

# Chapter 1

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## Analyzing Fiction

In order to gain a complete understanding of a work of fiction (that is, a short story or a novel), you should read it twice. “Good grief,” you say, “does that mean I have to read all the way through *War and Peace* a second time?” Perhaps not. But if you are studying a shorter work, you should try to find time to read it twice. And if you plan to write about a piece of fiction—even a novel as long as *War and Peace*—you must give it a second reading.

Preferably, let some time elapse between readings so that you can mull the piece over in your mind. Your initial reading can be purely for pleasure, but the second reading should involve study—careful and deliberate—of all the elements that combine to produce a unified whole. During that second reading you will want to underline key passages and make notes to yourself in the margins recording significant discoveries and personal responses.

### *Note the Structure*

During the second reading, you should give some attention to the way the work is structured. The action, or *plot* (what happens), usually is spurred by some conflict involving the *protagonist* (the main character). Except in some modern works, most short stories and novels have a clear beginning,

middle, and end, in which the conflict producing the action becomes increasingly intense, building to a climax that sometimes resolves the conflict, sometimes simply concludes it—often in catastrophe. Do not expect many happy endings in serious fiction. A somber conclusion is more likely.

Usually plots proceed in regular *chronological order*, following a time sequence similar to that in real life. But occasionally an author employs *flashbacks*, stopping the forward action to recount something which happened in the past, in order to supply necessary background material or to maintain suspense. Through a flashback in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, we learn of Jay Gatsby’s humble beginnings—and of possibly sinister involvements in his rise to wealth. And if William Faulkner had written “A Rose for Emily” chronologically, without the distorted time sequence, he could never have achieved the stunning impact of his morbid conclusion.

Since structure means broadly the way a work is put together, try to discover a framework or pattern that shapes the piece into a unified whole. The structure of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* can be described as divided into three parts in which the action in each section relates to a crucial scene on the scaffold. But one critic sees the novel as structured in five parts, like a stage drama. Sometimes great works of fiction are more loosely put together. Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, for instance, is structured around the seasons, beginning with the promise of spring, which is ominously blighted by a blinding snowstorm, and ending in the fall, which conjoins the dying of nature with the suicide of Zenobia. The structure of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* is even simpler: the novel chronologically follows episodes selected to reveal the plight of the lovely, ill-fated Lily Bart.

### *Subplots*

Longer works, like novels, plays, and films, frequently include one or more *subplots*, which produce minor complica-

tions in the main action. Often some quality of a major character is illuminated through interaction with minor characters in a subplot. In a well-unified work, the action of a subplot serves to reinforce the theme. In Joseph Heller's scathing anti-war novel, *Catch 22*, the subplot involving Milo Minderbinder and his flourishing business empire satirizes the activities of corporate profiteers, who gained millions of dollars at the expense of the millions of people who died. Thus, the subplot strengthens Heller's powerful anti-war theme. Occasionally, though, subplots are introduced simply to provide interest, excitement, or comic relief. As you study a work involving subplots, consider how they function. Do they provide action that contributes to the overall success of the work? If so, try to decide how. You may find you can write an interesting paper by focusing on the way a subplot helps to develop character or theme.

### *Become Aware of Specialized Techniques*

As you study a work on second reading, you may notice a number of important things that you missed the first time through. Sometimes you become so caught up in the action and so interested in the characters that you forget to pay close attention to the literary techniques. And some devices, like irony and foreshadowing, by their very nature, are difficult to perceive on first reading.

### *Irony*

*Situational irony* involves an upsetting of expectations—having the opposite happen from what we would anticipate. Sometimes we can recognize irony at once. In Stephen Crane's novel, we can see that Henry Fleming's "red badge of courage" is ironic as soon as he receives the wound, because he is running from battle at the time. But only after reflecting on the novel do we become aware of the pervasiveness of

the irony. Once we notice the repeated pattern of Henry's romantic delusions being undercut by hard realities, we can deduce that the ending also is ironic—that Henry has learned little from his experiences and remains a dreamer. Often we simply need to know the outcome of an action in order to detect the irony. In Flannery O'Connor's story "Good Country People," for example, the fact that the intelligent, sophisticated, well-educated Hulga-Joy is duped by the bumpkin bible salesman is intensely ironic, but we do not realize that this will happen until the end of the story.

Verbal irony is discussed under tone on pages 13–14. Dramatic irony is discussed in our chapter on drama, page 47, but can occur in any work of imaginative literature.

### *Foreshadowing*

Another literary device that becomes much more apparent on second reading is *foreshadowing*. We may not know the significance of various hints and suggestions until the events they foreshadow finally occur. The unusual spring snowstorm at the beginning of Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* foreshadows Zenobia's death at the end in two ways: cold kills the promise of the spring buds (as death ends the promise of her vibrant life); and her corpse is described as cold and white (like the cold whiteness of the snowstorm). Eventually we discover that even the title of the novel is ironic, since the concluding events are far from being blithe (happy), and all hope of romance is gone. When we go through a second reading, both irony and foreshadowing become far more apparent and can contribute significantly to our understanding and appreciation of the work.

### *Images, Motifs, Symbols*

Be alert also for *images*—for words and phrases that appeal to the senses and often put a picture in your mind. We can classify images roughly into several categories:

*visual*—images of sight (“she looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water”—William Faulkner)

*auditory*—images of sound (“the pounding of the cylinders increased: ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-*pocketa-pocketa*”—James Thurber)

*olfactory*—images of smell (“the frailest of ringlets, still black, with an odor like copper”—Eudora Welty)

*kinetic*—images of motion (“her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side”—James Joyce)

*thermal*—images of hot or cold (“stony hills ablaze with heat”—Stephen Crane)

*tactile*—images of texture and touch (“the bristly hairs rubbed painfully against her breast”—Yukio Mishima)

Such images increase the enjoyment of reading fiction and, if deliberately repeated, can become *motifs* that emphasize some important idea in the story. The constant images of fungus and decay in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” reinforce our impression of the deterioration of Roderick Usher’s mind.

If a repeated image gathers significant meaning, it then becomes a *symbol*—to be clearly related to something else in the story. The moldering of the Usher mansion probably symbolizes the decay of Usher’s psyche, just as the repeated images of dust and decay in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” symbolize the deterioration of Miss Emily’s mind as well as the fortunes of her once prosperous family.

**Archetypal Symbols.** Some symbols are considered *archetypal*, or universal, conveying the same meaning in all cultures from the time of earliest civilization. For example, the circle is an ancient symbol of wholeness or perfection; the sea has for centuries symbolized the voyage through life; a bird is an archetypal symbol for the soul; water suggests cleansing; white is associated with purity; spring means rebirth. “How am I supposed to know all of these things?” you may well ask. Luckily, there exists a handy volume that allows you to look up words to discover their symbolic significance:

J. E. Cirlot’s *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library). Your library will have a copy in the reference section.

**Phallic and Yonic Symbols.** Two important and commonly employed symbols are associated with human sexuality. A *phallic* symbol suggests the potency of the male or the force of male dominance in a patriarchal society. Common phallic symbols are guns, spurs, snakes, columns, towers, sleek cars, jet planes—objects resembling in shape the male sex organ. A *yonice* symbol suggests the fecundity of the female or the allure of female sexuality. Common yonic symbols are caves, pots, glasses, cups, rooms, full-blown roses, pom-pom chrysanthemums—round or concave objects resembling the shapes of the primary sex organs of the female. If you think of fruit, bananas are phallic, apples are yonic.

Remember, though, that these objects will not always be charged with sexual significance. You must be sure that the image can be reasonably associated with sexuality. In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, the “full, fragrant roses” adorning Edna’s table at the climactic birthday dinner party can be seen as emphasizing the culmination of her sexual maturity. And in the final scene, the phallic image of the waves, “coiled like serpents about her ankles,” unites with the auditory images—her father’s voice and the cavalry officer’s clanging spurs—to suggest the patriarchal forces of society which ultimately defeat her.

For discussions of *metaphor*, *paradox*, and *sentimentality*, see Chapter 2.

### *Consider Point of View*

Sometimes the *point of view*—the manner in which an author chooses to tell what happens—can be crucial to the effectiveness, sometimes even to the understanding, of a work of fiction. Since several different systems exist for classifying and describing point of view in fiction, we will explain here the most commonly used terms.

### *Omniscient Author*

Often the point of view in a fictional work will be straightforward. An *omniscient* (all-knowing) *author* chooses which details to include, which character's thoughts to reveal, and presents the narrative as if telling a story to the readers. Most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, until the time of Henry James, were written from an omniscient point of view. Occasionally these authors, including James, will address their readers directly as "dear reader" or "gentle reader," in order to gain a sense of immediacy. Here is an example of omniscient point of view from Katherine Anne Porter's short novel, *Noon Wine*.

... the boys referred to their father as the Old Man, or the Old Geezer, but not to his face. They lived through by main strength all the grimy, secret, oblique phases of growing up and got past the crisis safely if anyone does. Their parents could see they were good solid boys with hearts of gold in spite of their rough ways. Mr. Thompson was relieved to find that, without knowing how he had done it, he had succeeded in raising a set of boys who were not trifling whittlers. They were such good boys Mr. Thompson began to believe they were born that way, and that he had never spoken a harsh word to them in their lives, much less thrashed them. Herbert and Arthur never disputed his word.

### *Limited or Jamesean*

Henry James is credited with devising a variation on the omniscient author approach wherein the point of view is conveyed primarily through the consciousness of a single character, usually the main character. The readers are given the thoughts of this central character in detail but know nothing of the thoughts of the other characters. In *Daisy Miller*, for example, we are privy to endless debates in Winterbourne's mind concerning Daisy's respectability—or lack of it. But we are never told what Daisy thinks, because to

know her thoughts would be to know the solution to Winterbourne's dilemma.

**Unreliable Narrator.** The limited point of view often includes the added challenge of dealing with an *unreliable narrator*, since the central character, through whose consciousness the story or novel is filtered, is often self-deceived. In James's short novel *The Beast in the Jungle*, John Marcher thinks of himself as a caring, sensitive person. He seems charming, and readers can easily be deceived into seeing him as he sees himself. But in describing Marcher's relationship with May Bartram, the woman who loves him, James supplies several hints that Marcher is totally self-centered and uncaring about anyone besides himself:

It was one of his proofs to himself, the present he made her on her birthday, that he hadn't sunk into real selfishness. It was mostly nothing more than a small trinket, but it was always fine of its kind, and he was regularly careful to pay more for it than he thought he could afford.

Even as May is dying, Marcher continues to try to take from her instead of giving her the love she needs:

It sprang up sharp to him, and almost to his lips, the fear she might die without giving him light. He checked himself in time from so expressing his question.

At the end of the novel Marcher finally gains self-knowledge and admits to himself that "he had never thought of her . . . but in the chill of his egotism and the light of her use." Reading this work a second time, we can see that James has carefully prepared us for "John Marcher's arid end," but on first reading we may well be taken in by the skillfully presented, biased viewpoint of the central character.

### *First Person*

Some authors choose to let one character tell the story from a *first person* point of view, as Huck does in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Part of our pleasure in reading this

novel derives from our engagement with Huck, who seems so real, so earnest, so in need of our sympathy as he relates his adventures in his own voice as if speaking directly to the reader. And the effectiveness of the meaning of the novel derives largely from the boy's innocent, nonjudgmental narration. He describes the behavior of the adults he encounters on his journey but never draws any moral. We are allowed to observe the greed, the lust, the prejudice, the hypocrisy, the general moral miasma—and judge for ourselves.

A slightly different version of the first person child-narrator occurs in James Joyce's "Araby." This story recounts the experience of a young boy whose illusions are shattered by a tawdry reality, but the whole thing is told from the perspective of the boy as a grown man. This point of view allows the author to speculate with an adult's wisdom (using an adult's vocabulary) on the childhood experience.

Of course, first-person narrators are usually adults describing their own adult experiences or adventures. Here is a brief passage from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," in which the first-person narrator, a woman descending into madness, records her thoughts in a journal:

If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?

My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing.

So I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is—and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change would do me good.

But what is one to do?

Sometimes the first-person narrator is not the protagonist but an observer reporting the action, a peripheral character who is present during all the events but is not the one to whom things are happening. In Somerset Maugham's story "Rain,"

the doctor makes a perfect first-person peripheral narrator. As a physician he has been trained in accurate observation, and as a character not directly involved in the conflict, he provides a convincingly unbiased report of the action.

### *Dramatic or Objective*

The *dramatic* or *objective* point of view, most often found in short stories, narrates action but does not report or comment on anyone's thoughts or feelings. Ernest Hemingway, in "Hills Like White Elephants," uses this type of narration, allowing his characters to tell the story themselves through conversation, almost as if on stage.

"Oh, cut it out."

"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."

"Well, let's try and have a fine time."

"All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?"

"That was bright."

"I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?"

"I guess so."

The girl looked across at the hills.

"They're lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees."

"Should we have another drink?"

"All right."

This point of view has the advantage of keeping authorial comment entirely out of the work, leaving readers to evaluate the fiction entirely on their own.

### *Stream of Consciousness*

*Stream of consciousness* narration attempts to represent the thoughts running through a character's mind without the ordering imposed by the conscious mind. In Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," the stream of

consciousness point of view (in this case, Granny's) perfectly conveys the distorted impressions and nostalgic recollections drifting in and out of the dying woman's mind. In this passage her daughter Cornelia is caring for her as she remembers another daughter, Hapsy, who died years before.

It was Hapsy she really wanted. She had to go a long way back through a great many rooms to find Hapsy standing with a baby on her arm. She seemed to herself to be Hapsy also, and the baby on Hapsy's arm was Hapsy and himself and herself, all at once, and there was no surprise in the meeting. Then Hapsy melted from within and turned flimsy as gray gauze and the baby was a gauzy shadow, and Hapsy came up close and said, "I thought you'd never come," and looked at her very searchingly and said, "You haven't changed a bit!" They leaned forward to kiss, when Cornelia began whispering from a long way off, "Oh, is there anything you want to tell me? Is there anything I can do for you?"

### *Observe the Setting*

The setting of a piece of fiction, like the point of view, can sometimes be of consequence, sometimes not. *Setting* includes the place and time during which the action occurs. In Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, the bleak Nebraska landscape so influences the lives of the characters that the novel simply could not be set in a less harsh environment. Likewise, the nineteenth-century time period is essential because Cather is recounting the experiences of pioneers. The brooding heaths of Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels are equally central to those works, as the grim landscape seems almost to precipitate the tragic consequences that befall the characters. And again, the nineteenth-century setting is crucial, since the novels deal with social and moral issues which have changed appreciably since that time. Both the dark forest setting and the communal atmosphere of the village carry symbolic significance in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown."

As you study a work of fiction, give some thought to the setting. Could the events just as well take place somewhere else? Or does the setting seem to play an integral part? Would

the work be changed significantly if set in a different time? Does either setting or time period contribute importantly to the meaning of the story?

### *Discover the Mood and Tone*

Setting often exerts a powerful influence on the mood (or atmosphere) of a work. *Mood* refers to the emotional effect aroused in the readers by the setting and the events. Mood is that chill foreboding that Poe creates by setting "The Fall of the House of Usher" in a remote, moldering mansion on the edge of a black, stagnant pool and then having eerie things happen. Shirley Jackson uses mood ironically to increase the impact of "The Lottery" by conveying the atmosphere of a summer picnic just before turning her story abruptly toward ritual murder.

The word *tone*, sometimes used interchangeably with mood and atmosphere, can more usefully denote the attitude of the writer toward the subject or material being written about. If a writer is having fun with a subject, the tone might be described as wry, playful, light, or humorous—one of the easiest tones to identify. If a writer is serious about a subject, the tone might be called somber, solemn, or perhaps serious—also an easy tone to identify. If, on the other hand, you find the tone of a work quite difficult to detect, it probably is not important in analyzing the work and can simply be called neutral. A neutral tone, by the way, is quite common in fiction.

### *Verbal Irony*

The tone you must be most careful not to overlook involves *verbal irony*. An ironic tone is created through subtle verbal clues. Since words used ironically suggest the opposite of their literal meaning, to miss the ironic tone is to mistake the meaning. Consider the tone of this passage from Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*:

The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.

Since motherhood is a quality usually much admired in our society, we realize—if we catch the irony—that Chopin is suggesting that motherhood can be overdone. The verbal clues are the words conveying the image of mother as brooder hen: the *extended, fluttering wings* (which metamorphose comically into angel wings) protecting the *precious brood*. Also, the exaggeration of the words elevating motherhood to a religion—*idolized, worshipped, holy privilege*—suggests that Chopin questions the appropriateness of such dedication. The most obvious clue to the irony is, of course, the mention of protection from both real and *imaginary* harm.

### Think About Style

All of the elements discussed so far affect the style of a work, especially tone, imagery, and point of view. But, specifically, style refers to an author's choice of words and how those words are arranged to present the material. Sometimes rhythm is important. Do the words come in short, staccato bursts, in the manner of Ernest Hemingway?

Ten cars were lined up side by side under the long shed. They were top-heavy, blunt-nosed ambulances, painted gray and built like moving vans. The mechanics were working on one out in the yard. Three others were up in the mountains at dressing stations.

—*A Farewell to Arms* (1929)

Or do they flow in a liquid smoothness, in the manner of Virginia Woolf?

A steamer far out at sea had drawn in the air a great scroll of smoke which stayed there curving and circling decoratively, as

if the air were a fine gauze which held things and kept them softly in its mesh, only swaying them this way and that.

—*To the Lighthouse* (1927)

In order to analyze style, you need to consider sentence length and complexity. Does the writer use primarily short, fairly simple sentences, like Hemingway in the previous example, or long, circuitous, involved sentences, like Henry James? Here is a sentence typical of James's style in his later years:

It was characteristic of the inner detachment he had hitherto so successfully cultivated and to which our whole account of him is a reference, it was characteristic that his complications, such as they were, had never yet seemed so as at this crisis to thicken about him, even to the point of making him ask himself if he were, by any chance, of a truth, within sight or sound, within touch or reach, within the immediate jurisdiction, of the thing that waited.

—*The Beast in the Jungle* (1903)

Of course, this use of unusual sentence patterns and an elevated diction makes his style easy to identify. Because they employ neither, Mark Twain and Sherwood Anderson are described as writing in the "plain style," a label considered complimentary by those who admire an easy, graceful, and unpretentious way with words. Here is a passage from a short story by Sherwood Anderson:

Neither of us had ever seen a woman's body before. It may have been the snow, clinging to the frozen flesh, that made it look so white and lovely, so like marble. No woman had come with the party from town; but one of the men, he was the town blacksmith, took off his coat and spread it over her. Then he gathered her into his arms and started off to town, all the others following silently. At that time no one knew who she was.

—"Death in the Woods" (1926)

You will scarcely ever need to look up a word when reading Twain or Anderson, but when reading Edgar Allan Poe, you need a dictionary handy because of his fondness for *latinate* words.

Poe's interest in creating mood certainly accounts in large

measure for his choice of words, images, and descriptive details. Notice in the following passage how skillfully he amasses details to create a bleak, depressing atmosphere of "irredeemable gloom," as the narrator first encounters the cadaverous Roderick Usher:

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. . . . I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.

The details are singularly foreboding: the dark draperies, black floors, and inaccessible windows admitting only feeble light; the vaulted ceiling providing a suggestion of entombment; and perhaps the finest touch, the "gleams of encrimsoned light" casting an infernal glow over the scene.

Consider also the importance of dialect in conveying verisimilitude, a feeling of reality, in a work of fiction. In "A Summer Tragedy," Arna Bontemps presents an aged black couple, a sharecropper and his wife, both in ill health and hopelessly in debt, who have made a suicide pact rather than suffer the indignity of going to the poorhouse. The authenticity of their dialect makes the story believable and thus heightens the pathos:

"How many bale o' cotton you think we got standin'?" she said. Jeff wrinkled his forehead as he calculated.

"Bout twenty-five, I reckon."

"How many you make las' year?"

"Twenty-eight," he said. "How come you ask that?"

"It's jes thinkin'," Jennie said quietly.

"It don't make a speck o' difference though," Jeff reflected. "If we get much or if we get little, we still gonna be in debt to old

man Stevenson when he gets through counting up agin us. It's took us a long time to learn that."

If you have read *Huckleberry Finn*, you will remember that a great deal of the humor stems from Huck's uneducated dialect in the narrative voice:

After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers; and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by-and by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take no stock in dead people.

Analyzing style involves looking at words—at their arrangement into sentences as well as their meanings and connotations. You need to do a close and careful examination of virtually every component of a work in order to thoroughly describe the style.

### Study the Characters

As you reread the work, pay special attention to the dialogue, those passages in quotation marks that characters speak to each other. You can begin to determine characterization from these exchanges, just as you come to know real people partly by what they say. As you form an understanding of a character, you also need to notice what other people in the story say about that person, how they respond to that person, as well as what the author reveals of that person's thoughts and past behavior. Since fiction often allows us access to what the characters are thinking and feeling, we can sometimes know fictional persons better than we do our closest friends and family members.

### Motivation

As you analyze characters, consider their *motivation*, their reasons for doing the things they do. Sometimes we can be certain of a character's motivation for behaving in a certain way; at other times this motivation becomes one of the ele-

ments we must figure out before we can fully appreciate the story. Our judgment of Sammy, the narrator of John Updike's "A & P," depends upon an analysis of his motives for quitting his job. Does he do it just to impress the three girls who come into the store? Is he really protesting the shabby way the manager treats the girls (as Sammy says he is)? Or is he taking advantage of an opportunity to leave a job he hates? Perhaps his motives are mixed. In any case, our evaluation of Sammy's motivation is central to our understanding of Sammy—and to our interpretation of the story.

### Foils

Minor characters, called *foils*, often function as contrasts for main characters, thus heightening our understanding of the major characters. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Tom Sawyer, with his boyish foolishness and heedless trickery, serves to point up the growing maturity and basic honesty of Huck Finn. Sometimes foils play roles that also help to illuminate theme. In Jack London's "To Build a Fire," the dog, who instinctively knows better than to cross the Arctic when the temperature is fifty below, serves as a foil for the foolish, egocentric man. At the same time, the dog, as a creature of nature, emphasizes London's theme of the insignificance of human beings in the face of implacable natural forces.

### Static and Dynamic Characters

The terms *static* and *dynamic* are used as labels to denote characters who do not change throughout the course of a work (static) and those whose experiences alter them (dynamic). Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage* is a good example of a static character, because he is just as visionary and deluded at the end as he was at the beginning. Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* is a good example of a dynamic character because she is a totally different person after she experiences her dual awakening to sexuality and selfhood.

### Significance of Names

Some authors give their characters names that carry significance. If you look up "Ahab" and "Ishmael" in a dictionary of biblical characters, you will find that Melville's Ahab and Ishmael share meaningful traits with their biblical counterparts. The name of Henry James's heroine Daisy Miller suits her perfectly: "daisy" suggests her natural, unspoiled innocence and charm; "miller" suggests her common, far from aristocratic origins. In the same work, Winterbourne's name suggests his frigid manner, for he ultimately frosts poor Daisy. Names will not always have meaning, of course, but you should consider the possibility.

### Continue Questioning to Discover Theme

Your entire study of these various elements of fiction—all the questions you ask of yourself and then seek to answer—all of this critical thinking should lead to an understanding of the meaning, the *theme*, of the story. The title may in some way point toward or be related to the meaning. If you ask yourself why Katherine Mansfield entitled her poignant story "Bliss," you will probably decide that she was being ironic—that she wanted us to see how fleeting is the young wife's blindly trusting happiness. Sometimes the title identifies the controlling symbol, as in John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums" and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." Joseph Conrad's title *The Heart of Darkness* directs us straight to his theme: the evil that lurks at the core of human experience.

You need to ponder everything about a work of fiction in order to discover its theme. Keep asking yourself questions until you come up with some meaningful observation about human behavior or the conduct of society. The questions that follow will guide you in exploring any novel or short story and perhaps spark that essential insight which leads to understanding.

## LIST OF QUESTIONS FOR ANALYZING FICTION

The following questions should help you understand any short story, novella (short novel), or novel. Some will have more bearing than others, depending upon the individual work. If you are preparing to write about a piece of fiction, you can generate most of the material for your paper by writing out your answers.

1. Who is the main character (the protagonist)? Does this person's character change during the course of the work? Do you feel sympathetic (favorable) toward the main character? If not, how do you respond? What sort of person is he or she?
2. Why are the minor characters there? Do any of them serve as foils? Consider each one individually.
3. Are the names of the characters significant?
4. Can you see a pattern in the way the plot is constructed? That is, can you describe the way the events are organized? Does the author use flashbacks? If so, for what purpose? Does surprise play an important role in the plot? Is there any foreshadowing?
5. Is anything about the work ironic? Consider verbal ironies as well as ironic situations.
6. How does imagery function? Are there repeated images (motifs)?
7. Do any of these images gather symbolic meaning? Is there, perhaps, a controlling symbol (like the river in *Huckleberry Finn*)?
8. What is the setting—the time period and the location? How important are these elements in the work? Could it be set in another time and place just as well?

9. Is the mood (or atmosphere) important? If so, try to describe it. How does the author create this mood?
10. Consider point of view: Who is the narrator? Is the narrator reliable? What effect does the point of view have on your response to the work? What would be gained or lost if the point of view were different—told by another character, for instance, or told in the first person?
11. Does the author's style affect your response to or your understanding of the work? If so, how would you describe the style? For example, what is the tone? Is it ironic, satirical, somber, light, wry, humorous, or simply neutral? Is the sentence construction fairly simple or elaborate? Can you detect a rhythm? Are the words familiar or fancy? Does the style create a mood? Do you think the style is important in contributing to the effectiveness of the work?
12. How does the title relate to the work? Does it give you a clue about the meaning?
13. What is the theme? Can you state it in a single sentence? How is this meaning conveyed? In other words, how did you figure it out?