

Advanced College Writing and Research

Reading and Writing about Fiction

Introduction to Science Fiction

I. Reading Assignment- From Handout Given at “Check in”

Five Steps for Writing the Critical Essay

Recognizing Character Traits

Summarizing an Article or Book Chapter

II. Learning Objectives

1. **Explain the definitions of fiction and science fiction**
2. **Understand the concept of literary analysis**
3. **Recognize the four methods of studying literature**
4. **Understand how to effectively read fiction**
5. **Understand how to effectively write responses for fiction**
6. **Recognize literary terms that are relevant to reading fiction**
7. **Identify the genre of science fiction that is relevant to ENG 132**
9. **Apply the strategies of literary analysis to a text**

III. Lecture

The information that you learned and practiced last week will be instrumental in this next segment of the course. You may have noticed that the majority of the texts that you will read in this course are works of **fiction**. Fiction *is works of literature that are not real or true at the time in which the text was written*. These works of literature “communicate intense, complex, deeply felt responses to human experiences that speak to the heart, mind, body and imagination” (Hirschberg 19) through unique stories written by very creative people. Throughout this lecture, you will learn about fiction, as well as how to read and write responses for fiction.

A. Fiction

As stated in the aforementioned paragraph, fiction is works of literature that are not biographies or historical accounts. Good fiction has within it situations or stories that are interesting, believable and convincing. The writer attempts to create an effective **plot**, authentic **characters**, and compelling **dialogue** so that the reader can experience the full impact of an emotional and intellectual creative product. Works of fiction allow for us to visit places that we've never seen, better understand the complexities of other's lives that are different from our own, and help us to better understand past events or events for which we were witnesses (20). We can imagine a future and evaluate ourselves as human beings within a space that is nonthreatening. When we can touch the motives, feelings and desires of other people in different situations, we are able to better appreciate a work of fiction.

The earliest forms of fiction were myths, legends and epic poems that explained the lives of gods and goddesses, heroes, heroines and fantastic beings. There were also stories that were created to teach people about morality, such as fables and parables. In the 18th and 19th century novels and short stories became popular forms of literature. The short story was different from the novel in that short stories were written with the expectation that the reader could complete the story in one sitting. The short story had "all the literary elements of plot, character, setting, and the author's distinctive use of language [...] to create a single effect (20). However, the short story usually developed a singular main event and minor related events with one or two characters as its focus. Both the novel and short story has its own genres: the **realistic story** and the **nonrealistic story**.

Realistic stories are stories for which events are in realistic settings. They also present crisis for which the reader can directly or indirectly identify. **Non-realistic stories** are stories that include, "fantastic, bizarre, or supernatural elements" (21) that concentrate on character's feelings and perspectives about a particular crisis. The settings can be realistic and the characters can have human-like behaviors even if the characters themselves are not human.

Since the second half of the 20th century, a lot of literature has been written and read about from a **postmodern** perspective. **Postmodern** writers, "avoid seeing events as having only one meaning" [...] They "produce works that represent reality in unique, complex and highly individual ways" (21), but these writers do not believe that there is one "right" answer to analyze and critique the text. This does not mean that the author does not have an intended **purpose** for his or her story,

or an intended **thesis**. On the contrary, it means that the author understands that a reader brings his or her own experiences to his or her interpretation of the text. These different experiences allow us to share different perspectives as we evaluate, analyze and critique the human experience. For example, a story about American pride can be interpreted from many points of view, including, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age, socio-economic status, etc. The writer encourages this type of active participation to the text. Here are some things that you should consider when you read from a postmodern perspective:

There are many ways to interpret the “meaning” of the text. However, the author may have an intended meaning that is different from the critique given to the work.

Characters will experience specific situations and have specific interactions in the text. However, these situations and interactions can be interpreted in different ways depending upon the reader.

Postmodernists typically use different points of view within the story to give more complexity to the story. This means that the author can reveal the inner and outward perspectives from different characters in the same story.

Postmodernists are very aware of the complexities that shape the human experience. Therefore, postmodernists seek to show how there is no **homogeneous**, or *all the same*, experiences within a society.

B. Science Fiction

In this course we will be reading a very unique genre of fiction: science fiction. Although, **science fiction** is “*a genre of fiction in which the stories often tell about science and technology of the future*” (NCTE) it is also a type of fiction that represents “*fantasy [...] and the realm of the impossible*” (Franklin). Science fiction in many ways has a direct intellectual relationship with the sciences and mixes realistic and non-realistic aspects of fiction together to create a complex and unique perspective about the human experience. Most science fiction is futuristic with stories of the Earth, space and /-or far away galaxies as well as alternative realities; but, settings can also take place in the past. Science fiction “includes a human

element, explaining what effect new discoveries, happenings and scientific developments will have on us in the future” (NCTE).

There is a lot of debate regarding the origins of science fiction. Many argue that science fiction is over two thousand years old pointing to examples of creation stories and tales to explain nature and supernatural phenomenon. Others use a more modern example to explain that science fiction developed in the 18th century as fiction about modern science and technology. The supporters of this point of view argue that in the 18th century the idea of “science as a special category of human knowledge—disciplined, rigorously tested, and uniquely reliable—began to gain wide intellectual acceptance” (Simpson). Consequently, people began to wonder and speculate about the moral, economic, social and psychological consequences of developments in science and technology.

Regardless of its origins, science fiction was once viewed as a lesser form of entertainment for young boys and boyish teenagers. However, overtime, literary works of science fiction has given the genre respectability. It is an expression of modern technological, scientific, industrial societies and political organizations that has achieved respectability from philosophers, scientists and technological gurus (Simpson). Also, with the use of technology in the 19th and 20th centuries, people cannot help but take notice science and technology and the way it effects our world (and the galaxy around us).

Science fiction is an umbrella term that encompasses many **sub-genres**, or *minor categories*. Here is a list of some of the sub-genres in science fiction:

- Aliens
- Alternative History
- Cyberpunk
- Dystopias
- Environmental Science Fiction
- Feminist Science Fiction
- Hard Science Fiction
- Lost-Colony Stories
- Queer Science Fiction
- Space Opera
- Speculative Science Fiction
- Utopias
- Vampires

There are many other sub-genres within science fiction beyond the list that I have given to you in this lecture. For our class this semester, we will focus on one of the sub-genres from this list. There will be an explanation of the author in a future lecture.

Hard Science Fiction—I, Robot, Issac Asimov/ 2010: The Year We Make Contact

Major Themes:

- Stories are based on real scientific theories from many branches of study, such as physics, chemistry and quantum mechanics.
- Plot devices are developed around the character's understanding of scientific law and theory.
- Controversial points of view about real scientific issues are explored and speculated about in the stories.
- Scientific explanations are usually offered for new technologies introduced in the story, especially in regard to space travel, computers and technological devices.

Speculative Science Fiction/Aliens – Bloodchild and Other Stories, Octavia Butler

Major Themes:

- Focus on social issues like overpopulation, AIDS, fear of technology, alien invasions, alien alliances, poverty, or environmental concerns.
- Setting is usually future or near future Earth, but can sometimes be an alternate dimension or another planet used as an **allegory**, or *abstract symbol* for Earth.
- Social structure is often a complete **dystopia**, *the vision of a society in which conditions of life are miserable and characterized by poverty, oppression, war, violence, disease, pollution, nuclear fallout and /-or the abridgement of human rights, resulting in widespread unhappiness, suffering and pain*; or, a **utopia**, *an ideal community or society*, that is based on an ethically questionable act, such as cloning, human sacrifices or Big Brother.
- Main character is usually in dissent with society, even if he or she is in

harmony with the same society at the beginning of the story.

C. Reading Fiction

In last week's lecture, you learned how to annotate and read for summary, analysis and synthesis. These skills will be very helpful in our course, especially as you do your research in this class. Reading fiction is a helpful skill to further strengthen your critical thinking skills. As you read fiction, you must be aware of many literary parts that help to develop the story. In addition, you must understand the parts for which you can do **literary analysis**: *evaluations of the qualities of literature* to help you better appreciate what you have read.

1. Four Ways of Preparing for Literary Analysis

There are four main types of analysis that can be used to evaluate and better understand a story/text. You can take note of the following as you read:

- a. Meaning – Discovering the meaning of the story
- b. Structure—Analyze how the story is organized
- c. Language—Evaluating the author's use of words
- d. Context – Discovering the reasons why the story was created

In order to better understand one or all of these types of analysis, you will need to understand these **literary terms** so that you can specifically evaluate the following:

Characters

Setting

Point of View

Voice and Tone

Language

Plot

Symbols

Theme

These literary terms are a few of many concepts that are helpful for reading literature. In your handouts titled, Recognizing Character Traits and Five Steps for Writing the Critical Essay, you are given the definitions of the following to assist you in your reading of I, Robot and Bloodchild and Other Short Stories. The aforementioned handouts will also be helpful in your viewing of 2010: The Year We Make Contact. Once you learn the definitions and concepts, you will be able to better

evaluate the texts for this course.

2. Questions to Ask as You Read

You should always asking questions as you read. Depending upon the type of analysis that you are doing, you will need to ask relevant and focused questions about the story. Consider the following:

Meaning • Character Analysis

- What clues has the author given to shape the character's response to certain forces?
- How do circumstances and situations reveal character traits?
- Does the author reveal how he or she feels about a character through narrative?
- Are there hints in the dialogue that help to understand character?
- How do the character's actions and/or his or her dress develop persona?
- Does the character have a significant name that is important to the story?
- What do characters say about themselves?
- How do they interact with others?
- What are the character's mannerisms?
- Is the character a stereotyped figure or a caricature?
- How do others feel about the character?
- What are the character's motivations?
- How does the character change?
- Are there non-human entities that could also be a character in the story?
- How does he or she handle conflict?

Meaning • Setting

- Is the setting merely a backdrop or is the setting central to the conflict and/or resolution of the story?
- Is the setting literal, metaphorical, part of a character's imagination?
- Does the setting have an influence on the sequence of events?
- Is certain language utilized because of the setting?
- Does the setting create a certain mood or tone in the story?

Meaning • Other

- Is the character an embodiment of an idea or a concept? (Think social, political,

scientific, cultural)

Structure

- Why does the sequence of events take place in this specific way?
- How are the parts of the story interrelated?
- What is the point of view of the author and the characters?
- Which type of view point is the story told?
- How does the point of view affect the story's meaning?
- Are there differences in dialogue?
- What are the **ethos, pathos and logos** in the story? How do these affect how the story is organized?
- Is there irony? What type? How does this shape the story?
- What does the author emphasize about characters or events? What does he or she omit?
- Does the author attempt to give his or her personal perspective through particular characters?

Language

- What words does the author use to appeal to the reader's emotions?
- How does the author use words to create setting and character?
- Does the author use metaphors and similes?

Context

- Is the story created against an actual historical background?
- Can you determine through the story, the author's attitude?
- Are the characters part of the status quo or do they stand outside the mainstream?
- What political, social and economic values does the story dramatize or satirize?
- Does the author use the story to test a new theory or provide a point of view about a controversial issue?
- Does the work say something significant about human nature and society?
(Hirschberg 1-30)

The ability to ask many of these focused questions from each category will help you to prepare to write critically about the story. An effective read of the text will help to assist you further analyze literature in your writing.

D. Writing about Fiction

In order to effectively write about fiction, you will need to utilize the skills of effective writing. First, you should **PLAN** your writing. Take a few moments to think about what you have read and then begin to **ORGANIZE** your response. This will require that you pre-write and then develop an outline. Many of the prewriting skills that you learned in English 131 are brainstorming, freewriting, clustering, and asking questions. The prewriting process helps you to generate ideas so that you can begin to 1) develop a thesis statement; and, 2) organize your ideas in an outline.

Creating an effective thesis statement is **CRUCIAL**. You want to develop a clear statement that you can develop over a series of paragraphs. Your thesis statement should be concise and effectively introduce a main idea. Once you have developed an effective thesis, then you can further organize your writing by developing an outline. In your textbook, in Part Four, you are given examples of different formal outlines that you can develop to assist you with your organization. The topic outline, though vague, is a good starting point to help you to organize your writing. The topic outline can be helpful for homework assignments, and other short writing assignments. The sentence outline is better outline because it shows a clear thought for each main idea and sub-idea of a response. This is a wonderful outline to help you to prepare for research essays. The paragraph outline is not appropriate for most undergraduate work. You are encouraged to write an outline to help you to organize your writing. Once you have determined your main and supporting ideas for your analysis, you only need to find specific supporting information from the story to support your thesis.

There are many ways in which you can use information from the story as specific evidence. The three most popular methods for using information in your responses are:

- **Paraphrases/Indirect Quotations-** Restatement of the original text keeping the majority, but not all, of the language as seen in the original.
- **Summaries-** Restatement of the original in your own words.
- **Direct Quotations-** Restatement of the original, word for word, as you see it in the original.

Below is an example of each:

Original text: Would you please be quiet? I am trying to sleep!

Summary

Please hush. I am trying to get some rest.

Paraphrase

Would you please hush? I am trying to get some rest!

Direct Quotation

“Would you please be quiet? I am trying to sleep!”

Remember, if you are using the story to support your analysis, **you must document your source**. Your handout, Five Steps for Writing the Critical Essay gives you important information regarding preparation tips for writing about fiction. Moreover, your Writing the Research Essay: A Handbook provides helpful information about the thesis, the outline and how the two work together to help you organize your writing. An effective outline is an outline that has specific and focused information. A vague outline with vague ideas will be of no use to you if you are unsure about the specifics of your ideas and how you plan to develop those ideas. A good outline is a quality outline.

In this class, you will have many opportunities to practice literary analysis. It is my hope that you will use the information in this lecture as a learning opportunity in preparation for future assignments in this class.