How to read a Novel -- Some Places to Begin

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. This method essentially considers the fictional text as a form of information technology, in which each of the techniques acts as a component.

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," 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?"

Here are some techniques to consider:

- point-of-view and narrative technique
- plot and narrative structure
- setting
- characterisation
- image, symbol, and motif
- theme and subject

How to read a novel -- point of view and narrative technique

One way to approach a novel involves asking yourself as you read, "Who's telling the story?" Is it some unidentified person or voice, who always uses the grammatical third person -- "he," "she," "they" -- or is it a first-person narrative in which the identified speaker relates everything from his or her point of view? Or does the novel unfold as an unusual hybrid in which a character tells part of the story and an all-knowing narrator tells the rest?

Once you've determined that the novel seems to be told by either a first- or third-person narrator, next decide if this narrator knows absolutely everything about the story and its characters or only some of the things we want (and need) to know. Is the narrator, in other words, an omniscient or a limited narrator? One characteristic of an omniscient narrator is that such a storyteller, unlike any human being who has ever lived, knows what's going on inside the mind of other people (or at least other characters).

Readers almost always identify with the fictional character who relates stories in the first person, but can you tell whether this speaker is reliable or not? Most first-person narrators are reliable, but a good many are not. Some clearly do not represent the author's views and may even be the butt of satire or other forms of criticism. How can you tell?
How to read a novel -- Plot and narrative structure

Plot is what happens in a story, and structure is the order in which the novel presents the plot. Plot and structure converge almost completely in most novels-- they start at the chronological beginning and progress to the end. In epics like The Iliad and novels like Absalom! Absalom!, which begin in medias res [in the middle of things] and then use flashbacks to explain what is happening, plot and structure diverge a great deal.

Although it might seem easy to merge plot and structure completely, it is virtually impossible to do so, for even books that at first seem to start at the "very beginning," such as A Tale of Two Cities and Great Expectations, often pause late in the action to provide what in cinema is termed "back-story." Such delayed exposition is particularly common in detective stories or narratives in which a mystery plays an important part.

How to read a novel -- setting

Where does the action take place? In reading a novel, one almost always learns pretty quickly in what place and time the story unfolds -- in other words, where in time and space the story "is set."

Chronological setting: What does setting a novel several decades earlier than the time of its writing and publication imply? Why did Dickens place Little Dorrit in a time when debtor's prisons still existed? How is setting a story three or four decades back different from setting it three or five centuries earlier?

Place: Although placement in time is obviously very important, many discussions of setting tend to focus on place and on those techniques, such as description and allusion to verifiable facts, that create setting. As you read a work of fiction consider if the author just informs us that the action happens in a specific real place (Manchester), a fictional one (Milton), or merely a general place (an industrial city in the north). Does the novel describe landscape, cities, and interiors in great detail? What does each approach imply about the writer's attitude toward reality (or "the world")? What is the relation of a particular setting to a novel's main characters, and can you imagine them in a different setting. What happens in novels, such as Gaskell's North and South and Dickens's Great Expectations, when the protagonists appear in a new setting -- and what does that appearance in a new setting have to do with "what the book is about"?

How to read a novel -- characterisation

When you think of it, one of the strangest things about fiction is that authors can make us react to a bunch of words as if they were a real person. These assemblages of language
can make us laugh or cry, get us angry or indignant, and even occasionally treat them as more important to us than people we know. The various techniques that works of fiction in prose and verse use to create this powerful allusion of a person make up what we call characterisation. Here are some of the more important of these literary devices:

- **physical description** -- telling us what the character looks like
- **dialogue** -- what the character says
- **physical actions** -- what the character does (particularly in relation to what he or she says or thinks.)
- **thoughts, or mental actions** -- the character's inner life, what the character thinks
- **judgment by others** -- what other characters say and think about this fictional person
- **the narrator's judgment** -- what narrator tells us about the character
- **the author's judgment** -- what the author thinks of the character (sometimes difficult to determine until late in the narrative)

### How to read a novel -- theme and subject

We frequently use the terms theme and subject interchangeably, but one of my teachers in college used to urge us to distinguish between the two as a useful means of discussing works of fiction: in his usage **subject** is the general topic or topics the book implicitly discusses, such as, for example, "the condition of the working classes" or "the relations of manufacturers and mill workers." In contrast, **theme** is what the novel implies we should think about such subjects; it's what the book means. **North and South** thus shows that factory workers in mid-Victorian England led harsh lives of deprivation and injustice and that following the assumptions of classical economics led factory owners to mistreat their workers and to consider them almost as a separate, lower species. You'll notice that using the word **theme** in this way also requires using the word **that**, as in "the subject of the work-in-question is nature," but "this work shows [argues/demonstrates/implies] that nature is cruel." The use of **that**, in other words, makes one take a stand and state what one believes a text to mean.