

28) Writing about Short Fiction

This handout outlines an approach for writing critical papers on short fiction. The handout describes the elements of short fiction and how these elements contribute to the overall theme of the story. It also explains how to develop a focused thesis statement and how to write good body paragraphs with clear topic sentences, strong evidence, and engaging interpretation. To make best use of this handout, first read Anton Chekhov's story, "The Lady with the Dog," available online at <<http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/jr/197.htm>>.

I) Where to Begin

Analyzing a short story begins with careful reading. First read to understand what happens (the plot), who is involved (the characters), and where and when the action takes place (the setting).

Once you have the plot, characters, and setting of the story clear in your mind, you should re-read and annotate the story (mark the parts that stand out to you). In order to write an effective analytical essay, you must examine specific elements—character, structure, symbols and imagery, point-of-view, setting and atmosphere—so that you can demonstrate how the author has made particular use of one or several of these elements to illuminate the story's theme. While your instructor may want you to examine just one or two elements in your essay (be sure to check your assignment sheet), it is often helpful to begin by looking at many elements. We'll discuss these elements, and the concept of theme, in more detail in the following section.

II) Pre-writing

To begin writing an essay that analyzes short fiction, you should have a working idea of the theme and some idea of how that theme is developed. As the U of A's Composition II textbook, *Literature and the Writing Process*, points out, the theme of a work of literary short fiction cannot be expressed as a *moral*, which is usually "a neatly stated, preachy comment on some vice or virtue." Instead, you should think of the story's theme as some insight into the human condition. You should also be careful not to confuse *theme* with *topic*:

- (x) Moral: The moral of Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog" is *even a very bad man can turn good*.
- (x) Topic: Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog" is about change in character.
- (√) Theme: The theme of Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog" is how even the most unlikely of men is capable of sacrificing a great deal when affected by love.

Topic tells us what a story is about. *Theme* tells us what a story means. Don't worry too much if a precise statement of theme does not come to you immediately. Sometimes writing is an act of discovery. The theme

may come into clearer focus as you draft and revise. However, you should try to write a working statement of the story's theme. Don't worry if it's not perfect at this stage. You'll be able to improve it as you progress.

After you have written your working statement of theme, you are ready to begin the more focused part of your analysis. When you analyze, you are looking at specific elements of the story to discover how they contribute to the theme. Begin by exploring a particular element of the story: character, structure, etc. You might want to repeat the process for several different elements to discover which one or two will work best for your essay. Make notes on various aspects of these elements by using questions like the following:

A) Character

- Who is the protagonist of the story? Does he/she have a foil or an antagonist?
- How is the character described, and what might this physical description suggest about the character's traits?
- What traits of the main character does the author first reveal?
- What traits are revealed through the story's action?
- What do a character's reactions tell us about him/her?
- Why does the author choose to show us these character traits?
- Are there differences between what the characters say and what they do?
- In what way does our understanding of this character change because of this/these revelation(s)?
- What changes, if any, does the character go through in the story?

B) Structure

- Does the story progress in a straight line until the central conflict is resolved?
- If there are digressions, flashbacks, and/or other elements which alter the forward motion of the story, why does the author stop the forward movement, and what does she want us to know about the character that we could not know otherwise?
- What events complicate the central conflict, and from where do these complications arise?
- Why would the author have chosen this particular conflict or set of conflicts?
- What traits of the main character are revealed to us by this particular set of circumstances that we might not have seen otherwise?

C) Imagery and Symbolism

- What images are repeated? At what moments are these images repeated? What do these images connote?
- If images are repeated frequently, what might they stand for beyond themselves?
- Does the author use particular symbols to reinforce the meaning of the story?
- Consider the physical description of these images and what it might suggest.

D) Point of View

- How differently would the story read if it were presented from another character's point of view?
- If the story is in the first person, what kind of person is the narrator? Is he or she reliable? To what extent? Might the narrator misrepresent or misinterpret characters or events in the story?

E) Setting and Atmosphere

- Why has the author chosen the particular region in which the story is set? What about the season?
- What might the setting suggest about the atmosphere? In other words, what would a bright, sunny day convey? A windy day with clouds on the horizon? A snowy day? Consider the effect of such things as the weather on the people in the story.
- Is the story set in a particular type of building or locale, such as a Gothic manor, an international train station, a boarding school, etc.? How does the setting contribute to the story's theme? How different would the story be in another setting? If the story would not work in any other setting (time, place, and specific set of conditions), then you will probably have enough material to discuss the use of setting.

III) Drafting

While you may be able to develop a tentative thesis at this point, it is often helpful to first work on body paragraphs. It is in body paragraphs where you discuss the author's use of the element(s) you have selected for analysis in order to persuade your reader to understand how these elements contribute to the story's theme.

To begin writing body paragraphs which develop the main ideas, follow this pattern:

- 1) Topic Sentence (the claim, which unifies the idea of each paragraph)
- 2) Textual Support (evidence from the story that supports the claim)
- 3) Evaluation or Explanation (reasoning that demonstrates how the evidence supports the idea(s) in your claim and in your larger thesis statement)

Following the 1-2-3 format described above, a body paragraph analyzing the character Gurov in Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog," which can be found at <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/jr/197.htm>, might read like this:

(1) In Anton Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog," the author portrays Gurov as an unfeeling womanizer. (2) We first see Gurov's calloused nature in the opening paragraphs. He refers to women as "the lower race," and we know that he has had "often repeated, truly bitter experiences" with them. The shallowness of his connections with women is suggested by Chekhov's telling us that Gurov found "every intimacy, which at first so agreeably diversifies life and appears a light and charming adventure, inevitably grows into a regular problem of extreme intimacy." (3) In other words, Gurov likes his

relationships to be quick and disposable. This is further suggested by his later musings on women whom he can hardly remember a week or two later.

In essence, when you analyze short fiction, you develop a thesis based on one of the literary elements. Then you support your thesis by using details from the text, passages that suggest your analysis is relevant and interesting.

IV. Drafting (developing a tentative thesis)

Now that you have an idea of how to form a body paragraph, you should begin working toward the larger goal—finding and developing a thesis. When developing a thesis, remember that you should try to assert something that is debatable and not obvious—something that can be argued and, preferably, something that is interesting.

Every thesis will make a claim, and that claim will include how the author uses particular elements to establish the story's theme. A vague thesis might state, "Gurov, the protagonist of Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog" is a character who undergoes changes." This statement is obvious and not debatable. It also does not refer to either literary elements or theme. A better thesis might read, "Chekhov uses shifts in character and setting to illustrate how even the most unlikely of men is capable of sacrificing a great deal for love." This thesis statement is better because it argues something that needs to be supported by evidence and because it includes elements and theme.

You develop the thesis through multiple readings and careful consideration of the text; it might change in the course of drafting your essay. Think of your original thesis as a tentative or working thesis, and be sure to hone its scope and claim as you develop your body paragraphs. Here is a second body paragraph for our analysis of "The Lady with the Dog" which expands upon our tentative thesis:

(1) Gurov begins to transform when Anna leaves Yalta. (2) Chekhov writes, "Left alone on the platform, and gazing up into the dark distance, [Gurov] listened to the chirrup of the grasshoppers and the hum of the telegram wires, feeling as though he had only just woken up." (3) This sense of awakening is a far cry from the cold manner with which he initially responds to Anna, eating a watermelon after he first sleeps with her, slicing and eating it without haste, providing "at least a half hour of silence" before addressing her fears over committing adultery. The callousness of this watermelon scene is then mirrored when Gurov returns to his job and family in Moscow. The winter frost has set in, and Gurov acts out against his frigid surroundings by bragging to an associate about his tryst with Anna. Instead of humoring him, however, the associate comments, "You were right this evening: the sturgeon was a bit too strong." Now Gurov is the one repressed. It is only when he sees Anna at the opera, the sound of violins and flutes in the air, where his emotions are released: "He felt suddenly frightened; it seemed as though all the people in the boxes were looking at them." It is no coincidence that Chekhov tells us how Gurov had trained as an opera singer, for Gurov now associates Anna with his former dreams and possibilities. (3) Continuing the affair forces Gurov to become vulnerable to both Moscow society and his own emotions as Chekhov demonstrates the power, risk, and universality of love.

Notice how each instance of textual support is evaluated and explained. By analyzing Chekhov's use of characterization and setting, we do more than simply state that Gurov undergoes changes—we explain *how* Chekhov transforms a cynical, unemotional character into a reckless romantic to illustrate his views on love.

For advice on writing an appealing introductory paragraph and a memorable concluding paragraph, see pages 24-26 of *Literature and the Writing Process* and the QWC's handout #6, "Introductions, Body Paragraphs, and Conclusions."