

INTRODUCING LITERARY CRITICISM OR, "BOOK CLUBS: THE NEXT LEVEL!"

A MENTOR MOM© CLASS

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Prepared for the 2010 LDSEHE Education Conference in Buena Vista, Virginia

Most Important: This is a "BASIC" introduction to Literary Criticism. It is not something that you can cover comprehensively in one year...your children will study this all throughout their schooling. Don't try to do it all.

- b. Middle Children: deeper understanding with examples
- c. Teenagers: should be able to use the term to actually analyze literature

Why introduce literary criticism in a book club environment?

1. Fun!
2. Non-threatening
3. Easy environment to introduce a little at a time
4. Brings a new challenge/fresh approach to "tired" book discussions

What should I expect from young children (K-grades 3/4)?

1. BASIC concepts and understanding
2. If it is making them miss the bigger picture, drop back for a bit.
3. Concrete analysis – character, setting, etc.

What should I expect from middle children (grades 4/5-7/8)?

1. Deeper understanding of basic definitions
2. More awareness of meaning
3. Beginning to identify more difficult elements (obvious symbols, simple themes, heavy-handed tone, etc.)

What can I expect from high school students?

1. Still learning, they don't have it all
2. Can look for more subtle and abstract ideas (multiple conflicts & themes, etc.)
3. Look for more layers in meaning & characterization
4. Start to articulate theme statements, need to have support FROM THE BOOK for their ideas
5. Compare/contrast skills (SO IMPORTANT for higher analysis)

How Do I Do This?

- 1) Decide which literary elements you want to teach. (schedule per year, per semester, per month)
- 2) Assign a book that illustrates that element well.
- 3) Decide when in the book discussion you want to introduce the topic (beginning is easiest, later on can tend to "kill" a good discussion unless the kids are older; still, you might want to use this for effect)
- 4) Decide how much of the Literary Element you are going to teach.
 - a. Young Children: familiarity with the term and basic understanding

Teaching Example: PLOT

Young Children: Basic definition

Plot: the story line, the sequence of major events of the book

Ex. – Cinderella is treated badly by her stepmother and stepsisters, not allowed to go to ball. Fairy Godmother appears, turns her into a beautiful princess, she goes to ball and dances with prince without telling him who she is. She leaves at midnight, dropping a glass slipper in her haste. The prince has all the maidens of the village try on the glass slipper to try to find his dancing partner. The shoe fits Cinderella's foot, and the prince and Cinderella live happily ever after.

Middle Children: Basic definition/understanding of plot PLUS introduce a plot diagram

A: Introduction or

Exposition:

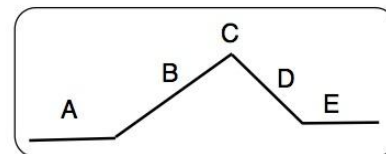
Introduces setting, main characters and conflict; can be short or long, but

tends to be "flat" (little emotion or action at this point). *Example: Cinderella's loving father has died, leaving her at the mercy of a mean stepmother and two horrible stepsisters.*

B: Rising Action: characters are developed, conflicts increase, motives introduced, the bulk of a novel or story. *Example: Cinderella gets treated badly; has to cook, clean and do all the work; stepsisters are cruel; Cinderella doesn't get to go to ball; Fairy Godmother appears and works her magic; Cinderella goes to ball, dances with Prince, falls in love; leaves at midnight leaving glass slipper behind; Prince commands all young maidens to try on the slipper; stepsisters try to keep Cinderella from trying on the slipper.*

C: Climax: the "high point" of the story; major conflicts erupt into a final showdown; emotional moment (Beware: often the main character triumphs here, but not always! Sometimes they lose, or sometimes there is no "winner."): *Example: Cinderella finally tries on the slipper and it fits!*

D: Falling Action: where stuff gets "wrapped up;" what immediately follows the climax, loose ends are tied up. *Example: stepsisters and*



stepmother realize that the beautiful princess at the ball was really Cinderella; Prince recognizes Cinderella; takes her to his castle

E: Resolution or Dénouement: reader gets sense of closure; may be asked to think about what comes next; the Happy Ending; epilogues; sometimes surprise or abrupt endings cut off the dénouement. Example: Cinderella and Prince marry, live happily ever after, stepmother and stepsisters live with regret

Teenagers: Basic definition PLUS plot diagram PLUS analyzing plot sequence in **current book**. Should be able to pick out keep moments in the Rising Action that bring about Climax, should be able to identify how various types of conflict are resolved in Falling Action & Dénouement, etc.

Example: If students are reading *The Lonesome Gods* by Louis L'Amour, they should be able to:

- trace the Rising Action conflicts between Johannes and Fletcher, Johannes and his grandfather, Johannes and Meghan, Mrs. Nesselrode and the town, the Californios and the Americans, Dona Elena & Don Isidoro, etc.
- identify at least three “mini-climaxes” to these conflicts
- decide what the “overall climax” was and why
- identify the Falling Action elements, and tell how these differ from the final elements of Resolution

Other Literary Elements

Character: a person (or animal in some stories) who is responsible for the thoughts and actions within a story or other literature

Major Character: appears throughout the novel, or in a major section of it; involved in the important actions and conflicts

Minor Character: enters the novel for a specific reason and may then not be heard from again, or may exist “on the sidelines”; may be involved in a conflict with a major character and be essential to the plot, but only so that something can be learned or shown about the major character

Round Character: has many sides; grows or changes in the story; thinks and reacts on many levels; central to the story and its conflicts and theme; we care about them and tend to react along with them

Flat Character: has only one side; may be a major character, but does not change; important to the story b/c round characters interact with them; we may feel strongly about them because of how the round character interacts with them or because he/she is a strong and consistent representative of Good or Evil

Protagonist: the main character or lead figure in a novel, play, story, or poem; may be referred to as the “hero” of a work

Antagonist: a character in a story or poem who deceives, frustrates, or works against the main character, or protagonist, in some way; doesn’t necessarily have to be a person--could be death, the devil, an illness, or any challenge that prevents the main character from living “happily ever after”

Foil: a character whose personality and attitude is opposite the personality and attitude of another character. Because these characters contrast, each makes the personality of the other stand out.

Great books to teach about “Character:”

Younger: *The School Story*; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; *Understood Betsy*; *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of N.I.M.H.*; *David and the Phoenix*; *Charlotte’s Web*

Middle: *The Book of Three*; *Little Men*; *A Little Princess*; *The Tale of Despereaux*; *The Bronze Bow*; *The Cay*

Teens: *A Tale of Two Cities*; *The Count of Monte Cristo*; *The Lonesome Gods*; *The Giver*; *The Chosen*

Conflict: a fight, argument, disagreement or simply opposition in which two sides are presented. Characters, themes, ideas can all be elements of conflict. Identification of conflicts can lead you to discovery of the theme. The resolution of the conflicts will lead the plot to the climax and resolution.

- *Man vs. Man* – usually the easiest to identify; can be woman vs. woman, etc.; look for Foils here
- *Man vs. Nature* – usually “survival” stories like *Robinson Crusoe*; *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, but can be an element of a larger conflict, as in *The Lonesome Gods*
- *Man vs. Society* – stories like *The Real Thief*; *The Awakening*; *1984*; *The Freedom Factor*
- *Man vs. Himself* – an internal conflict within a character’s values, personality or ethics; *The Bronze Bow*; *The Robe*, *The Lord of the Rings*; *Jacob Have I Loved*; *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Point of View: the perspective from which a story is told

1st person: “I” is used to tell the story; is a character in the story; can be present or past tense.

2nd person: “You” is used to tell the story; not commonly used except in “choose your own adventure” stories; usually in the present tense.

3rd person: “He, she, it, they” tells the story; usually in the past tense.

Limited: Can be 1st or 3rd person. Only the narrator knows what he/she experiences or learns about in some way. The narrator’s knowledge grows as the story unfolds; at times the reader may know more than the narrator.

Omniscient: Can be 1st or 3rd person. The “all-knowing” narrator knows all the details about events, characters, etc. and reveals them to the reader as the story unfolds.

Great books to teach about “Point of View:”

Young: *The Search for Delicious*; *The Hundred Dresses*; *The Stories Julian Tells*; *Walter, the Story of a Rat*

Middle: *I Am David*; *The Great Brain*, *Follow My Leader*

Teen: *The King’s Fifth*; *The Giver*; *Spindle’s End*; *My Name Is Asher Lev*

Setting: time (date, time of day, season) and place; a piece of writing will generally have many settings and each setting will generally carry with it a mood or atmosphere. Sometimes the setting is so important that it could be considered a character.

Books where “Setting” is key: *The Golden Goblet*; *The Door in the Wall*; *The Secret Garden*; *The Jungle Book*; *The Girl of Limberlost*; *The Incredible Journey*; *The Cat of the Bubastes*; *The Lonesome Gods*

Theme: The answer to the question “What is this all about?” or “What does the author want me to think/learn/remember?” Themes tend to be the author’s message about important human conditions or problems (Good vs. Evil; Death; Freedom; Hope; the Quest; Family & Relationships; etc.). Older students should be encouraged to come up with one-sentence “Theme Statements” – summaries of what the author or the work has to say about an overall theme. Novels will typically have more than one theme, but students should be able to support their theme statement with evidence from the book.

Tone: The overall feeling created by a piece of writing. Can often be described in a few words (frightening, oppressive, hopeful, triumphant, etc.). Specific details in the setting or relationships contribute to the theme.

Types/Genres of Literature (there are many more, but these are some of the most recognizable):

Historical Fiction: a “made-up” story set in a definite and recognizable historical time period, which could not have been in the author’s lifetime. These novels often include characters and settings which are historically accurate and may follow the timeline of actual historical events. *Examples: The King’s Fifth, The Golden Goblet, The Bronze Bow, The Witch of Blackbird Pond*

Science Fiction: originally referred to books with a strong scientific/futuristic plot or setting. Now can include any books with utopian, time travel, space, and alien encounter themes. *Examples: The Forgotten Door, A Wrinkle in Time, The Giver*

Realistic Fiction: novels or stories, which are “real” in that they occur in a time and place like the present or recent past, have plots that are possible, and have characters that are believable as “real people.” *Examples: Hatchet, Shiloh, Frindle, Ramona the Pest*

Fantasy: covers a large range of real/unreal plots, settings and characters. Some identifying characteristics: animals as characters, magical happenings, and imaginary beings as characters. *Examples: Tuck Everlasting, The Hobbit, The Wind in the Willows, Alice in Wonderland, Watership Down*

Mystery: A mystery novel contains a puzzle and engages the reader to join the detective character who eventually solves the puzzle. Collecting clues is vital for the mystery reader. *Examples: The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, The Westing Game, From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*

Katie Wilson lives in Virginia and has been homeschooling her four children for ten years. She graduated from BYU with a B.S. in Psychology and a minor in English, then attended George Mason University, where she received her Master’s Degree in School Psychology. Throughout her graduate program, she was firmly committed to making public schools better. However, by the time her oldest son started first grade, Katie knew that homeschooling was the path her family was to take. She served as LDSEHE secretary for three years, and is now president.