

Karinn's Critical Thinking Tutorial



My teacher challenged me to consider the process of critical thinking as I review the lyrics of “Fast Car” by Tracy Chapman (*Between the Lines* 11, p. 293) for the **3.1 Decode Series** assignment. Here are my step by step reflections as I apply the critical thinking process to my study of “Fast Car”.

The **critical thinking process** has three steps:

1. identify assumptions
2. explore information carefully
3. evaluate findings

1. Identify Assumptions

The first step in applying the critical thinking process to analysis of a text involves considering the intended audience and the purpose of the text. So, I need to ask myself...

- to whom is the author writing?
- what message about humanity is the author communicating?

I found a You Tube video (http://youtu.be/Orv_F2HV4gk) of Tracy Chapman singing “Fast Car”, which helped me better understand the lyrics.

I think Chapman wrote the lyrics for a broad audience, and wanted to help people understand the conflict that the speaker (a young woman) faces. Maybe Chapman wants to inform people of the “dead end” situation some people create for themselves. The song’s delivery and message makes me feel a bit depressed, so it’s hard for me to say that the purpose of the text is to entertain, although given it was a popular song in its time, entertainment must be its purpose. Because the song has rhythm and a catchy melody, it’s possible that the audience might miss the seriousness of the lyrics.

2. Carefully Explore Information

To understand deeper meaning in the text, I need to explore carefully the conflicts the speaker experiences, as well as her assumptions about her situation.

The speaker seems to have several conflicts:

- Internal conflict: she's unhappy with her life: she's in a dead-end job, she supports her alcoholic spouse, she alone takes care of her kids, she "got no plans" and "ain't going nowhere." She "always hoped for better." To start with high hopes and then end up where she is would be very frustrating.
- External conflict: the speaker is fed up with her partner because she supports him by having a job "that pays all our bills", and he spends more time "drinking late at the bar" and sees "more of [his] friends than...[his] kids". Her spouse doesn't aspire to anything else. He sounds like a "sponge".

I need to carefully **explore assumptions** of the characters in the text:

Assumptions of the Speaker:

- she "wants a ticket to anywhere", assuming that anywhere is better than where she is
- she thinks she has "nothing to lose" by running away with her boyfriend
- she assumes that her boyfriend has similar goals to hers: to "make something"
- she assumes her plan is well thought out because she's saved a bit of money working at the convenience store, which is enough to get her and her boyfriend into the city
- she thinks that living and working in the city will help her be happy
- the speaker assumes that because her "mama went off and left" the speaker's dad, it is now her job to take care of him by quitting school
- the speaker assumes she has to make a decision right away: "we gotta make a decision / we leave tonight or live and die this way", or else she'll be stuck here forever
- she assumes that "belonging" and feeling that she "could be someone" comes from her relationship with her boyfriend and escaping her situation
- she assumes life will get better when her boyfriend finds work and she gets a promotion she thinks a promotion at the market and her boyfriend getting a job is all it takes to get out of a shelter and live in a big house in the suburbs
- she thinks that the solution to her problem is to have her spouse leave: "you gotta make a decision / you leave tonight or live and die this way"

Assumptions of the Spouse:

It is difficult to identify the assumptions of the spouse, as the lyrics are written from the speaker's perspective. We know her boyfriend through what she says about him, so it's difficult to perceive his assumptions about the situation. We can make assumptions **about him** based on what the speaker reports.

- he seems to think it's acceptable to let his girlfriend work and pay the bills because he "stay[s] out drinking late at the bar" and "see[s] more of [his] friends than...[his] kids"
- he seems lazy and unmotivated
- it's possible that he suffers from depression

2. Evaluate My Findings

The next step, after carefully exploring the text's content, is to evaluate my findings. This includes analyzing information I discovered through close reading, and then arriving at an opinion, or in this case, a solution for the speaker.

I think that the speaker of "Fast Car" is naive. After her mom leaves, she thinks she needs to take care of her dad. This is messed up, since parents are supposed to take care of their kids, not the other way around. Maybe this changes as parents get older and can't take care of themselves, but not for teenagers like the speaker in the song.

She seems to think things would be better anywhere else: "Any place is better". She doesn't like her situation and she wants to escape, and takes the first opportunity with her boyfriend. Her standards for a boyfriend are low, too: she mostly seems interested in his "fast car." And then her boyfriend turns out to be just like her dad because all he wants to do is drink! All she's focused on is the promise of escape (in the car), and belonging to someone who might share her goals and dreams. She seems unsure about how to solve her issues in a healthy way. She seems caught in a cycle of poverty and doesn't know how to break it.

She doesn't even seem to know what to do to achieve her goals and dreams. How can you buy a house if you don't have a good job? Working at a convenience store or a market doesn't pay enough money to buy a house in the suburbs!

She also seems to make rash decisions. She doesn't like the living situation with her dad, so she forces a quick change. I'm not sure she really thinks things through: "We leave tonight or live and die this way." Her plan is somewhat short-sighted, in my opinion. She is so focused on escape, but she has no plan to follow the escape. Then she's unhappy with her spouse –

understandably so – and tells him to leave. She wants him to go right away: “is [your car] fast enough so you can fly away.”

A Solution for the Speaker

After carefully reading the text and thinking about the speaker’s problems, I think she looks for a “quick fix” to her problems. She initially ran away with her boyfriend to escape her dad, and then, when that didn’t work out, she told her partner he needed to leave. I think it’s a good thing she left her dad, but her plan wasn’t very good. She ended up with someone as useless as her dad. She left a job at the convenience store to become a market checkout girl. She says she hopes she’ll get promoted, but I wonder if she has to improve her education first. It also seems like a good idea to separate herself from her partner so she doesn’t have to support him anymore. I feel bad about the kids; it would probably be easier for her if they weren’t part of the equation. She even says, “I got no plans I ain’t going nowhere.” She hasn’t really thought of a solution for herself.

I would suggest that the speaker ask her partner to leave and get himself some counselling, either for addiction or depression. He drinks too much and seems unwilling to contribute to his family life, and that puts an unfair burden on the speaker. I think the speaker should try to get some education so that she can form a plan and progress. She seems semi-ambitious at the beginning of her story, but then angry and stuck at the end. I think, with some planning and follow through, she could change her life – and her kids’ lives – for the better. The speaker seems more committed to her own kids than her mother was to her; the speaker’s mom left her dad and her daughter. Here though, the speaker wants the man to leave. I think that if the speaker wants to change the pattern of poverty for her own kids, she needs to improve her own situation by getting an education to not only be a good example to her children, but to better support them, too.

Personal Reflection

This was a challenging exercise for me. I had to step-by-step read and re-read the text so I could understand the conflicts and the assumptions of the speaker. I don’t usually read a text so carefully, or think about it so much! It takes a lot of work to be a critical thinker, but I can see that if I was to think things through in this careful manner, it would be easier for me to understand other people’s perspectives and make good decisions for myself.

For example, I have an aunt who's in a similar situation to the speaker in the song. It might be fair to say that she has a "sponge" husband, and she tries to be the responsible one, taking care of the bills and my cousins. As I read the lyrics and listened to the song, I felt somewhat depressed. I started to think that it's likely the speaker and her partner are depressed by their situations, and maybe don't know how to escape. I think my aunt is in the same situation. I never thought about it before, but maybe she's depressed, and maybe my uncle is depressed, too. I don't think that's an excuse for him not contributing to the family, but it helps me understand what's going on. I think my aunt doesn't really know what to do in her situation, either. I can also see that we can't totally escape our situations unless we face problems and address them, or else we could end up stuck in a situation of unhappiness, like the speaker in "Fast Car."

Here's a quick recap of the critical thinking process when applied to analysis of a text:

1. Identify Assumptions

- Consider the intended audience and the purpose of the text.

2. Carefully Explore Information

- Explore the conflicts in the text.
- Examine the assumptions of the characters in the text.
- Consider all possible explanations, perspectives, and ideas.

3. Evaluate My Findings

- Examine evidence and formulate possible answers, ideas, and solutions in response to conflict in the text.
- Make connections to other texts or real life situations.