

The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches
Prof. Smita Jha
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee

Lecture - 6
How to Read a Novel

Hello student, I am Professor Smita Jha and I am here to discuss today how to read a novel, which is a very important part of reading the English novel with an interdisciplinary approach, which is the broadest theme of this course. We all read novel, but I am talking specifically about the literature students. How and why we should read a novel, and very importantly, how to read a novel to take out meaning from the novel.

Let us see what are the important factors. In his book 'Literature in Our Lives', award-winning teacher and author Richard Jacobs shows that reading is thinking about, writing or talking about English literature involves us all personally. Texts talk to us intimately and are gently inviting us to talk back. That is the thought process intervening in and changing our lives.

One useful way to approach reading a novel or other work of fiction involves paying close attention to the individual techniques that tell the story. Even though you eventually might want to concentrate upon the novel's meaning or its effect upon you, those tasks become a lot easier if you know how the text works. Exactly. And as I said, specifically for the literary purpose, I'm talking about how to read novel.

You choose, you select novel for research purposes. What is your angle, to understand, to explain the novel? What is your perspective on the thematic analysis of the novel? Because there could be various angles. How you read? What is your approach? What is your thought process? That is the cognitive part. Very, very important. Reading a novel randomly, well, is of no use.

Even though you are reading a novel for entertainment, even though, I mean, even in that case, you need some kind of interpretation. This method essentially considers the fictional text as a form of information technology in which each of the techniques acts as a component. And the whole process is called thought process. That is the cognitive part. Another way of looking at this approach to reading and studying the novel is to think of it as reading from the author's point of view.

Yes, very important. Because author has written the text and what is the perspective since you as reader are always implicitly asking, if I were telling this story, why would I make this particular move or employ this particular technique at this place in the story? Very true. This is the outcome of a critical mind, criticality of your thought, that if you were the author. This depends, you know, entirely how you read. How you go through reading novels open onto the world of creative imagination.

And I like this very much: creative imagination. Creative imagination means *your* critical thinking, your own exploration. Not only does it develop skills that are essential for today's global environment. But it also inspires change and innovation. Here are some important points to talk about before deciding to read a novel. Historical context, that is the background of the novel. At some point, too much historical context will add an extra narrative that confuses students or readers. Who might already struggle to understand a complex story. But, with writers like Shakespeare or Jane Austen, it is important to remind students or reader of some basics about how monarchies work on women's rights. With Austen, students or readers want to judge females without considering that they couldn't work, go to school, vote or even be taken seriously in conversation by males.

The second important style is 'narrative style' or the factors you need to consider. The narrative mode of the story should be introduced more than anything else. Yes. Who is telling the story? Who is the main narrator? The tone, the style, the sequence, all involve in narrative style. So this is very, very important aspect to consider while going through a novel. Many novels contain complex narrative techniques like limited, omniscient narrator flashbacks, letters, dreams, or the stream of consciousness that is also psychological aspect.

Next is 'voice'. Voice or narration or narrative style, you know, interchangeable. But voice is very important. There are several novels, like *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. Ishmael is the narrator, unseen narrator, but in all the pages, he is very much there. So voice, what is the narrator and his heart is language-like. What is the tone like? Ironic, comic, witty, angry? Controlled, understated, sermonizing, biblical, parliamentary, or a mixture?

'Voice' comprises all such factors while deciding the tone, the narrative style. Well, 'plot', another very important aspect, plot outline or character tree. Because when we talk of novel, well, novel is different from short story. Short story can be defined as moment to a monument, while novel is a universal phenomenon dealing with universal theme,

number of characters, a very well woven plot. Many novels have characters with long names or large families.

Minor characters can also be hard to keep track of. So, students often need a one-page reference sheet. So they don't feel the need to look for online resources. You see the plot of E.M. Foster's novel *Howards End*, the family tradition, the title. Even in Emily Bronte's only one novel *Wuthering Heights*, even the house name that is very important and create plot like a great movie that you watch more than once. A great novel requires many readings. And this is my judgment. This is my suggestion. I always request my scholars that one reading is not enough. At least you read thrice to get the concrete meaning.

This is why it is advised to read the text out loud also. This is another useful way to read out loud. It gives students a second chance to make sense of everything. Because the full truth involves understanding multiple perspectives. A story that depicts reality will never be simple.

A visible shift in thinking should be evident. As the world is decontextualized through the ideas and content, read and discussed, and the ways authors craft and record these ideas, students should be better positioned to understand other things heard, read, or viewed as a result. Point of view, yet another important aspect, is related, but different question, who is perceiving or focalizing the action, point of view or focalization? Where your focus is while moving the pages of a novel? Speech and thought, how are they represented? Directly or indirectly? Free or not? And for that, I would advise you to see Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short's *Style in Fiction*.

Does it change? And you will get good idea that what is the direction of speech and thought, sometimes soliloquy, sometimes monologue. And that can be explained well, you know, if you consult this book. Language, of course. the backbone of any novel. Everything comes through language. So there are lots of things to think about here. Choice of vocabulary, dialect, syntax, tone, rhythm, repetition, figurative language and the like. Language changes often dramatically and surprisingly fast. So remember to look words up in the OED or in other reliable sources.

What is the rhetoric like? And I have given a lecture on rhetoric theory in connection with this reading of English novel. Rhetoric, the art of speech and the role of figurative, you know, terms. Narratives only exist in time. and are structured by it. So ask, how time and temporality feature?

Look at tenses, tempo, uses of repetition, sequence, and order of narration, etc. Paratextual material and forms of framing, use of titles, footnotes, divisions alike. Scenes of narration, performance or writing are often very revealing. And these aspects, small things, you know, help you to explore the very texture of the novel. You need to analyze all such things.

Further, allusions: references or intertextuality are often a royal road to interpretive insight, literary students would be lost without good dictionaries and reliable encyclopedias. So I would advise to use them. Dialogue. What kinds of dialogue?

Who speaks to whom and when and how? Look at the relation of the oral to the written in the story and the said to the unsaid. The reader, that is another important aspect, how is the reader constituted? Is there an implied reader to the story? Is the reader addressed directly?

First person narrative, second person narrative, third person narrative, and yes, the implied reader. That is very important aspect and it is the reader's critical thinking that can analyze it. Gender and the body questions. Always good ones to ask of the narrator, characters and implied readers. Mystery, suspense, peripeteia, anagnorisis, ways of thinking about the process of their story.

For the two latter terms, see Aristotle's *Poetics* in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* with the two latter terms, that is, 'peripeteia' and 'anagnorisis'. Well, they are fundamental terms in any analysis of narrative form: beginnings endings climatic moments all need a special attention. If we talk of characterization we may ask who is important and why?

The protagonist, antagonist. Who is marginalized or subordinated? What kind or kind of characters are we offered? How do narrators characterize their characters? How do they characterize themselves?

Naming, gender, race and class questions are important here. Is there any sort of system or patterning to the characterization through doubling or parallelism for example? Space, place, background. Rarely simple background and objects and things not necessarily the same. Sometimes as important as the people.

That is why when you go through a novel first time, the first reading can give you some idea of the very texture of the novel. And better you keep a pen and a paper and you write it. Which aspect I'm talking, you know, just now, which one is the most prominent, you

know, while going through the pages. Maybe the second reading, you will get much clearer, you know, idea. And third, very clear idea.

Place and organization in the text, very important. And, you know, Shakespeare was criticized due to the place also. How do the chapter or other divisions, for example, the fact of serial publication, affect our reading experience and affect what are the affective dimensions and force of the novel like? How and in what way does it want to move you?

Does it succeed? Well, I am posing all these questions to you because when you read a novel, don't be a passive reader. Be an active reader. And the more queries you have, the inquisitive quality, the more exploration is possible while dealing with the novel.

Laughter, satire, irony, wit, these are all rhetorical part. Don't forget that novelists are often comedians. But what kind of comedy is structuring? Not just through plot but also through contrast. Comparison, parallelism and repetition of characters, plots, lexical items, grammatical structures alike are vital to fiction.

That is why I said you keep pen and paper, write all these things. And also what do you want to look into them? But then, don't read a novel with preconceived notion. A free reading will help you and then you decide, you know, the most prominent one and your point of view. When looking at novels with illustrations or images, remember that it is a punctual art.

What moment does the artist choose to illustrate and why? Yes, the biography of the author, the life, you know, history of the author, the situational episode can be a factor to decide the tempo of the novel. How does the picture relate to the narrative of which novel? It is a part of the text it accompanies. Does it deviate from it or supplement it in any way?

What is its style? Is it realistic, grotesque, picturesque and is it appropriate? Like *Wuthering Heights*, now we can say gothic, grotesque, macabre, due to the appearance of *Wuthering Heights* and the character residing in that house. So the factors, the characters, the environment, all are very important to decide.

What is the formal organization of the picture? Where are we encouraged to look? What does it allude to? Other pictures in the same text? Does it make other cultural references or allusions?

Keep your mind, you know, full with the questions. Framing bodies, characterization, space, place, objects, all important here. Remember to use high quality reproductions so you can see the detail. If the novel has photographs. Now these days we are working extensively, intensively on comic graphic novel.

So if the novel has photographs, did the novelist take them? The real picture or borrowed from somewhere? Are they found photographs? Did the novelist work with a collaborator? What does this say about artistic collaboration? Are the images degraded somehow? If they are repeatedly photocopied, what is the reason? And you have to explore all these questions. Where? Appropriate research.

What do the authors think about the relationship between text and image? Well, with these words, I conclude today's topic. But my point is that first you select novel with the choice of your theme. And your subject, and as I said that I am delivering this speech not randomly. This is specifically for literary purpose.

When you select a novel, specifically in humanities, for research, you know, I mean you should be very clear in your mind. That what kind of subject you are going to deal with. Because selection of the novel is also very difficult. And as I said that you are not supposed to read the selected novel or the select novel randomly. With some idea, with some vision.

Writing novel from the point of view of the author is totally different. But when you read, that is your perspective. And I like reader response theory. See, in this age of post-modernism, post-colonial age, deconstruction is very important. And in my opinion, yes, you deconstruct the novel.

But again, like Roland Barthes, I cannot say that the writer is dead. Or the dead writer. The presence of writer should be there. You cannot omit, you cannot, you know, delete the name of writer completely. But your interpretation is very, very important.

Remember, literature is always open. And due to this flexibility, you have ample choice to select the novel to go through the gap of the research. Well, the writer has written where do you find that you should start with a new exploration that why he or she has written this. In your research you come up with your research objectives your research questions based on the reading of the novel.

And that supports your research methodology, your theoretical framework. Therefore, you need to be very, very serious while exploring the novel. And again, I say that not

once, at least three, four times you read a novel. You jot down the ideas, the factors, you know, what you think. And very important, the context.

In which context you are going through the novel. And what do you think about your further writing? A human mind cannot be passive. So your thought process, the cognitive design, the criticality, critical thinking will help you to explore the various factors I just explained. And as Aristotle said, that a clear beginning, a clear middle and a clear end - that is the example of a good novel.

Complexities, you know, ambiguity can make you, you know, perplexed for some time. But then, like a writer, like an author, a reader has this freedom to choose his or her own vision, interpretation and explanation. With these words, I would like to conclude the discussion of 'how to read a novel'. Kindly note down all the points. Read it and you see that you will come up with a solid theme of your own choice.

Thank you very much. Let us meet in the next lecture.