THE SHORT GUIDE SERIES

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Under the Editorship of
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A Short Guide to Writing about Literature

TENTH EDITION

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New York Boston San Francisco
London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore Madrid
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You might be better off if you returned to the text itself to press forward with, and develop, your own responses. Do some pre-writing, try a rough outline, and explicate a key passage. Your best resource is yourself.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) remains an engaging introduction to the art of prose fiction by an accomplished practitioner. Other highly readable books by story writers and novelists include: Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (1969); William Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1971); Eudora Welty, *The Eye of the Story* (1977); John Updike, *Hugging the Shore* (1983), *Odd Jobs* (1991), and *More Matter: Essays and Criticism* (1999); and John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* (1983).

For academic studies, see Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (1966, on oral as well as written fiction); Robert Liddell, *Robert Liddell on the Novel* (1969, a volume combining two earlier books by Liddell—*A Treatise on the Novel* and *Some Principles of Fiction*); Norman Friedman, *Form and Meaning in Fiction* (1975); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (1978); and Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (1983).

Some of the best modern studies are included in *Forms of Modern Fiction* (1948), ed. William Van O'Connor; *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction, 1920–1951* (1952), ed. John W. Aldridge; *Approaches to the Novel: Materials for a Poetics*, rev. ed., ed. Robert Scholes (1966); and *The Theory of the Novel: New Essays*, ed. John Halperin (1974). For essays defining the short story and sketching its history, see Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, eds., *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (1989). Also helpful are Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (1983), and Thomas Riggs, *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, 2nd ed. (1998).

Examples of contemporary approaches include Susan Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Fiction* (1981); Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984); David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction, Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts* (1993); and *Understanding Narrative* (1994), eds. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz.

Among recent studies, we recommend Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (1995), an important study of the genre from its classical sources through the eighteenth century; *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, eds. Deidre Lynch and William B. Warner (1996), a collection of essays on the novel from the perspectives of "comparative literature and transnational cultural studies"; and *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (2000), an anthology of classic essays.

Among journals devoted to narrative are *Journal of Narrative Technique, Modern Fiction Studies, Novel: A Forum,* and *Studies in Short Fiction*.

✔ A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about Fiction

Here are some questions that may help to stimulate ideas about stories. Not every question is relevant to every story, but if after reading a story and thinking about it, you then run your eye over these pages, you will probably find some questions that will help you to think further about the story—in short, that will help you to get ideas.

It's best to do your thinking with a pen or pencil in hand. If some of the following questions seem to you to be especially relevant to the story you will be writing about, jot down—freely, without worrying about spelling—your initial responses, interrupting your writing only to glance again at the story when you feel the need to check the evidence.

Title

- ❑ Is the title informative? What does it mean or suggest? Did the meaning seem to change after you read the story? Does the title help you to formulate a theme?
- ❑ If you had written the story, what title would you use?

Plot

- ❑ Does the plot grow out of the characters, or does it depend on chance or coincidence? Did something at first strike you as irrelevant that later you perceived as relevant? Do some parts continue to strike you as irrelevant?
- ❑ Does *surprise* play an important role, or does foreshadowing? If surprise is very important, can the story be read a second time with any interest? If so, what gives it this further interest?
- ❑ What *conflicts* does the story include? Conflicts of one character against another? Of one character against the setting, or against society? Conflicts within a single character?

- ❑ Are the conflicts resolved? If so, how?
- ❑ Are certain episodes narrated out of chronological order? If so, were you puzzled? Annoyed? On reflection, does the arrangement of episodes seem effective? Why or why not? Are certain situations repeated? If so, what do you make of the repetitions?
- ❑ List the major structural units of the story. In a sentence or two summarize each unit that you have listed.
- ❑ In a sentence summarize the conclusion or resolution. Do you find it satisfactory? Why, or why not?

Character

- ❑ List the traits of the main characters.
- ❑ Which character chiefly engages your interest? Why?
- ❑ What purposes do minor characters serve? Do you find some who by their similarities and differences help to define each other or help to define the major character? How else is a particular character defined—by his or her words, actions (including thoughts and emotions), dress, setting, narrative point of view? Do certain characters act differently in the same, or in a similar, situation?
- ❑ How does the author reveal character? By explicit authorial (editorial) comment, for instance, or, on the other hand, by revelation through dialogue? Through depicted action? Through the actions of other characters? How are the author's methods especially suited to the whole of the story?
- ❑ Is the behavior plausible—that is, are the characters well motivated?
- ❑ If a character changes, why and how does he or she change? (You may want to jot down each event that influences a change.) Or did you change your attitude toward a character not because the character changes but because you came to know the character better?
- ❑ Are the characters round or flat (Forster's terms)? That is, are they complex or, on the other hand, highly typical (for instance, one-dimensional representatives of a social class or age)? Are you chiefly interested in a character's psychology, or does the character strike you as standing for something, such as honesty or the arrogance of power?
- ❑ How has the author caused you to sympathize with certain characters? How does your response—your sympathy or lack of sympathy—contribute to your judgment of the conflict?

Point of View

- ❑ Who tells the story? How much does the narrator know? Does the narrator strike you as reliable? What effect is gained by using this narrator?
- ❑ How does the point of view help shape the theme? After all, the basic story of Little Red Riding Hood—what happens—remains unchanged whether told from the wolf's point of view or the girl's, but if we hear the story from the wolf's point of view, we may feel that the story is about terrifying yet pathetic compulsive behavior; if from the girl's point of view, about terrified innocence and male violence.
- ❑ Does the narrator's language help you to construct a picture of the narrator's character, class, attitude, strengths, and limitations? (Jot down some evidence, such as colloquial or—on the other hand—formal expressions, ironic comments, figures of speech.) How far can you trust the narrator? Why?

Setting

- ❑ Do you have a strong sense of the time and place? Is the story very much about, say, New England Puritanism, or race relations in the South in the late nineteenth century, or midwestern urban versus small-town life? If time and place are important, how and at what points in the story has the author conveyed this sense? If you do not strongly feel the setting, do you think the author should have made it more evident?
- ❑ What is the relation of the setting to the plot and the characters? (For instance, do houses or rooms or their furnishings say something about their residents? Is the landscape important?) Would anything be lost if the descriptions of the setting were deleted from the story or if the setting were changed?

Symbolism

- ❑ Do certain characters seem to you to stand for something in addition to themselves? Does the setting—whether a house, a farm, a landscape, a town, a period—have an extra dimension?
- ❑ Do certain actions in the story—for instance, entering a forest at night, or shutting a door, or turning off a light—seem symbolic? If so, symbolic of what?

- ❑ If you do believe that the story has symbolic elements, do you think they are adequately integrated within the story, or do they strike you as being too obviously stuck in?

Style

- ❑ Style may be defined as *how* the writer says what he or she says. It is the writer's manner of expression. The writer's choice of words, of sentence structure, and of sentence length are all aspects of style. Example: "Shut the door," and "Would you mind closing the door, please," differ substantially in style. Another example: Lincoln begins the Gettysburg Address by speaking of "Four score and seven years ago," that is, by using language that has a biblical overtone. If he had said, "Eighty-seven years ago," his style would have been different.
- ❑ How would you characterize the style? Simple? Understated? Figurative? Or what, and why?
- ❑ How has the point of view shaped or determined the style?
- ❑ Do you think that the style is consistent? If it isn't—for instance, if there are shifts from simple sentences to highly complex ones—what do you make of the shifts?

Theme

- ❑ Do certain passages—the title, some of the dialogue, some of the description, the names of certain characters—seem to you to point especially toward the theme? Do you find certain repetitions of words or pairs of incidents highly suggestive and helpful in directing your thoughts toward stating a theme?
- ❑ Is the meaning of the story embodied in the whole story, or does it seem stuck, for example, in certain passages of editorializing?
- ❑ Suppose someone asked you to state the point—the theme—of the story. Could you? And if you could, would you say that the theme of a particular story reinforces values you hold, or does it to some degree challenge them?

✔ A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about a Film Based on a Work of Literature

Many novels and short stories have been turned into films, and the relationship between film and fiction is a popular topic for courses. If your instructor asks you to write about a film version of a work of fiction, these questions may help to bring impressions out into the open and provide topics for essays.

Preliminaries

- ❑ Is the title significant? If the title of the film differs from the title of the published story, account for and evaluate the change. (Consider, for example, the slight but significant difference between the title of Thomas Hardy's novel "Jude the Obscure" [1895] and the title chosen for the film "Jude" [1996].)

Plot, Character, Setting, and Theme

- ❑ Does the film closely follow its original or not? Is the use of the camera straightforward, or highly creative? Are there, for instance, shots from high or low angles, slow or fast motion that present effectively or else distort features of the original work? (Robert Enrico's *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* [1962] is a close adaptation of Ambrose Bierce's story, and yet it is visually interesting.)
- ❑ How faithful is the film to the story in plot and in character? Evaluate the changes, if any. Are the additions or omissions due to the medium or to a crude or faulty interpretation of the original?
- ❑ Does the film do violence to the theme of the original?
- ❑ Can film deal as effectively with inner action/mental processes as with external, physical action? In a given film, how is the inner action conveyed? By voice-over? Or by visual equivalents?
- ❑ How effectively does the film convey the setting or settings that the author chose for the story?
- ❑ Does the editing—for instance, frequent sharp juxtapositions, or slow panoramic shots—convey qualities that the story writer conveyed by means of sentence length and structure?
- ❑ Are shots and sequences adequately developed, or do they seem (in film terminology) jerky? (A shot may be jerky by being extremely brief or at an odd angle; a sequence may be jerky by using discontinuous images or fast cuts. Sometimes, of course, jerkiness may be desirable.) If such cinematic techniques as wipes, dissolves, and slow motion are used, are they meaningful and effective?
- ❑ Are the actors appropriately cast? Was it a mistake to cast Robert Redford as Gatsby in Jack Clayton's film version of *The Great Gatsby* (1974)? Is Gwyneth Paltrow the right choice for the leading role in the film version (1996) of Jane Austen's novel *Emma*? John Huston, in his film (1951) of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1894; a novel about cowardice and courage in the Civil War), used Audie Murphy, one of the most highly decorated

sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home.

Material such as this cannot be skimmed. These directions and the settings they describe are symbols that help give the plays their meaning. Not surprisingly, Miller's play has Marxist overtones. Miller (notice the "solid vault of apartment houses" that menaces the salesman's house) is concerned with social forces that warp the individual. An essay might examine in detail the degree to which the setting contributes to the theme of the play.

Because Shakespeare's plays were performed in broad daylight on a stage that (compared with Ibsen's and Miller's) made little use of scenery, he had to use language to manufacture his settings. But the attentive ear or the mind's eye responds to these settings, too. Early in *King Lear*, when Lear reigns, we hear that we are in a country "With plenteous rivers, and wide-skirted meads"; later, when Lear is stripped of his power, we are in a place where "For many miles about / There's scarce a bush."

In any case, a director must provide some sort of setting—even if only a bare stage—and this setting will be part of the play. A recent production of *Julius Caesar* used great cubes piled on top of each other as the background for the first half of the play, suggesting the pretensions and the littleness of the figures who strutted on the stage. In the second half of the play, when Rome is in the throes of a civil war, the cubes were gone; a shaggy black carpet, darkness at the rear of the stage, and a great net hanging above the actors suggested that they were wretched little creatures groping in blindness. In a review of a production, you will almost surely want to pay some attention to the function of the setting.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Among useful reference works are Stanley Hochman, ed., *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama*, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (1984); Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 4th ed. (1983); and Martin Banham, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (1995). See also J. L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, 3 vols. (1981). Another helpful resource is *Theatre, Theory, Theatre: The Major Critical Texts from Aristotle and Zeami to Soyinka and Havel*, ed. Daniel Gerould (2000).

Useful introductions to the nature of drama are Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (1964); J. L. Styan, *The Elements of Drama* (1969); and J. L. Styan, *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance* (1996). More specialized studies are Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker* (1946); C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, 3 vols. (1982–85); Sue Ellen Case, *Feminism and the Theatre* (1984); and Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (1990). We also recommend the essays included in *Shakespeare in the Theatre: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Stanley Wells (1997).

A quarterly journal, *Modern Drama*, publishes articles on American and English drama from 1850 to the present. It includes an annual bibliography of studies of this material.

✔ A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about Drama

The following questions will help you to formulate ideas for an essay on a play.

Plot and Conflict

- ❑ Does the exposition introduce elements that will be ironically fulfilled? During the exposition do you perceive things differently from the way the characters perceive them?
- ❑ Are certain happenings or situations recurrent? If so, what significance do you attach to them?
- ❑ If there is more than one plot, do the plots seem to you to be related? Is one plot clearly the main plot and another plot a subplot, a minor variation on the theme?
- ❑ Take one scene of special interest and indicate the structure, for example, from stability at the beginning to the introduction of an instability, and then to a new sort of stability or resolution.
- ❑ Do any scenes strike you as irrelevant?
- ❑ Are certain scenes so strongly foreshadowed that you anticipated them? If so, did the happenings in these scenes merely fulfill your expectations, or did they also in some way surprise you?
- ❑ What kinds of conflict are there? One character against another, one group against another, one part of a personality against another part in the same person?
- ❑ How is the conflict resolved? By an unambiguous triumph of one side or by a triumph that is also in some degree a loss for the triumphant side? Do you find the resolution satisfying, or unsettling, or what? Why?

Character

- ❑ What are the traits of the chosen character?
- ❑ A dramatic character is not likely to be thoroughly realistic, a copy of someone we might know. Still, we can ask if the character is consistent and coherent. We can also ask if the character is complex or is, on the other hand, a rather simple representative of some human type.
- ❑ How is the character defined? Consider what the character says and does and what others say about him or her and do to him or her. Also consider other characters who more or less resemble the character in question, because the similarities—and the differences—may be significant.
- ❑ How trustworthy are the characters when they characterize themselves? When they characterize others?
- ❑ Do characters change as the play goes on, or do we simply know them better at the end? If characters change, *why* do they change?
- ❑ What do you make of the minor characters? Are they merely necessary to the plot, or are they foils to other characters? Or do they serve some other functions?
- ❑ If a character is tragic, does the tragedy seem to proceed from a moral flaw, from an intellectual error, from the malice of others, from sheer chance, or from some combination of these?
- ❑ What are the character's goals? To what degree do you sympathize with them? If a character is comic, do you laugh *with* or *at* the character?
- ❑ Do you think the characters are adequately motivated?
- ❑ Is a given character so meditative that you feel he or she is engaged less in a dialogue with others than in a dialogue with the self? If so, do you feel that this character is in large degree a spokesperson for the author, commenting not only on the world of the play but also on the outside world?

Nonverbal Language

- ❑ If the playwright does not provide full stage directions, try to imagine for a least one scene what gestures and tones might accompany each speech. (The first scene is often a good one to try your hand at.)
- ❑ What do you make of the setting? Does it help reveal character? Do changes of scene strike you as symbolic? If so, symbolic of what?

✔ A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about a Film Based on a Play

Preliminaries

- ❑ Is the title of the film the same as the title of the play? If not, what is implied?

Dramatic Adaptations

- ❑ Does the film closely follow its original and neglect the potentialities of the camera? Or does it so revel in cinematic devices that it distorts the original?
- ❑ Does the film do violence to the theme of the original? Is the film better than its source? Are the additions or omissions due to the medium or to a crude or faulty interpretation of the original?

Plot and Character

- ❑ Can film deal as effectively with inner action—mental processes—as with external, physical action? In a given film, how is the inner action conveyed? Olivier used voice-over for sections of Hamlet's soliloquies—that is, we hear Hamlet's voice but his lips do not move.
- ❑ Are shots and sequences adequately developed, or do they seem jerky? (A shot may be jerky by being extremely brief or at an odd angle; a sequence may be jerky by using discontinuous images or fast cuts. Sometimes, of course, jerkiness may be desirable.) If such cinematic techniques as wipes, dissolves, and slow motion are used, are they meaningful and effective?
- ❑ Are the characters believable?
- ❑ Are the actors appropriately cast?

Soundtrack

- ❑ Does the soundtrack offer more than realistic dialogue? Is the music appropriate and functional? (Music may, among other things, imitate natural sounds, give a sense of locale or of ethnic group, suggest states of mind, provide ironic commentary, or—by repeated melodies—help establish connections.) Are volume, tempo, and pitch—whether of music or of such sounds as the wind blowing or cars moving—used to stimulate emotions?