



HOW TO ANALYZE A SHORT STORY OR NOVEL

Revised March 2007

1. Basic Questions

- Who is the main character?
- Who are the two or three other most important characters?
- How are they related to one another?

2. Big Questions: A First Shot

- What is the story about?
- What are the Big Ideas here? (Can you tell yet?)

3. Mapping I: Places

- Draw a map of the most important places the main character goes through the story, and trace his or her movement.
- Next — maybe in another color — tell how the character feels at each place, and what he or she thinks.
- Next — maybe in another color — tell what the character learns at each place.
- If you like, add other important characters to the map, or perhaps draw new maps for each important character.

4. Mapping II: Events

- Do the same mapping exercise, but this time make it a "time line" listing the important *events* of the story. (Again, map how the character feels at each place, and what he or she learns.)

5. Mapping III: Character (These can be applied to any important character)

Make another map, or a timeline — or maybe just a list — of the following things:

- What does the character, and perhaps other characters, desire?
- What gets in the way of attaining that desire? (In other words, what *obstacle* does the character meet?)
- What are the character's main *fears*? Where do they appear? How are they described?
- Are any of the fears realized? (Do they actually happen?) How? How does the character react?
- What are the character's main *hopes*? Where do they appear? How are they described?
- Do any of these hopes materialize? How? How does the character react?
- What does the character *see* or *know* that others do not?
- What does the main character *not see* or *know* that others do see or know?

6. Mapping IV: Themes

- Are there any important or unusual words or phrases, or objects or places, or feelings or ideas that occur more than once in the story? **If so, these things are *themes* — things repeated several times. They mean to communicate important *ideas*.**
- Make another map — or a list, if you like, or a timeline — and plot these themes in some way.
- Do these themes help you understand important places or events, fears or hopes?

7. **Analysis I: Character and Plot**

- Now look back at your maps. What are the very most important places and events in the story? How does the character change as a person at these turning points?
- What kind of person is the character at the beginning of the story?
- What kind of person is the character at the end?
- How do his or her relationships change?
- How do the people around him or her change?

8. **Analysis II: Images and Ideas**

- In the themes you've identified, is the author trying to use *pictures* to talk about *ideas*?
- List a few of the important pictures — big or small — and try to show how the author is using them to talk about ideas.
- Go back to your first sketchings of big ideas. Can you find any "pictures" in the story that communicate these big ideas?
- Look at the places where the author describes the character's feelings, ideas, hopes, fears, desires, or obstacles. What pictures does the author draw to help you understand these?

9. **Analysis III: Experience and Ideas**

- Are there elements of the main character's experience (or the experience of any other character) that are like your experience? How?
- Do you have experiences that are markedly different from those of the characters?
- Look at the Big Ideas of the story. Are there any that you agree with? Are there any you disagree with?
- What were your emotional reactions to the story? Do they change at various points?
- What is your emotional response to the story now that you've finished it?
- What moments in the story affected you the most? Why?
- What moments in the story bothered you the most? Why?
- What were your own hopes, fears, or desires as you read the story? Did these change as the story moved forward? How, and why?