

Getting Started: Thinking about novels*

Read these four statements made by novelists. Using your own words, try to condense into **one sentence** what the writers seem to be saying about the novel and its function or importance:

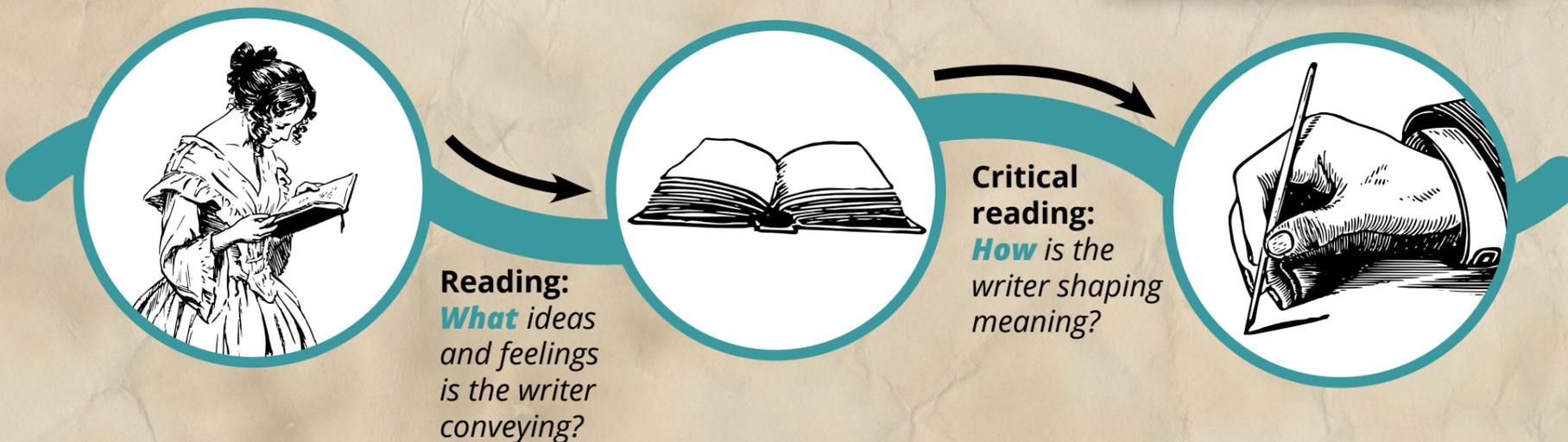
- ‘...a novel... in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature is conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.’ JANE AUSTEN
- ‘People wonder why the novel is the most popular form of literature...read more than books of science or metaphysics. The reason is very simple; it is merely that the novel is more true than they are.’ G K CHESTERTON
- ‘Writing fiction is the act of weaving a series of lies to arrive at a greater truth.’ KHALED HOSSEINI
- ‘You don’t read *Gatsby* to learn whether adultery is good or bad but to learn about how complicated issues like adultery and fidelity and marriage are. A great novel heightens your senses and sensitivity to the complexities of life and of individuals...’ AZAR NAFISI

Reading and Critical Reading

Think about how **prose works**, especially novels, differ in the way that they are crafted and received from **poetry** (*condensed meaning, often read aloud*) and **drama** (*dependent on interpretation of performer and/or director*). Think about the freedoms and possible restrictions in crafting an extended piece of narrative writing.

‘A novel absorbs us, I would say, not because of what it is about, but because of how it is written.’

PROFESSOR JOHN MULLAN**



The English literature student must develop **critical reading skills** and go beyond merely grasping and responding to **what** the writer is saying to consider **how** he or she has shaped meaning and our responses to it.

Read this list of some **techniques or prose devices** a novelist might consciously choose to shape meaning. Try to rank them in order of importance for the novelist.

- | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| • setting | • syntax | • tone/register |
| • narrative viewpoint | • tense | • symbolism |
| • repetition | • characterisation | • dialogue |
| • accumulation of detail | • plotline/structure | • contrasts/parallels |
| • authorial intervention | • imagery | • title/chapter headings |

Tackling Narrative Technique (AO2)

Look at the short extracts from novels in Part 3 of this Prose Study Knowledge Organiser.

- (1) Read **Extract (a)**, the opening to a novel written in the 1950s, and answer these questions:
 - What impressions do you gain of the central character from this short opening extract?
 - Now read the extract again, focusing more critically on **how** the writer’s conscious choices have shaped our response to the character. Think about the effects of narrative viewpoint; register or tone; diction or choice of vocabulary; sentence structure; impact of the highlighted phrases/words; what is withheld from the reader.
- (2) Read **Extract (b)**, the opening to a novel published in 1815, and answer the same questions as for Extract (a).
- (3) Read **Extract (c)**, the ending to a novel written in the 1920s.
 - What thoughts do you have about this as an ending to a novel? How would you describe the atmosphere created here? How has the writer created that atmosphere? Think about the effects of use of dialogue and/or repetition; choice of vocabulary; highlighted words; sentence construction of syntax; impact of the final sentence.
- (4) Read **Extract (d)**, the opening to a novel published in the 1850s.
 - How would you describe the atmosphere or tone of this extract and the omniscient narrator’s attitude to the city described? How has the writer created that atmosphere and/or attitude? Think about the effects of use of imagery/personification and accumulated detail; syntax; highlighted words/phrases.

* You can choose to study other types of literary prose, including short story collections; travel writing; biography; essays etc. Remember to consider the generic features/conventions of the prose style chosen.

** Professor John Mullan has written a useful guide to critical reading of literary fiction (*How Novels Work*), as have other scholars such as EM Forster (*Aspects of the Novel*) and David Lodge (*The Art of Fiction*).