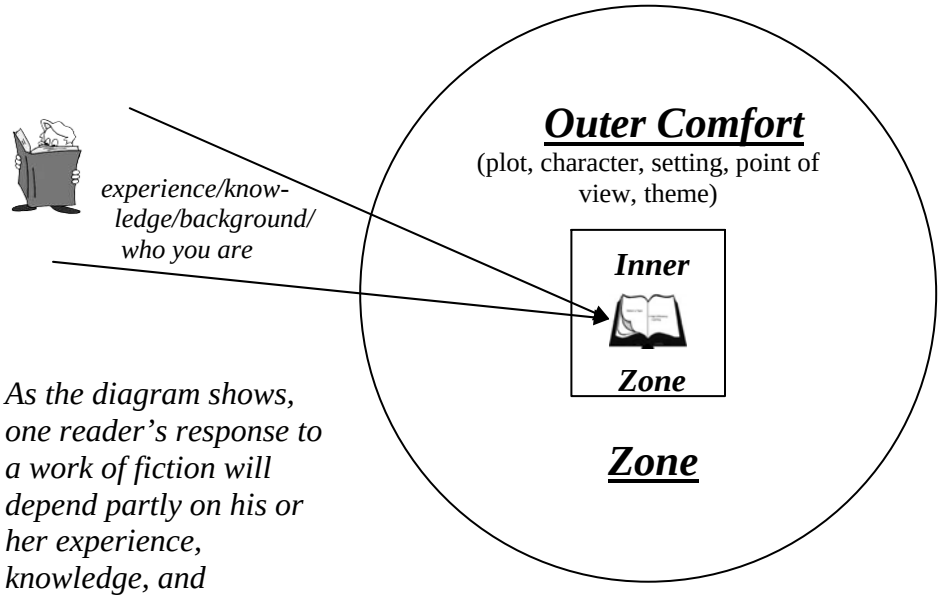
An Introduction to Fiction

The model that follows can apply to any literary work; however, it is most applicable to fiction, which is often analyzed according to what you can call the "comfort categories." In fiction, the "comfort categories" include the traditional areas of plot, character, setting, point of view, and theme. Essentially, the comfort categories relate to basic questions you often ask of a work of fiction or narrative poem in order to begin analyzing it: how, who, what, where, when, and why:

Plot: *<u>What</u> happens in the work?*
Character: *<u>Who</u> thinks and acts in the work?*
Setting: *<u>Where</u> does the work take place? <u>When</u> does it take place*?
Point of View: *<u>How</u> is the work told?*
Theme: *<u>Why</u> is this work important?*

Explaining or analyzing a work involves exploring its theme(s)—its underlying, identifiable consistencies or controlling idea(s)—along with the other elements mentioned above. A novel's characters may seem unusual, its plot unlikely, and its setting unfamiliar, but there will always be something familiar about its theme(s): it might focus on love, death, suffering, renewal, human relationships, social injustice, or spiritual longing. Through the work's theme(s), the reader can make connections with his or her own experience; themes enable writers to universalize their subject.

<u>A Model for Reading and Interpreting Fiction</u>



As the diagram shows, one reader's response to a work of fiction will depend partly on his or her experience, knowledge, and background. Because everyone brings a different set of experiences and expectations to a work, nobody's analysis is going to be identical—even though we share the critical tools for analyzing fiction: the "outer zone" contains the comfort categories of plot, character, setting, point of view, and theme; in the inner zone, you can apply the more complex tools for analyzing fiction discussed below. At the centre of the circle, of course, is the text itself, just as it is at the centre of an analysis.

Being familiar with the many resources for analyzing fiction will enable you to respond more fully and sensitively to the work, to come up with an "in-depth" reading.

<u>*Fictional Forms*</u>: Whether a work of fiction is called a *short story*, a *novella*, or a *novel* depends on its length and the space a writer can give to traditional areas like plot and character. A *short story* is a fictional narrative of fewer than 15,000 words; a *novella* is 15,000-40,000 words; a *novel* is generally more than 40,000 words—often much more.

<u>Short Story</u>: The following creative definitions by students in a fiction-writing workshop draw attention to other elements of successful short stories, expanding the definition so you can see what a short story *does*, not just what it officially *is*: A short story…

1) …should provide some kind of continuous dream which the reader can enter, commune with, and leave having felt something.
2) …is a fully realized world. After passing through this world, the reader sees his or her own world differently.
3) …is a narrative wherein a character absorbs an experience.
4) ...is a slice of life—the thinner the better.

definition 1: stresses the effect of stories on their readers; stories are a shared experience that evoke particular feelings;
definition 2: in stating that a short story "is a fully realized world," makes the point that in spite of its brevity, the short story must be complete; it must render a total picture of something;
definition 3: conveys the importance of character in a short story; furthermore, the character undergoes, and often learns from, an experience;
definition 4: suggests that a story can represent a total picture by showing us an important part, a "slice" of the whole.

The Single Effect: One of the earliest developers of the short story, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49), claimed that, unlike the novel, the successful short story should be able to be read at one sitting and should focus on one effect that serves to unify its elements; according to Poe, writers of short fiction should decide what this single effect is to be and select incidents that help bring it about. Such a dictate stresses the necessary *economy* of the story—the judicious use of atmosphere, dialogue, **mood**, **imagery**, etc. that results in a unified effect. In many short stories, the single effect relates to a discovery a character makes about nature, society, other people, or about himself/herself.

Novella (novelette): Since a novella occupies the middle space between a short story and a novel, it's not surprising that it shares some of the characteristics of the short story as well as some of those of the novel (*see below*). A novella usually is more fully developed in one or more areas of plot, character, and setting than a short story, but is less developed than a novel in all these areas.

Novel: a novel can be defined as an extended fictional prose narrative involving one or more characters undergoing significant experiences over a span of time.

The term "novel" is from the Italian *novella*, a short realistic prose work popular in the late medieval period. The word "novel" means "new," and the English novel was a "new" prose form, very different from popular "romances" that depicted the imaginary exploits of heroes—the most famous English romance cycle is that of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Yet the novel is not always a "realistic" form. In other European countries, such as France, an extended work of prose fiction was called a "roman," and a distinctive form of the modern French novel is called the "nouveau roman" (new novel), which breaks from many of the conventions of the traditional novel. The two words "novella" and "roman" suggest two directions for the novel—and for fiction in general: towards realism and towards romance, or towards the "real" and the "ideal."

How to Approach Fiction

Some tools for analyzing stories, novellas, and novels are discussed below. Many of the terms are also useful in analyzing narrative or dramatic poetry.

Plot: The plot is the arrangement or sequence of actions in a story, novel, or drama.

> ☞ Remember to avoid plot summary unless it is specifically assigned. Elements of plot, however, can be an important part of your analysis (*see below*).

Plot Complication: The initiator of and driving force behind the actions or events of a short story, novel, or drama, it may arise from the character's motivation or through forces lying outside the character. The complication is usually introduced early and instigates the rising action. Fiction involves one or more kinds of *conflict*. Conflict usually takes the form of obstacles the character must overcome to achieve a goal.

Plot Structure: You may be familiar with the pyramidal division of plot into *rising action*, *climax* (the high point of the conflict), and *falling action* (*resolution* or *denouement*). In most dramas, novels and many stories, the rising action is preceded by the *exposition*, which serves as an introduction by giving background information. *In medias res* is a term used to describe the strategy of beginning a story in the midst of an important action.

Many other structural devices can lend coherence to a story; for example, authors may use a *framing* technique in which the beginning and the end mirror one another in their setting or situation. In some novels, a character narrates the beginning and the end with the story of the main character between the frame. Other forms of *parallelism* can be used to suggest similarities or differences between a character at different points in a novel.

Plots may be *closed* or *open-ended*. A traditional way to provide *closure*, especially in novels of social interaction, such as the *novels of manners* of Jane Austen, is through a marriage. The actions or events of the plot may be unified (closely related) or only

loosely related, as in the episodic plot of a picaresque novel; in that case, the overarching structure may take the form of a journey. A *quest* is a journey with a specific goal, usually a valuable object. The quest is completed when the hero/heroine overcomes all the obstacles and has brought the object back to his or her society.

The incidents that comprise a plot can be ordered in various ways: most simply, they may be arranged chronologically (time order); even in the chronological order, however, other devices or effects can be used—for example, the writer may use *chronological telescoping*, such as *foreshadowing*, employing suspense to anticipate a future action or result, or *flashbacks*, moving back in time to narrate important events as a character recollects them.

Character: Henry James was one of the earliest writers to treat the novel as an "art form," one that combined meticulous technique with moral vision. In "The Art of Fiction" (1893), James asked "What is a picture or a novel that is *not* of character?" Through point of view (see *below*), said James, the author can focus on the character's consciousness. A writer's fidelity to the consciousness of the protagonist resulted in the *psychological realism* of many English novels and short stories of the late 19th- and early 20th centuries.

Character Type: A work of fiction often has at least one *round* (fully developed and complex) and several *flat* (one-dimensional, undeveloped) characters. The main character in a work of fiction or drama is called the *protagonist*. The work may also have an *antagonist*, who opposes the protagonist. An antagonist often reveals hidden or submerged aspects of the protagonist. The *doppelgänger*, "double," or "shadow self" is the character's opposite (as Hyde is to Jekyll in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). A *foil* is a character who can be seen *in contrast to* another character; the two characters don't necessarily directly oppose one another.

Character Development: Character may be disclosed through direct narrational methods, such as description or exposition, or indirect ones, such as dialogue or action. A character's development may be represented primarily through his or her thoughts or through that character's actions. Character development usually occurs through a learning experience: in an *initiation story*, a young protagonist makes the transition to adulthood, from innocence to experience. The learning experience could be one of suffering, resulting, as it often does in drama, especially tragedy, in an intense moment of recognition or insight. In short fiction, James Joyce talked about the concept of the *epiphany*, a character's sudden recognition of something extraordinary in an ordinary event or object.

Setting: Setting is the place and time of the work. In contrast to short stories, there is usually more than one main setting in novels, and the time may span several days (occasionally less) to several years or, in the case of some 19th-century novels, generations. Setting can be shown through concrete detail conveyed through **diction** and **imagery**. Selective use of imagery can also create a specific atmosphere, which may be important in creating a **mood**. *Regionalism* focuses on the realistic portrayal of the beliefs and behaviours of characters from a distinct part of a country; examples include William

Faulkner (Mississippi), Stephen Leacock (Orillia, Ontario), Alice Munro (Southwestern Ontario), and Jack Hodgins (Vancouver Island).

Point of View: The angle of vision or perspective from which the narrative is told. Discussed under "Narrator," *below*.

Narrator (*field of vision*): An *omniscient narrator* ("all knowing") sees and tells the whole story in the third-person, moving to different scenes, and in and out of the minds of characters; a *limited omniscient narrator* can move in and out of the minds of one or more characters, but perspective is often limited to the consciousness of the main character; *first-person narrators* report from their own experiences (using the first-person "I" voice).

Narrator (*involvement*): First-person narrators do not always reflect the most subjective viewpoints; they can be relatively detached, narrating events from the first-person *observer* or uninvolved perspective. First-person narrators can also, of course, be involved in the action. First-person *involved* narrators may narrate events in which they play a significant role. Writers may choose to utilize special techniques to represent internal consciousness—such as *inner monologue* or *stream-of-consciousness* to show the mind in flux or the transient emotions, thoughts, and sensations of a person; both these techniques attempt to represent raw perceptions at the pre-verbal or subconscious levels.

Narrator (*reliability*): Narrators may be reliable or unreliable. A reliable narrator can be trusted to relay a truthful picture of events and character. Most third-person narrators can be considered reliable, but you should still be aware that this kind of narrator is not the author.

An *unreliable narrator* may be naïve; that is, he or she may not be in possession of all the facts or may be too young or inexperienced to see things as they are or to make sound judgements. The *naïve narrator*, then, may be limited in his or her capacity to understand. On the other hand, a narrator may consciously or unconsciously deceive the reader in order to avoid confronting unpleasant facts about himself/herself or due to a bias or prejudice. Unreliable narrators can vary greatly in their unreliability. A writer's use of an unreliable narrator will produce irony, as there will be a discrepancy between the narrator's perceptions and the reality of a situation. Through unreliable narration, writers convey the complexity of perception and the human capacity for (self)-deception.

<u>*Orientation to Reality*</u>:
"My task…is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. *That—and no more, and it is everything"*–Joseph Conrad.

<u>*Realism*</u>: The popularity of novels and short stories from their inception is due in part to their ability to portray ordinary people, places, and circumstances. Realism in fiction has produced many sub-genres, including social realism, psychological realism, and historical realism. Because the term "realism" is so broad, it is difficult to define. In the general

sense, it refers to the need of the fictional writer to portray things "as they really are," "to make you see," as Conrad says.

Realism can also be considered a distinct literary tradition that began in Europe as a response both against *romance, see below,* and to recent scientific discoveries and theories about the place of humans in the universe—for example, the theory of evolution that gained prominence after Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Such theories looked back to other "mechanistic" views of humans and their world, such as those of Copernicus and Newton. Since it seemed less and less truthful for artists to dwell on idealized human traits, writers turned increasingly to the everyday interactions among ordinary people, showing middle-class characters in a recognisable environment, using an accumulation of "realistic" detail to do so. Editor Wayne Grady has called realism the "most characteristic feature" of the Canadian short story. Some critics see realism primarily as a technique or method, viewing *naturalism* as a school of writing applicable to fiction and drama.

Naturalism: an outgrowth of realistic writing in the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries that stressed humanity's helplessness before external forces, such as those of one's society or natural environment, or internal ones, such as heredity. French novelist Émile Zola drew an analogy between the naturalistic writer and the laboratory scientist, both of whom examine phenomena dispassionately and draw conclusions based on evidence. Naturalistic writers often portray their protagonists as victims of fate.

Romance: The romance is often distinguished from the novel. Romance deals with imaginary, though usually conventional, heroes and heroines. Characters may be exalted and their goals idealized. American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne (1851) called his works "romances" because they owed an allegiance not to "the probable and ordinary course of man's experience" but to "the truth of the human heart." Like "realism," "romance" is a complex term.

Departures from the Realism/Romance Divide: "Reality" is not an absolute term. A work may be oriented to reality, while utilizing a symbolic framework, though, on the surface, symbols and realistic detail might seem incompatible. Similarly, *science fiction* and *fantasy* may invert or subvert some of the standards of objective reality and still be considered "real"; in this case, the relevant question would not be "could it happen in our world?" but "could it happen *given the world created by the writer*?" *Magic realism* combines the objectively real and the surprise of the unreal or unexpected; in magic realism, the created world is magical and real at the same time. *Metafiction* defines its own boundaries of the real by focusing on the story itself as the testing ground of the "real"; one of the themes in a work of metafiction is the status of fiction and fiction-making; metafiction uses the work itself to explore this status.

Much critical writing today attempts to explore the many faces of *postmodernism*. Postmodernism is certainly not restricted to fiction; indeed, it incorporates diverse aspects of contemporary culture. Although notoriously difficult to define, postmodernism in literature tends to reject such "givens" as the authority of the author, univocal (one-voice)

perspectives, unifying narratives, and other absolutes; in their place, it stresses plurality, possibility, and "play."

For other terms commonly used in poetry and fiction, see "A Glossary of Poetic Terms" and "A Glossary of Short Fiction Terms."