

Notes on Writing about Literature: A Brief Guide to Better Writing
Prepared by Professor Livia Katz

Reading the Text

Because naïve readers of literature also tend to become naïve writers whose impulse is to reconstruct the text rather than to interpret it or analyze it, the first step in learning how to write about a literary text is learning how to read it. No one is guaranteed instant insight into any work of fiction or any poem. In order to become responsible writers, you must first become responsible readers, learn to ask questions of the text, and attempt to clarify your relationship to the text beyond an emotional response. In other words, you must learn to read critically and analytically.

Learning to read critically means that you cannot read your assigned literary text only once, form some jumbled impressions of its meaning, and attempt to write an essay. When you read a text for the first time, you form surface impressions about the plot, the characters, and so forth. You are more interested in finding out what happens to whom and how the story or the plot unfolds. At this stage of reading, you respond to the text emotionally; you form gut reactions to characters and actions, and may even try to compare what is happening in the literary work to what you know in your own life. At this stage, you are forming impressions about the text and absorbing the surface details; you are probably able to reconstruct the text but not analyze it. After a second and then a third reading, you begin to become more objective in your observations about what you have read. You establish a certain distance from the characters and actions; you begin to discern patterns, to see relationships and connections, to develop inferences, and you are able to form conclusions.* At this stage of your reading, you have developed an intellectual response over a merely emotional one. You now have a clearer perspective on your relationship to the text, on what you as a reader bring to the text, and you are probably more poised to formulate judgments and begin thinking about the essay than you were after the first reading. Remember that experienced readers are made and not born, so here are some suggestions to becoming perceptive readers:

- **Read actively, not passively.** Reading actively means that you read with pencil in hand, underline passages that seem important, make copious notes in the margin of the text or in a notebook, reread puzzling or complicated passages, and ask questions of the text. Why is something happening and what is the significance of its happening at that point in the text? For example, in

Shakespeare's Hamlet, why does Hamlet refrain from killing Claudius in the chapel? Is it really because killing Claudius at prayer would send him to heaven absolved of his sins? Are we to believe that this is the real reason Hamlet does not kill Claudius in the chapel? If so, why? If not, why not? Looking at the text critically and asking questions are the first steps toward interpreting the text rather than reconstructing it.

- **Keep a double entry reading journal.** Take a notebook, divide the page in half and, on the left side, jot down what you think that the text says. Here you can summarize, paraphrase, or take down important quotations (carefully noting their place in the text). On the right side of the page, write your own responses, your questions, your observations, and so forth. Such notes will become helpful in understanding your reactions to the text and help you in formulating judgments.
- **Read editors' prefaces and notes to the text carefully.** Introductions to literary texts always contain important information that places the literary text in the context of the author's other works, in the context of the historical and literary period it was written, in the context of prevailing intellectual ideas of the period, and so forth. Sometimes reading introductions and prefaces after your first reading of the literary text will enhance your subsequent readings and deepen your understanding.
- **In longer works of fiction, like *Crime and Punishment*, mark the important passages** that you might wish to reread before writing your paper. Since novels of such length are difficult to reread in the course of a semester, you will need to reread sections and chapters three or four times before writing your paper.
- **Pay attention to the way in which words are used in context**, to their connotative meaning and not only to their denotative meaning. Looking up unfamiliar words in a collegiate dictionary will not necessarily bring you closer to the meaning of that word in the text or to how the word functions in the text. If you have difficulty with the language or words of an author, pay attention to the notes provided with the text. Most literary texts are annotated to aid your comprehension. For example, most editions of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" will tell you that the Puritans used "goodman" the way today we use "mister," and that "goody" was a shortened form of "goodwife," or mistress. Paying attention to the notes that accompany the text will allow you to see that Hawthorne is playing upon the word goodman and may even be having a bit of fun. If your text does not come with annotations, a good source

of information for the way in which words were used in a certain century or period in English literature (for works written in the English language) is The Oxford English Dictionary. For instance, you may be seriously misled into thinking that, in James Joyce's "The Boarding House," Mrs. Mooney indulges in vulgarity when she ponders over Bob Doran's affair with her daughter Polly and considers his suitability as a husband to her daughter: "She knew that he had a good screw for one thing and she suspected he had a bit of stuff put by." The Oxford English Dictionary will tell you that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the word screw was slang for "wages" or "salary" and thus place the meaning of Mrs. Mooney's words into a different context: money.

- **Read all poems aloud.** Reading aloud will help you understand and enjoy the language more and allow you to get a better sense of the rhythm, the sounds, and the poem as a whole. Even if the poem has been translated into English, you can often get a feeling of the original from reading the translation aloud. If you have trouble with a poem's inverted syntax and such syntax impedes your understanding, try to reconstruct the lines in correct syntactical order in order to clarify the meaning for yourself.
- **Above all, start your reading early.** Finishing a literary work the night before your paper is due or reading it partially will never lead to any kind of critical thinking about the text or responsible and informed writing. Remember that nothing can substitute for reading, reading, reading, and then rereading, rereading, and rereading the original text. Take pleasure in what you read. Develop a passion for the work. Passionate readers who take pleasure in what they read are bound to become passionate writers who argue their points vigorously and with conviction. Passionate writers are not content to skim the surface of the text in search of the obvious or the superficial. They are like miners who dig deeply beneath the surface of the text to unearth its riches and to equip themselves with a better understanding of the text's complexities.

***Note:** For a very good explanation of the three interrelated stages of reading literary texts, see any edition of Robert DiYanni's Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay. New York: McGraw Hill. The book is available for perusal in the John Jay College Writing Center.