

Critical Reading of Short Stories

Although this anthology supports a number of response approaches, it focuses mainly on the development of critical reading skills necessary for graduating students in their classroom and examination work. This section is a brief introduction to the questioning techniques and approaches often used by critical readers.

There are certain recurring elements to watch for and observe in the first reading of any story:

CHARACTER

- Who is the protagonist? (Note: terms used in this section are defined in the Glossary, which begins on p. 498.)
- What is the protagonist's goal, problem, or conflict?
- Is there an antagonist or character foil?
- When a character makes a choice, what might be her or his motivation?
- How and why is the protagonist changed or unchanged by the end of the story?

PLOT

- What happens in the story? What are its key moments or episodes?
- Is there a crisis or any foreshadowing of events to come?
- Where does the climax occur? How is it a turning point?
- How does the story end? Is there a resolution to its main conflict, or does it have an indeterminate (unresolved) ending?

CONFLICT

- Who or what is in conflict? What type of conflict is it? (External: protagonist vs. other characters, nature, or limiting circumstances; Internal: protagonist vs. self.)
- What causes the conflict? Is it resolved? Why or why not?

POINT OF VIEW

- From whose point of view is the story told?
- What does the choice of point of view (i.e., first person, limited omniscient, omniscient, or objective) contribute to the reader's experience of the story and knowledge about the characters and conflict?

SETTING, ATMOSPHERE, AND MOOD

- Where and when does the story take place? Is a particular historical, geographical, or cultural context used?
- Is the atmosphere of the story an important element? If suspense is an aspect of the story, how is it built up and maintained?
- What mood does the story create in the reader?
- How might setting and atmosphere affect or reflect the plot, characters, and conflict?

IRONY

- Does the writer use irony for presentation of plot, conflict, characterization, or theme?
- What types of irony are present—verbal, dramatic, or situational?

SYMBOLS

- Is symbolism (a pattern or sequence of symbols) used in the story?
- Are there any symbolic characters, actions, settings, or objects? How might these relate to characters, conflict, and theme?

THEME

- What main theme or idea is presented by the story?
- What other ideas or subthemes are presented by the story?
- What specific details support the theme?

PURPOSE

- Why did the writer write the story? What did the writer want to accomplish?
- Does the writer succeed in fulfilling her or his purpose? Why or why not?

STYLE

- What words could be used to describe the way in which the story is written?
- What is unique or original about the writer's use of story structure, methods, imagery, and diction?
- How does the style affect the reader's response to the story?

After a first reading, the critical reader typically returns to the story and focuses on some of its more fundamental aspects. Overall, she or he tries to

1. *identify basic fiction elements*—(e.g., protagonist, setting, point of view, etc.)
2. *understand motivation*—Why does the protagonist make certain choices? Does the protagonist have a goal, motivation, or internal conflict?
3. *respond to mood*—How does the reader's mood or the atmosphere of the story reflect and illuminate the protagonist's feelings and conflicts?
4. *recognize symbols and symbolism*—Symbols are often clues to conflicts and themes. Sometimes the symbols are arranged in a pattern (called symbolism) that invites extended or in-depth reader interpretation.
5. *consider different perspectives*—Often, a story contains more than one perspective or point of view. How might this fact influence conflict?
6. *reflect on the significance of the title*—Titles often help the reader to focus on a character, setting, symbol, conflict, or theme.

Considered together, all of the above help to “open up” a story's meanings and possibilities for the reader.

Sample Analysis of a Specific Text

Read the following story, “Identities” by W.D. Valgardson, by yourself. Write down questions or comments that occur to you as you read, and then compile as many as you can once you finish reading and before you proceed with the following guided question activity.

W.D. Valgardson

Identities

1 Normally, he goes clean-shaven into the world, but the promise of a Saturday liquid with sunshine draws him first from his study to the back yard, from there to his front lawn. The smell of burning leaves stirs the memories of childhood car rides, narrow lanes adrift with yellow leaves, girls on plodding horses, unattended stands piled high with pumpkins, onions, beets, so that each one was, in its own way, a still life. Always, there were salmon tins glinting with silver, set above hand-painted signs instructing purchasers to deposit twenty-five or fifty cents. This act of faith, containing all the stories he has read in childhood about the North—cabins left unlocked, filled with supplies for hapless wayfarers—wakes in him a desire to temporarily abandon the twice-cut yards and hundred-year-old oaks.

2 He does not hurry, for he has no destination. He meanders, instead, through the suburban labyrinth of cul-de-sacs, bays and circles, losing and finding himself endlessly. Becoming lost is made all the easier because the houses repeat themselves with superficial variations. There grows within him, however, a vague unease with symmetry, with nothing left to chance, no ragged edges, no unkempt vacant lots, no houses rendered unique by necessity and indifference.

3 The houses all face the sun. They have no artificial divisions. There is room enough for everyone. Now, as he passes grey stone gates, the yards are all proscribed by stiff picket fences, and quickly, a certain untidiness creeps in: a fragment of glass, a chocolate bar wrapper, a plastic horse, cracked sidewalks with ridges of stiff grass. Although he has on blue jeans—matching pants and jacket made in Paris—he is driving a grey Mercedes Benz. Gangs of young men follow the car with their unblinking eyes. The young men stand and lean in tired, watchful knots close to phone booths and seedy-looking grocery stores.

4 Their hair glistens as though shellacked. Their jackets gleam with studs. Eagles, tigers, wolves and serpents ride their backs.

- 5 He passes a ten-foot wire fence enclosing a playground bare of equipment and pounded flat. The gate is double locked, the fence cut and rolled into a cone. Three boys throw stones at pigeons. Paper clogs the fence like drifted snow. The school is sheathed in heavy screens. Its yellow brick is pockmarked, chipped.
- 6 The houses are squat, as though they were once taller and have, slowly, sunk into the ground. Each has a band of dirt around the bottom. The blue glow of television sets lights the windows. On the front steps of a red-roofed house, a man sits. He wears black pants, a tartan vest, a brown snap-brimmed hat. Beside him is a suitcase.
- 7 Fences here are little more than fragments. Cars jam the narrow streets, and he worries that he might strike the unkempt children who dart back and forth like startled fish. Street lights come on. He takes them as a signal to return the way he came, but it has been a reckless, haphazard path. Retracing it is impossible. He is overtaken by sudden guilt. He has left no message for his wife.
- 8 There have been no trees or drifting leaves, no stands covered in produce, no salmon tins, but time has run away with him. His wife, he realizes, will have returned from bridge, his children gathered for supper. He also knows that, at first, they have blamed his absence on a neighbour's hospitality and gin. However, by the time he can return, annoyance will have blossomed into alarm. His safe return will, he knows from childhood and years of being locked in domestic grief, degenerate to recriminations and apology.
- 9 Faced with this, he decides to call the next time he sees a store or phone booth. So intent is he upon the future that he dangerously ignores the present and does not notice the police car, concealed in the shadows of a side street, nose out and follow him.
- 10 Ahead, there is a small store with windows covered in hand-painted signs and vertical metal bars. On the edge of the light, three young men and a girl slouch. One of the men has a beard and, in spite of the advancing darkness, wears sunglasses. He has on a fringed leather vest. His companions wear leather jackets. Their peaked caps make their heads seem flat, their foreheads nonexistent. The girl is better looking than she should be for such companions. She is long-legged and wears a white turtleneck sweater that accentuates her breasts.

11 In spite of his car, he hopes his day-old beard, which he strokes upward with the heel of his hand, will, when combined with his clothes, provide immunity. He slips his wallet into his shirt pocket, does up the metal buttons on his jacket and slips a ten-dollar bill into his back pocket. Recalling a television show, he decides that if he is accosted, he will say that the ten is all he's got, that he stole the car and ask them if they know a buyer.

12 He eases out of the car, edges nervously along the fender and past the grille. The store window illuminates the sidewalk like a stage. Beyond the light, everything is obscured by darkness. He is so intent upon the three men and the girl that he does not notice the police car drift against the curb, nor the officer who advances with a pistol in his hand.

13 When the officer, who is inexperienced, who is nervous because of the neighbourhood, who is suspicious because of the car and because he has been trained to see an unshaven man in blue jeans as a potential thief and not as a probable owner, orders him to halt, he is surprised. When he turns part way around and recognizes the uniform, he does not feel fear but relief. Instinctively relaxing, certain of his safety, in the last voluntary movement of his life, he reaches his hand toward his wallet for his identity.

Now take a look at the story a second time and write down any further questions that occur to you.

Compare the following questions with those you raised in your first read-through. Are any of them similar? What new elements did you notice as you read and reread the story?

(Alternatively, you might try answering your questions and the following ones with a partner or in a small group. This will give you fresh perspectives on this particular story and on the process of critical reading—it may even answer some of the more difficult questions.)

Identities

- What does the title make the reader think of? What does it mean to have an identity?
- What are some ways in which people are “identified” in their lives?

1 Normally, he goes clean-shaven into the world, but the promise of a Saturday liquid with sunshine draws him first from his study to the back yard, from there to his front lawn. The smell of burning leaves stirs the memories of childhood car rides, narrow lanes adrift with yellow leaves, girls on plodding horses, unattended stands piled high with pumpkins, onions, beets, so that each one was, in its own way, a still life. Always, there were salmon tins glinting with silver, set above hand-painted signs instructing purchasers to deposit twenty-five or fifty cents. This act of faith, containing all the stories he has read in childhood about the North—cabins left unlocked, filled with supplies for hapless wayfarers—wakes in him a desire to temporarily abandon the twice-cut yards and hundred-year-old oaks.

- How is the first word in the story important?
- Who is the protagonist? What sort of neighbourhood does he live in?
- Why does he leave home? What is his motivation or goal?

2 He does not hurry, for he has no destination. He meanders, instead, through the suburban labyrinth of cul-de-sacs, bays and circles, losing and finding himself endlessly. Becoming lost is made all the easier because the houses repeat themselves with superficial variations. There grows within him, however, a vague unease with symmetry, with nothing left to chance, no ragged edges, no unkempt vacant lots, no houses rendered unique by necessity and indifference.

- Does he know where he is going? Why does he get lost?
- What note of tension is introduced in this paragraph? Which words create mood?

3 The houses all face the sun. They have no artificial divisions. There is room enough for everyone. Now, as he passes grey stone gates, the yards are all proscribed by stiff picket fences, and quickly, a certain untidiness creeps in: a fragment of glass, a chocolate bar wrapper, a plastic horse, cracked sidewalks with ridges of stiff grass. Although he has on blue jeans—matching pants and jacket made in Paris—he is driving a grey Mercedes Benz. Gangs of young men follow the car with their unblinking eyes. The young men stand and lean in tired, watchful knots close to phone booths and seedy-looking grocery stores.

- Describe the new setting. How do this neighbourhood and its people contrast with his own neighbourhood and himself?
- What does the reader learn about his social status? What are other people's reactions to him in this section?

4 Their hair glistens as though shellacked. Their jackets gleam with studs. Eagles, tigers, wolves and serpents ride their backs.

- Whose hair "glistens"? What is the reader's impression of the people described?
- What mood is created by the images in this paragraph? Are any of the images symbolic or stereotypical?

5 He passes a ten-foot wire fence enclosing a playground bare of equipment and pounded flat. The gate is double locked, the fence cut and rolled into a cone. Three boys throw stones at pigeons. Paper clogs the fence like drifted snow. The school is sheathed in heavy screens. Its yellow brick is pockmarked, chipped.

- What impressions are created by the writer's description of the playground and the school? So far in the story, what have all the reader's impressions been based on?

6 The houses are squat, as though they were once taller and have, slowly, sunk into the ground. Each has a band of dirt around the bottom. The blue glow of television sets lights the windows. On the front steps of a red-roofed house, a man sits. He wears black pants, a tartan vest, a brown snap-brimmed hat. Beside him is a suitcase.

- What does the first sentence suggest about the neighbourhood? Why is the man sitting on the step? Why might this man be mentioned?
- Make a list of the colours used so far in the story and speculate on possible associations.

7 Fences here are little more than fragments. Cars jam the narrow streets, and he worries that he might strike the unkempt children who dart back and forth like startled fish. Street lights come on. He takes them as a signal to return the way he came, but it has been a reckless, haphazard path. Retracing it is impossible. He is overtaken by sudden guilt. He has left no message for his wife.

- How does the protagonist feel at this point? Why is he nervous? Does he

8 There have been no trees or drifting leaves, no stands covered in produce, no salmon tins, but time has run away with him. His wife, he realizes, will have returned from bridge, his children gathered for supper. He also knows that, at first, they have blamed his absence on a neighbour's hospitality and gin. However, by the time he can return, annoyance will have blossomed into alarm. His safe return will, he knows from childhood and years of being locked in domestic grief, degenerate to recriminations and apology.

- How does this paragraph tie in with an earlier one in the story? What is learned of the man's family's attitude toward him? Look up the word "recriminations," and then describe his marriage.

9 Faced with this, he decides to call the next time he sees a store or phone booth. So intent is he upon the future that he dangerously ignores the present and does not notice the police car, concealed in the shadows of a side street, nose out and follow him.

- In what sense is he unaware of the present? Why is he being followed by the police?

10 Ahead, there is a small store with windows covered in hand-painted signs and vertical metal bars. On the edge of the light, three young men and a girl slouch. One of the men has a beard and, in spite of the advancing darkness, wears sunglasses. He has on a fringed leather vest. His companions wear leather jackets. Their peaked caps make their heads seem flat, their foreheads nonexistent. The girl is better looking than she should be for such companions. She is long-legged and wears a white turtleneck sweater that accentuates her breasts.

- Why are there bars on the windows? What are the four people like? How can the reader tell? What is the protagonist's attitude toward the girl? How does this reveal his character?

11 In spite of his car, he hopes his day-old beard, which he strokes upward with the heel of his hand, will, when combined with his clothes, provide immunity. He slips his wallet into his shirt pocket, does up the metal buttons on his jacket and slips a ten-dollar bill into his back pocket. Recalling a television show, he decides that if he is accosted, he will say that the ten is all he's got. that he stole the car and ask them if they know a buyer

- What kind of “immunity” is he thinking about? Why does he put his wallet in his shirt pocket? Why is he prepared to tell a false story?

12 He eases out of the car, edges nervously along the fender and past the grille. The store window illuminates the sidewalk like a stage. Beyond the light, everything is obscured by darkness. He is so intent upon the three men and the girl that he does not notice the police car drift against the curb, nor the officer who advances with a pistol in his hand.

- In what sense is the man on “a stage”? Why does the policeman have a gun in his hand?

13 When the officer, who is inexperienced, who is nervous because of the neighbourhood, who is suspicious because of the car and because he has been trained to see an unshaven man in blue jeans as a potential thief and not as a probable owner, orders him to halt, he is surprised. When he turns part way around and recognizes the uniform, he does not feel fear but relief. Instinctively relaxing, certain of his safety, in the last voluntary movement of his life, he reaches his hand toward his wallet for his identity.

- In this context, what is likely the policeman’s view of the protagonist? Is there any foreshadowing that the officer would view the protagonist this way? What is ironic about the protagonist’s reaction to seeing the policeman?
- What do the words “last voluntary movement of his life” suggest? What will probably happen next?
- What are some meanings of the last sentence?
- Why is the story written in the present tense? Was this a good choice on the writer’s part?

On the surface, “Identities” seems to be about an urban man in search of an identity, perhaps one he lost (e.g., “memories of childhood car rides”). He is a well-to-do person who appears to be unhappy or unfulfilled by his relatively prosperous lifestyle.

As he drives, he moves away from a familiar neighbourhood to another, more mysterious one. For him, it is like experiencing a different world, one that identifies itself to him through its surface images. For instance, the images of the young men in paragraph three introduce a note of menace, later revived in paragraph ten.

Ironically, the man has temporarily lost his usual identity or left it behind him. His identity at home has possibly contributed to his leaving; his family assumes he is drinking somewhere, and there are

In paragraph eleven, he prepares to change his identity to fit in with his new environment, but he cannot change the look of his expensive car. Unfortunately for him, the policeman also judges him on the basis of *his* appearance. Just as *he* judges others, he in turn is (mis)judged by a police officer. Ironically, he is shot because his usual identity is not visible in this foreign context.

Putting all this information together, one can reasonably conclude that this story is an exploration of identity and, in part, an exploration of how people define themselves and are, in turn, defined by others.

The theme of the story might be stated in a number of different ways, as in the following sample thematic statements:

- Identity is something superficial that can be easily misunderstood, sometimes with tragic results.
- People identify both themselves and others on the basis of appearances that can often be deceptive and dangerous.

In critical reading, it is not unusual to discuss or write about literature this concisely. Composing thematic statements is one effective means of communicating the main idea of a story. The reader who is able to state a story’s theme thoughtfully and accurately in her or his own words can feel confident that a reasonable understanding of the story has been attained and expressed.

To review, it is a good idea when reading critically to ask yourself many questions—especially of the who, what, why, and how variety—when beginning the initial study of a short story.

It also makes sense to look at the parts and fiction elements of the story and to pay close attention to the implications and meanings of words, images, and symbols. This approach gives any would-be critical reader a foothold for understanding that will eventually lead to paraphrasing, summarizing, and making concise statements about the story based on specific detail and evidence. (“Responding to Story,” the final section of this book, describes the various kinds of responses—personal, creative, and so on—that readers can have to short stories.)

In the rest of this book, you will be reading stories with common literary themes. Along the way, you may be asked to analyze, write about, or present on stories. This introductory section is ultimately a handy reference, then, for illustrating the methods and types of questions that may be necessary to develop your own successful critical reading in the classroom.