

Literary Analysis Series #1 – Focus on Story

The first thing you need to do is read the story. Hardly an amazing suggestion, I know. On the other hand, perhaps it is? We've all tried to get away with NOT 'exactly' reading an assigned story or book.

Why is that? Books and stories become assignments because they are good. No, Seriously! They are NOT chosen for the sheer sadism of enforced boredom. They are articles, stories, poems, or books that are examples of the best literature can be.

So why is it that the process of reading is so onerous? I have a few ideas. First, we plow through with a bad attitude. We go groping our way through paragraphs and chapters more interested in the page count than in the tale before us. The thing just drones on and on and on and on and.... NOT FUN! The second is that we confuse [or perhaps try to condense] the reading for pleasure and reading for analysis. By all means before picking at it, let the author tell his story straight through to the end. When you know 'how it all turns out' THEN you can retrace your steps to examine the pieces of the work. Finally, there are no 'bystanders' in reading. The Reader is very much an active part of the art of Literature.

Has it been more than a month since you read a book for pleasure?

In the last year have you tried but given up without finishing a reading assignment?

Have you simply stopped bothering to read assigned material on your own?

Do you ever read an assignment all the way through and still have no clue what happened?

If you answered 'NO' to all four of those questions – Skip the rest of this article and go to your reading.

But, if you said "YES" to even one – I will describe a method you can use to read better and get more out of it without doing a whole lot of extra work.

When I read – and when any good reader reads – and with a little practice when YOU read – there are two 'streams of thought' going through my head. One is the story itself, descriptions, action, characters, dialog...all the pieces of the book itself. The second, running at the very same time, is the process of reviewing the story, adding new details, relating it to other books, movies, songs and to personal experiences, and imagining what will happen next.

For now, don't be concerned about doing it all at once. That will naturally come as you practice. For now, think of it like a television show. A few minutes of the story, then the commercials....



Let's begin with a short story – novels can come a bit later. You want to stop every page or maybe twoyes, STOP READING...there needs to be a "WORD from our Sponsors." When you stop for a short time, I want you to answer the following 4 questions. GO on, write in the margin if you own the book...or on a separate piece of paper if you don't.

What's Happening Right Now?

Think of the last page or two. Remember the action. Picture the setting and characters. Review the story so far so you see how it's developing.

Other things you think of?

Does the story remind you of some other book, movie, song, poem, news report? Has anything related to this happened to you? What places are like the setting? Who do you know [real or from a story] who is like one of the characters?

Risk a guess?

We naturally try to guess who killed `em on a cop show or which guy will get the girl in the end. DO that here. What would YOU have happen next, and why?

Draw lines and circles

Inevitably there will be words or phrases you don't know. Save time, underline them and we'll come back later to work out what they mean. Did you ever hear any of the quotes from the section before somewhere? Circle them for later reference.

Use W-O-R-D at least every page or two of your reading. Soon it will only take you a few seconds each time so it won't make the reading take longer. And it will definitely do two things for you. One, it will keep you on task by breaking down a long reading session into smaller sections. This is, after all, how we are most accustomed to 'getting' stories – TV has taught us that! Two, it will have you thinking all the time, keeping track of the story, and involving you actively in the Literature in your hands.

Practice, practice, PRACTICE – and soon you won't even have to stop, you will track both streams as you go along. But for now, stop for a W-O-R-D from the sponsors along the way.

Jo Karabasz

[[to work along with these articles – read "Literary Analysis Step 1 – Example - The Lady, or the Tiger "]]

