

PROSE ANALYSIS

Someone is always speaking in a novel -- whether it is a narrator who is not a character within the fiction, or a character within the narrative. Consequently both the particular ideas, attitudes, feelings, perspectives of that speaker, and the concerns and attitudes of the novel as a whole, will be presented through the prose. The analytical reader needs to understand what information is conveyed and how it is conveyed. The following is a guide to some things to look for, and contains:

A. The Passage as Prose.

1. The language:

1. What kind of language is used? Here are some possibilities:
 1. abstract or concrete language ?
 2. language of emotions or of reason ?
 3. language of control or language of openness ?
2. What are the connotations of the language? How much language is connotative? What areas of experience, feeling, and meaning are evoked? When Conrad writes that a gate was "a neglected gap," we have to take notice, as a gate is not ordinarily a gap, nor is the issue of neglect or care usually applied to gaps. Conrad intends to imply, to connote, certain qualities through his language use.
3. How forceful is the language (see also imagery and sentence structure)?
4. what aspects of feeling are supported or created by the sound of the language?
 1. by the vowel and consonant sounds -- soft or hard long or short
 2. by how the words go together -- e.g. smoothly, eliding, so that one slides into the other, or separated by your need to move your mouth position.

2. Sentence structure: Meaning is created by how the sentences sound, by how they are balanced, by the force created by punctuation as well as by language:

1. by the stresses on words, and the rhythm of the sentence
2. by the length of the sentence
3. by whether the sentence has repetitions, parallels, balances and so forth
4. by the punctuation, and how it makes the sentence sound and flow.

3. Imagery and setting: Images and use of setting can tell a great deal about character, a narrator, a fictional work:

1. Imagery as figurative language: what sort of metaphors, similes and analogies does the speaker use, and what does that tell you about their outlook and sensibility?
2. Images as motifs: are their recurring images? What ideas or feelings are aroused by them, what people or events are brought to mind by them?
3. Imagery as setting: How is the setting used? To create a sense of realism? To create mood? To represent or create a sense of states of mind or feelings? To stand for other things (i.e. symbolic or allegorical -- as for instance Wuthering Heights and Thrushcroft Grange in *Wuthering Heights* might be said to stand for two ways of viewing the world or two different sociological perspectives, and jungle in *Heart of Darkness* might be said to stand for the primeval past or for the heart of humankind)?

4. Discourse features

1. how long does the person speak?
2. are the sentences logically joined or disjointed, rational or otherwise ordered, or disorderly?
3. what tone or attitude does the talk seem to have?
4. does the speaker avoid saying things, deliberately or unconsciously withhold information, communicate by indirection?
5. to what extent and to what end does the speaker use rhetorical devices such as irony?

B. Characterization The idea here is that the various features of the prose, above, will support features of characterization which we can discuss in somewhat different terms.

1. What ideas are expressed in the passage, and what do they tell you about the speaker?
2. What feelings does the speaker express? What does that tell you about them? Are their feelings consistent?
3. Does the character belong to a particular character type or represent a certain idea, value, quality or attitude?
4. What is the social status of the character, and how can you tell from how they speak and what they speak about?
5. What is the sensibility of the speaker? Is the person ironic, witty, alert to the good or attuned to evil in others, optimistic or pessimistic, romantic or not romantic (cynical, or realistic?).
6. What is the orientation of the person -- how aware are they of their own and others' needs, and of their environments?
7. How much control over and awareness of her emotions, her thoughts, her language does the speaker have?
8. How does the narrator characterize the character through comment or through description?

C. Genre & Tradition

Different traditions and genres tend to use language and characters and setting and plot differently, and this may show in individual passages. Is it a satire, a comedy, a tragedy, a romance? Is it a novel of social comment, an exploration of an idea? (There are more kinds.) Is it in a certain sub-genre like a detective novel, science fiction, etc.? Is it an allegory or a satire, is it realistic or more symbolic? How does this genre, sub-genre or tradition tend to use setting, characters, language, mood or tone? Does this one fit in?