

## How To - in Literary Criticism

You will find below some directions to assist you on understanding and writing your own critical appreciation of literature.

### Kinds of Fiction

- I. **Romance** - Problems lying in the path of true love between a man and a woman.
- II. **Adventure Story** - Involves physical danger to the hero. The efforts of the hero to reach his goal and triumph over the danger.
- III. **Psychological Novel** - Stresses the portrayal of personality of characters in all its complexity. It reveals what a person does, says, thinks and feels. The author's main concern is with the mental or spiritual life of the hero.
- IV. **Novel** - Long fictitious narrative story dealing with imaginary characters as if they were real.
- V. **Social Novel** - Existence of people from the stand-point of their group problems (politics, business, war).
- VI. **Historical Novel** - Important incidents or series of incidents which took place in the past with real or fictitious characters.

### Chief Characteristics of Fiction

**Background (setting)** - The surroundings, environment, and background of anything.

- a) Where (place) and when (time) does most of the action take place?
- b) To what extent are there buildings, dress, habits and language markedly different from what you are familiar with?
- c) How much does the background influence the action or personality of any of the main characters?
- d) How well does the background create moods?
- e) Does the author seem to be thoroughly familiar with the setting?

**Plot** - (sequence of related events that lead from a cause to a result plan of narrative)

- a) How well are the main plot and the sub-plots interwoven (if any)?
- b) What devices used by the author seem to indicate that he depended too much on chance to carry his story forward?
- c) How logical or reasonable or probable or unusual is the ending?
- d) How many loose ends are left at the end of the story?
- e) How does the author create suspense (if any)?

- f) Do the incidents follow one another naturally, or do they seem to have been mechanically inserted by the author?
- g) How does it reflect the society and times in which it was written?

### Characters

- a) How is the main character shown as an individual (feels, thinks, speaks, and acts to meet his own needs) and as a social being (feeling, thinking, speaking and acting, with relation to other people in the world)?
- b) How much did you identify yourself, or people you know with the characters?
- c) Which characters' happiness or sadness affected you most?  
Which one helped you understand people you know a little better than before?  
What minor characters are interesting?  
How would you describe one or two in a single sentence?
- d) If you were the author would you develop one or more of the characters differently?  
How?

### Theme - (subject matter or central idea)

- a) What do you suppose was the main reason for the author's telling this story?  
To amuse?  
To preach?  
To criticize?  
To present a social problem?
- b) What is he trying to prove or what life experience is he trying to explain?
- c) What is the main point of the story?  
How well does the author solve it or suggest a solution?
- d) How has the book influenced your own thinking?  
What new ideas have you come away with?
- e) To what extent has this story stimulated you to read others on this same theme?
- f) How significant is the theme in relation to world or life problems?

## Style

- a) How well does the author present his scenes? Does he make you feel as if you were an eye-witness?
- b) How do the characters talk - the same as people like them would in real life, or do they seem to be talking out of the mouth of the author?
- c) Does the author seem to invent phrases or have you heard many before? Give examples.
- d) What is the tone of the language?  
Warm and Friendly?  
Dry as Dust?  
Wise and Fatherly?  
Rough and Tough?  
Cold and Formal?
- e) If some of the language is strong, is it necessary to maintain the atmosphere and the nature of the characters? Give proof.
- f) Do you suspect that some bits were just put in by the author mainly to be sensational and help the book sell? Give examples that are really unnecessary.
- g) What do you think of the choice of the title? How does it suit the story?

## Non-fiction

### The Essay

- a) What are the chief subjects discussed? Are they one-sided or do they show varied interests?
- b) How careful is the writer about what he says?  
How sensitive is he to other people's feelings?  
Does he support what he says, especially if it is his opinion?
- c) How fresh and unusual are the Writer's viewpoints?
- d) What kind of person does the writer seem to be? (fastidious, cordial, cold, hard to please, very critical or particular)
- e) How worthwhile are the ideas?  
How convincing are they?
- f) What would you say about the sentence structure, vocabulary, and phrasing involved?  
Difficult to understand?  
Informal?

Conversational?  
Witty and varied?  
Cold and impersonal?  
Cite examples.

**Literature in General** - (Political, Social, Psychological or Educational subjects; books on travel or real adventure; surveys of historical periods.)

- a) Why was the book written?  
What does it contribute to one's culture?  
Was there a need for information in this area?
- b) How well does the author make his points?  
How satisfied are you with his conclusions?
- c) What kind of authority does the author seem to be?  
What are his qualifications to write on the subject?  
How many of his facts are the product of personal experience?
- d) What is the author's general point of view?  
Liberal?  
Conservative?  
To what extent does his point of view color his presentation?  
What evidence, if any, is there of propaganda?  
Does he show signs of bias?
- e) What are the chief qualities of the style (sentences, words, phrases, tone, imagination, etc...)?  
What are the chief weaknesses?
- f) What do you know now that you didn't know before?  
What has been made clearer as the result of reading the book?
- g) How would you support the author's conclusions in a debate?  
How much would you attack them?
- h) To what extent have you been stimulated to do some of the things the author did, or to go where he went?
- i) What other books on the same subject have you read that you consider superior or inferior?  
Why?
- j) To what kind of person would you recommend this book?  
Who should avoid it?