreting

* Look for links between the patterns of the work's imagery and plot (step 3) and issues "outside" the work itself. Consider biographical information as well as the social and artistic movements mentioned in the work's introduction or our anthology's general introductions. How might the author be referring to these outside issues, whether directly or indirectly? For instance, was there some scientific theory about eyesight at the time the work was written that helps to explain a writer's concern with eyes? Reconsider your preliminary analysis of the work in light of these other issues to arrive at an interpretation of the work's meaning in its original context.

* Look for intersections between the work and other works we have read. Does the work seem to respond to the ideas or issues in other authors' works? If so, how? What is the response?

General Questions for Analysis and Evaluation

Plot

1. Who is the protagonist of the story? What are the conflicts? Are they physical, intellectual, moral, or emotional? Is the main conflict between sharply differentiated good and evil, or is it more subtle and complex?
2. Does the plot have unity? Are all of the episodes relevant to the total meaning or effect of the story? Does each incident grow logically out of the preceding incident and lead naturally to the next? Is the ending happy, unhappy, or indeterminate? Is it fairly achieved?
3. What use does the story make of chance and coincidence? Are these occurrences used to initiate, to complicate, or to resolve the story? How improbable are they?
4. How is suspense created in the story? Is the interest confined to "What happens next?" or are larger concerns involved? Can you find examples of mystery? Of dilemma?
5. What use does the story make of surprise? Are the surprises achieved fairly? Do they serve a significant purpose? Do they divert the reader's attention from weaknesses in the story?
6. To what extent is this a "formula" story?

Characters

7. What means does the author use to reveal character? Are the characters sufficiently dramatized? What use is made of character contrasts?
8. Are the characters consistent in their actions? Adequately motivated? Plausible? Does the author successfully avoid stock characters?
9. Is each character fully enough developed to justify his role in the story? Are the main characters round or flat?
10. Is any of the characters a developing character? If so, is his change a large or a small one? Is it a plausible change for him? Is it sufficiently motivated? Is it given sufficient time?

Theme

11. Does the story have a theme? What is it? Is it implicit or explicit?
 12. Does the theme reinforce or oppose popular notions of life? Does it furnish a new insight or refresh or deepen an old one?
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Point of View

13. What point of view does the story use? Is it consistent in its use of this point of view? If shifts are made, are they justified?
14. What advantages has the chosen point of view? Does it furnish any clues as to the purpose of the story?
15. If the point of view is that of one of the characters, does this character have any limitations which affect his interpretation of events or persons?
16. Does the author use point of view primarily to reveal or conceal? Does he ever unfairly withhold important information known to the focal character?

Symbol and Irony

17. Does the story make use of symbols? If so, do the symbols carry or merely reinforce the meaning of the story?
18. Does the story anywhere utilize irony of situation? Dramatic irony? Verbal irony? What functions do the ironies serve?

Emotion and Humour

19. Does the story aim directly at an emotional effect, or is emotion merely its natural by-product?
20. Is the emotion sufficiently dramatized? Is the author anywhere guilty of sentimentality?

Fantasy

21. Does the story employ fantasy? If so, what is the initial assumption? Does the story operate logically from this assumption?
22. Is the fantasy employed for its own sake or to express some human truth? If the latter, what truth?

General

23. Is the primary interest of the story in plot, character, theme, or some other element?
 24. What contribution to the story is made by its setting? Is the particular setting essential, or could the story have happened anywhere?
 25. What are the characteristics of the author's style? Are they appropriate to the nature of his story?
 26. What light is thrown on the story by its title?
 27. Do all elements of the story work together to support a central purpose? Is any part irrelevant or inappropriate?
 28. What do you conceive to be the story's central purpose? How fully has it achieved that purpose?
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