

# Literature Overview

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Notes from *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*,  
Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs

# What is literature

- Compositions that tell stories, dramatize situations, express emotions, and analyze and advocate ideas.
- Oral tradition: literature spoken or sung, and passed down from generation to generation as performances.
- Written literature; passed down is hand written manuscripts; became much more widespread with the increase of literacy that followed the invention of the printing press.

# Types of literature

- Prose (narrative) fiction
  - Narrative means story telling/ involves a main character in conflict with an antagonist/ a plot
  - Fiction/ may include historical facts and details, but comes primarily from author's imagination.
  - Examples include myths, parables, romances, novels, short stories

# Poetry

- Derived from Greek word *poiein*, “to create or make.”
- If narrative fiction can seem realistic and, at time, almost photographic, Poetry seem by definition artificial and created by the artist. This distinction is, of course, an illusion. The highly realistic narrative fiction is, in fact, highly crafted.
- Poetry is, mostly, more compact, what Wordsworth called “narrow rooms.” With fewer words, each word is more crucial to achieving the poet’s purpose. This is achieved through the elements of poetry.
- Elements of poetry/ these are important parts of the poet’s tool bag, but not exclusive to the poet. We see many of these techniques at work in narrative fiction.
  - Imagery: using words that excite the senses; painting with words.
  - Figurative language – imaginative comparisons using metaphor, simile, hyperbole, personification
  - Sound devices – word music – rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, onomatopoeia,
  - Form – line, stanza, syllable count, positioning on the page, rules concerning schemes of rhyme and meter (i.e., sonnet or haiku).

# Drama

- Literature intended to be acted out on stage or filmed using actors.
- Dialogue, setting, music, and lighting are among the characteristic elements of drama
- Compact form...must fit within a limited performance time and space.
- Contemporary drama is usually written in prose/ Shakespearean drama and older forms, like Greek drama, were written in verse. Greek drama was originally a religious expression.

# Non-fiction prose

- Emphasis is on factual reporting rather than on imaginative expression
- News reporting, feature articles, essays, editorials, textbooks, historical or biographical works.
- Does involve description and analysis of facts/ not completely objective.
- Recently we have examples of journalists and memoir writers who claimed their works as non-fiction (to sell more books) when in fact they were predominantly or entirely fiction. This brings up questions of intellectual integrity.

# Reading and responding to literature (or why I decided to become an English major)

- Literature is a form of communication; the author (even an author long dead) lives, for a time, in your mind when you read his or her words. In a very real and mysterious way, the author is speaking to you, trying to teach some truth about the human condition as he or she experienced it. Because of your shared humanity, you can complete this spark of intimacy with the author when you bring your own experiences to bear on the work. Your thoughts, experiences, and emotions in response to the work completes what the author began. In a sense, the work is dead until you participate in it. To do this, you must engage with the work, hear the author's voice, and read actively.

# Reading Actively (see p 12 of the 8<sup>th</sup> edition)

1. Make sure you understand what is going on.
  - Explain words, situations, concepts/ write down new words and look up their meanings in context.
  - Who are the major actors in the text? What is happening? What are the relationships? What is the point of view (who is telling the story)? What are the conflicts?
2. Notes on your first impressions
  - Make margin notes (in book, on post-its, or in a reading journal) as you read recording your what you notice... what is interesting, humorous, frightening, sad, unclear, etc)
  - Describe interesting characterizations, events, techniques, ideas. If you like the way the author presents or describes someone or something, make a note explaining why you like it. If you don't like something, complain about it in a note (but be specific what you don't like exactly).
3. Develop ideas and enlarge on your responses.
  - Trace patterns in the work/ make an outline/ map the plot/ do you see any winners or losers? Is a predominate idea emerging? Write this in your journal.

# Guidelines for reading, cont.

– Write expanded notes about characters, situations and actions.

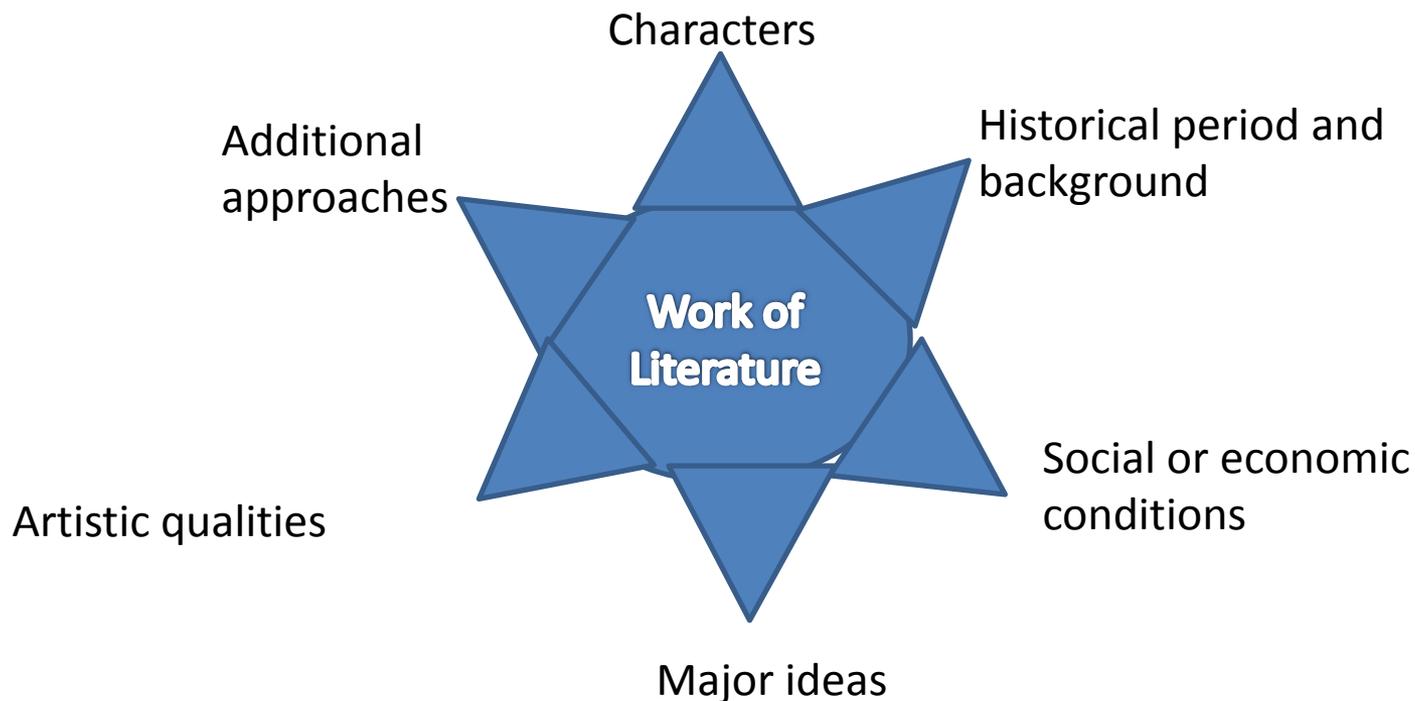
- What are the characters like? How do they speak and act?
- Do any characters change as a result of the action?

4. Memorize important, interesting and well-written passages. Copy them into your journal and even on note cards. They may be useful in a future essay.

# The writing process when writing about literature

## 1. Discovery (pre-writing)

- The ideas for your essay radiate from the source, the work of literature itself. These ideas come from your notes taken during active reading.



# Focus on Characters

- Do the characters change from the beginning to the end of the work?
- What decisions do they make and how do their actions affect the action
- How do they interact? How does that affect what happens to them?
- What is their motivation? Does that change?
- Are the characters reasonably “true to life,” or do their actions and motives seem unrealistic (this may be a question concerning the artistic quality of the work...we might call this the “soap opera” question.

# Focus on Historical Period and Background

- When was the work written?
- What were the major influences on the author (historical, literary, personal)
- What are the cultural assumptions at work in the story?
- Does the author seem to be supporting the predominant cultural assumptions, or is he or she challenging them?

# Focus on Social and Economic conditions depicted in work

- How are events related to the economic condition of the characters?
- What is the effect of economic or social class on the characters or action?
- Do gender, racial, or ethnic stereotypes play a role in the story?
- Are these influences depicted in positive or negative ways?

# Focus on the work's major ideas

- The major ideas can be inferred by the characters actions and words.
- The outcome of the plot often reveals the author's ideas and outlook.
- Often after the climax, during the falling action of the plot, the author may directly or through a character state major ideas and conclusions with eloquence. Look for these moments near the end of the story.

# Focus on the Work's Artistic Qualities

- Look at the work's plan or organization (plot development)
- Author's narrative method
- Writing style
- Poetic technique
- Symbolism
- Setting

# Assembling materials and beginning to write.

- Build on your journal or margin notes
- Trace patterns of action or thought in the work (use list or graphic organizers)
- Raise and answer your own questions
  - What is happening as the work unfolds (in actions and dialogue)?
  - Who are the main characters? What are their conflicts?
  - What conclusions can you draw about the work's actions, scenes and situations?
  - What kind of words are used?
  - What kind of literary devices are used? To what effect?

# Use your writing process to develop your thinking about the work

- Don't limit your "brainstorming" to private thoughts or even spoken words... write it all down.
- Be willing, as you develop your essay, to change your mind or explore an idea not in your original plan.
- Use your writing as a way to explore your response to the work and the author.

## Base your essay on a central idea or argument: drafting a thesis statement

- You are trying in your literary analysis essay to make a point that you will “prove” with the evidence you collect from the work or from additional research.
- To create your thesis statement do the following:
  - Develop a central question of interest to you
  - Find evidence (in the work or in outside research) that points to an answer to your central question.
  - Turn that answer into an assertion.. your thesis statement...and include in that sentence brief references to the “proof” you will present in support of your thesis.

# Develop an “analytical sentence outline”

- Write the thesis statement first, and keep it in front of you at all times. It is the glue that will hold your essay together.
- Your outline includes:
  1. Introduction
    - a) Central idea
    - b) Thesis statement
  2. Body (topic sentences, as many as needed)
    - a) Topic sentence for paragraph (1)
    - b) Topic sentence for paragraph (2)
    - c) Topic sentence for paragraph (3)
  3. Conclusion topic sentence

# Writing a first draft

- Do not begin with the introductory paragraph; save that for later, when you have a better idea of the points and phrasing to follow in the body paragraphs.
- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence, which is an assertion in support of your thesis.
- Only one topic per paragraph
- Follow the topic sentence with specific examples, details and reasons for your assertion.
- Don't form a "writer's block" by trying to make your first draft into a perfect final. Make mistakes freely! You can edit them out in subsequent drafts. That is why we have peer review and proof reading.

# Using references and quotations/ avoiding plagiarism.

- Integrate passages and ideas into your essay. The focus must always be your own thoughts about the work, with the integrated passages and ideas serving to support your ideas.
- Be careful to distinguish your thoughts from your author's thoughts.
  - Do this through explicit language alerting your reader whose ideas you are presenting.
- Use quotation marks for passages of less than 25 words. Use block quotation for passages longer than 25 words. (see example in book, p 33)
- Avoid excessive quotations; paraphrase and summarize (properly cited); leave quotations to demonstrate the author's style, or when the material is particularly difficult to summarize well. Your reader really is most interested in **your ideas** and **your writing**.
- Use MLA format for parenthetical citation and Works Cited List.

# Revision

- Your purpose is to analyze the work... to explore the author's ideas or ways of presenting those ideas.
- Your purpose is not to re-tell the story (although some re-telling may be needed)
- Create your own order of references
  - Refer to elements in the work according to your own pattern... for example, the story may progress chronologically (most do), but you are exploring the effects of setting. Your organizational pattern, then, may be spatial... and so you will refer to the setting descriptions using a spatial pattern.

# Use relevant literary material/ keep out the clutter

- See the example on page 38
- Only use the details from the story that are relevant to your thesis.
- This makes your writing more focused and concise...and convincing.
- Keep to your point... your thesis.

# Checking Development and Organization

- As we've said over and over, stick to your central argument (thesis)
- Another part of excellent writing is to make your thesis grow... that is, find ideas not noticeable at first, and find new, original interpretations.
- See example of a more original formulation of a thesis for "The Necklace" on pages 41-42.
- The key is to turn your idea into an **argument** through your choice of words (i.e., the insertion of the word "needless" in describing the hardship endured by the main character. Why needless? What is the difference between a "needless hardship" and one that is "needed"? The word "needless" makes the thesis more interesting and original.

# Checking Development and Organization

- Write with specific readers in mind
  - Can you assume the reader has read the work?
  - Do your readers have any specific interests or concerns? You may want to develop a topic along those lines.
  - For the purpose of this class, you can assume an audience that is already familiar with the work. You will need to supply only minimal summarization in your essays.

# Use exact, comprehensive and forceful language

- See examples from the sample essay on “The Necklace” on pages 43-44.
- When you revise, make sure your sentences say exactly what you intend.
- For treating story materials, always relate the materials to a point or argument.
- For responses and impressions, don’t simply state your response, but explain why you had it...what specifically gave you your impression of the story.
- For ideas be clear and direct.
- For critical commentary, don’t be satisfied with statement like “I liked this story.” Say specifically why! Bring in specific examples from the story.
- Good writing begins with attempts to rephrase sentences to make them really say something. If you always name and pin down descriptions, responses and judgments, no matter how difficult the task seems, your sentences can be strong and forceful because you will be making them exact and comprehensive.