

## Questions to ask when analyzing novels

### Questions relating to the analysis of **PLOT**

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1. Who is the protagonist of this novel? Identify him/her quickly by name, age, era, locale, social class, family, and occupation.
2. Summarize as briefly as possible the single change which occurs to the protagonist during the course of this novel, taking care to specify whether this change is mainly one of fortune, moral character, or knowledge.
3. Trace the progress of this change through these detailed stages:
  - a. the original situation of the protagonist (include the initial possibilities of later disequilibrium)
  - b. the precipitating event (or series of events) which begins to involve the protagonist in a central tension
  - c. the alternative types of action which are available to the protagonist as her/his involvement intensifies
  - d. the major steps that intensify the involvement. Show how each step advances the involvement, and how it changes the relative strength of the alternatives.
  - e. the crisis. Show what event precipitates the crisis and how.
  - f. the resolution. Show what event breaks the crisis and how.
4. What questions of probability arise in this novel? (Suggestion: select the two or three events which would be most unlikely in ordinary life; show how the likelihood of these events is established in the novel, or how their occurrence may be artistically justified.) In general, are the events of this novel made sufficiently probable to support its total design?
5. To what extent may the plot of this novel be called tight or loose? Can its loose features (if any) be artistically justified?
6. At what one or two points in this novel is tension highest? Lowest? How is that degree of tension produced, and how is it appropriate? Does this novel as a whole seem to be high-tension or low-tension? How is the degree of tension appropriate to the design of the novel as a whole?

## Questions relating to the analysis of **CHARACTERIZATION**

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1. Discuss the protagonist in this novel in terms of flatness or roundness. What purposes are served by her/his flat traits, if any? Discuss any two minor characters in similar terms. For each, justify the degree of flatness or roundness in terms of the character's contribution to this novel.
2. Evaluate the moral structure of the protagonist:
  - a. To what degree is her/his moral stature defined by contrasting minor characters, by the testimony of characters who are readily acceptable as witnesses?
  - b. Discuss the protagonist's inclinations to specific virtues and vices, her/his powers or handicaps with relation to those virtues and vices.
  - c. Discuss one or two important actions in which her/his moral stature is apparent.
3. Describe the psychology of the protagonist:
  - a. What are her/his dominant traits or desires? How did these traits or desires apparently originate? Do they support or oppose one another? Explain.
  - b. Through what modes of awareness is the protagonist most responsive to life and experience: rational, instinctual, sensory, emotional, intuitive? Explain and illustrate.
  - c. Discuss the way in which the protagonist takes hold of an emergency. In what terms does she/he see her/his problem? What does she/he maximize or minimize, try to prove or disprove? Do her/his reactions proceed through definite phases? If so, what are they? How may one explain the protagonist's effectiveness or inadequacy in taking hold of this emergency?
4. In view of all the matters above, what does the author apparently wish us to think and feel about what happens to the protagonist?
5. Is the personality of the protagonist worked out with probability and consistency? Why or why not?

## Questions relating to the analysis of **NARRATIVE MANNER**

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1. What is the predominant point of view in this novel, and who seems to be the focal character? Illustrate by citing a very brief passage from the novel and showing how it confirms your opinion.
2. Does this novel have any significant shift in FOCUS? What principles of focus seem to govern the novel?
3. What kind of breadth or narrowness of vision is generated for the reader by the point of view employed in the novel? How do the qualities of the focal character influence the reader's reception? Altogether, what does the point of view contribute to this novel?
4. What kind of ordering of time predominates in this novel? Explain. (If there is a distinct time frame in the narrator's "present" that differs from the time frame of the story being told, describe it and explain why this difference has been created by the author.)
5. At what points does the narrative significantly slow down or speed up? At what points do conspicuous time jumps occur? Is there a noticeable tempo in the novel?
6. What features of the treatment of time (questions 4 and 5) seem to bear most distinctly upon the novel's total effect? How?
7. Select several passages from this novel, each reasonably brief, and use them to illustrate a discussion of such stylistic matters as these:
  - a. special qualities of diction and sentence structure
  - b. the use of style to individuate the speech, thought, and personality of given characters
  - c. the implied presence of the narrator or "author"; her/his level of artificiality; her/his personality
  - d. the basic vision of life which the style of the novel reflects and extends
8. Take any important character or event of this novel, and describe the kind of distance at which the reader is placed. What factors help to determine this placement, and how? What contribution to this novel as a whole is made by the author's choice of distance for this character or event?

## Questions relevant to the analysis of **IDEA**

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1. To what extent does this novel stress idea through the use of generalizing devices. Illustrate the more obvious uses.
2. According to this novel, what kind of behavior makes for lasting human worth or for human waste? If a heroic ideal is implied by this novel, describe it.
3. What specific social problems does the author seem to regard as unsolved? What causes seem to be mainly responsible, and why? From where is one led to believe that a solution may come? Explain.
4. Evaluate the relative importance in influencing the outcome of the novel of the following: physical nature, biological make-up, intimate personal relationships, society. Generalize, to show what the novelist seems to regard as the chief area in which human destiny is formed.
5. As set forth in this novel, to what extent is any individual able to manage these formative conditions? (The soundness and the external success of the admirable characters might be brought into the discussion here.) Through what mode of awareness do the admirable characters behave most soundly and with greatest external success?
6. To what extent is the individual's final outcome helped or hindered by forces outside her/his control? In this novel are these influences benignant, malignant, or indifferent?
7. To what extent are all these ideas based upon the concept of a guiding tendency, force, spirit, or God in the universe? If the author of this novel has implied such a force or being, what are its attributes and what is its relationship to man? (If more than one view seems to be expressed, describe each view and explain the author's apparent preference.)

## Questions relating to the analysis of **BACKGROUND**

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1. Summarize the facts of the author's birth, family and social position, main gifts or handicaps, education, and entry into writing.
2. Briefly describe, with dates, the more important of the novelist's earlier works, giving special attention to the work immediately preceding the novel under study.
3. What specific circumstances led the novelist to write this novel? To what extent did she/he depart from the kind of fiction she/he had written up to this point? What persons, events, or other autobiographical materials does this novel reflect, and with what modifications? What account of her/his inspirations and problems with this novel did the author provide through letters, prefaces, journals, and the like?
4. By focusing upon sample details of this novel, show how this biographical information (questions 1 and 3) helps to explain the design of the work.
5. What main features of social tension or stability in her/his own times did the author treat in this novel? (Sample topics: ideology, institutions, war, economics, technology, daily life, the process of history.) Explain, using both this novel and such outside sources as personal statements by the author, histories of the period, and the like.
6. By focusing upon sample details of this novel, show how this historical information (question 5) helps to explain the design of the novel.
7. What authors, literary circles, or movements did the present novelist support or attack, imitate, join, or depart from? Why?
8. What did she/he or her/his group conceive to be the special nature of the novel with regard to its creators, its subject-matters, its techniques, its readers?
9. By focusing upon sample details of this novel, show how this literary background (questions 7 and 8) helps to explain the design of the novel.

source: <http://english.unl.edu/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/Novel%20Questions.htm>