

53c Writing about Fiction

When you write a **literary analysis** of a work of fiction, you follow the same process you use when you write any paper about literature. However, you concentrate on elements—such as plot, character, setting, and point of view—characteristic of works of fiction.

✓ CHECKLIST: WRITING ABOUT FICTION

- ✓ **Plot** What happens in the story? What conflicts can you identify? Are they resolved? In what order are the events arranged? Why are they arranged in this way?
- ✓ **Character** Who is the protagonist? The antagonist? What role do minor characters play? What are each character's most striking traits? Does the protagonist grow and change during the story? Are the characters portrayed sympathetically? How do characters interact with one another? What motivates the characters?
- ✓ **Setting** Where and when is the story set? How does the setting influence the plot? How does it affect the characters?
- ✓ **Point of View** Is the story told by an anonymous third-person narrator or by a character, using first-person (I or we) point of view? Is the first-person narrator trustworthy? Is the narrator a participant in the action or just a witness to the story's events? How would a different point of view change the story?
- ✓ **Style, Tone, and Language** Is the level of diction formal? Informal? Is the style simple or complex? Is the tone intimate or distant? What kind of imagery is used?
- ✓ **Theme** What central theme or themes does the story explore?

Carla Watts, a student in an introductory literature course, was asked to select a short story from the literature anthology her class was using and to write an essay about it, basing her analysis solely on her own reactions to the story, not on literary criticism. The following story, written in 1983 by Gary Gildner, is the one she decided to write about.

Writing about Literature (The Citadel)

<http://www.citadel.edu/citadel/otherserv/wctr/writinglit/html>

Sample Literary Essay (U. Victoria)

<http://www.clearcf.uvic.ca/writersguide/Pages/SampleEssaysLit.html>

SLEEPY TIME GAL

In the small town in northern Michigan where my father lived as a young man, he had an Italian friend who worked in a restaurant. I will call his friend Phil. Phil's job in the restaurant was as ordinary as you can imagine—from making coffee in the morning to sweeping up at night. But what was not ordinary about Phil was his piano playing. On Saturday nights my father and Phil and their girlfriends would drive ten or fifteen miles to a roadhouse by a lake where they would drink beer from schooners and dance and Phil would play an old beat-up piano. He could play any song you named, my father said, but the song everyone waited for was the one he wrote, which he would always play at the end before they left to go back to the town. And everyone knew of course that he had written the song for his girl, who was as pretty as she was rich. Her father was the banker in their town, and he was a tough old German, and he didn't like Phil going around with his daughter.

My father, when he told the story, which was not often, would tell it in an offhand way and emphasize the Depression and not having much, instead of the important parts. I will try to tell it the way he did, if I can.

So they would go to the roadhouse by the lake, and finally Phil would play his song, and everyone would say, Phil, that's a great song, you could make a lot of money from it. But Phil would only shake his head and smile and look at his girl. I have to break in here and say that my father, a gentle but practical man, was not inclined to emphasize the part about Phil looking at his girl. It was my mother who said the girl would rest her head on Phil's shoulder while he played, and that he got the idea for the song from the pretty way she looked when she got sleepy. My mother was not part of the story, but she had heard it when she and my father were younger and therefore had that information. I would like to intrude further and add something about Phil writing the song, maybe show him whistling the tune and going over the words slowly and carefully to get the best ones, while peeling onions or potatoes in the restaurant; but my father is already driving them home from the roadhouse, and saying how patched up his tires were, and how his car's engine was a gingerbread of parts from different makes, and some parts were his own invention as well. And my mother is saying that the old German had made his daughter promise not to get involved with any man until after college, and they couldn't be late. Also my mother likes the sad parts and is eager to get to their last night before the girl goes away to college.

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So they all went out to the roadhouse, and it was sad. The women got tears in their eyes when Phil played her song, my mother said. My father said that Phil spent his week's pay on a new shirt and tie, the first tie he ever owned, and people kidded him. Somebody piped up and said, Phil, you ought to take that song down to Bay City—which was like saying New York City to them, only more realistic—and sell it and take the money and go to college too. Which was not meant to be cruel, but that was the result because Phil had never even got to high school. But you can see people were trying to cheer him up, my mother said.

Well, she'd come home for Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter and they'd all sneak out to the roadhouse and drink beer from schooners and dance and everything would be like always. And of course there were the summers. And everyone knew Phil and the girl would get married after she made good her promise to her father because you could see it in their eyes when he sat at the old beat-up piano and played her song.

That last part about their eyes was not, of course, in my father's telling, but I couldn't help putting it in there even though I know it is making some of you impatient. Remember that this happened many years ago in the woods by a lake in northern Michigan, before television. I wish I could put more in, especially about the song and how it felt to Phil to sing it and how the girl felt when hearing it and knowing it was hers, but I've already intruded too much in a simple story that isn't even mine.

Well, here's the kicker part. Probably by now many of you have guessed that one vacation near the end she doesn't come home to see Phil, because she meets some guy at college who is good-looking and as rich as she is and, because her father knew about Phil all along and was pressuring her into forgetting about him, she gives in to this new guy and goes to his hometown during the vacation and falls in love with him. That's how the people in town figured it, because after she graduates they turn up, already married, and right away he takes over the old German's bank—and buys a new Pontiac at the place where my father is the mechanic and pays cash for it. The paying cash always made my father pause and shake his head and mention again that times were tough, but here comes this guy in a spiffy white shirt (with French cuffs, my mother said) and pays the full price in cash.

And this made my father shake his head too: Phil took the song down to Bay City and sold it for twenty-five dollars, the only money he ever got for it. It was the same song we'd just heard on the radio

and which reminded my father of the story I just told you. What happened to Phil? Well, he stayed in Bay City and got a job managing a movie theater. My father saw him there after the Depression when he was on his way to Detroit to work for Ford. He stopped and Phil gave him a box of popcorn. The song he wrote for the girl has sold many millions of records, and if I told you the name of it you could probably sing it, or at least whistle the tune. I wonder what the girl thinks when she hears it. Oh yes, my father met Phil's wife too. She worked in the movie theater with him, selling tickets and cleaning the carpet after the show with one of those sweepers you push. She was also big and loud and nothing like the other one, my mother said.

Carla began by reading the story through quickly. Then she reread it more carefully, highlighting and annotating as she read. A portion of the highlighted and annotated story follows.

When do events take place?

In the small town in northern Michigan where my father lived as a young man, he had an Italian friend who worked in a restaurant. I will call his friend Phil. Phil's job in the restaurant was as ordinary as you can imagine—from making coffee in the morning to sweeping up at night. But what was not ordinary about Phil was his piano playing. On Saturday nights my father and Phil and the girlfriends would drive ten or fifteen miles to a roadhouse by a lake where they would drink beer from schooners and dance and Phil would play an old beat-up piano. He could play any song you named, my father said, but the song everyone waited for was the one he wrote, which he would always play at the end before they left to go back to the town. And everyone knew of course that he had written the song for his girl, who was as pretty as she was rich. Her father was the banker in their town, and he was a tough old German, and he didn't like Phil going around with his daughter.

My father, when he told the story, which was not often, would tell it in an offhand way and emphasize the Depression and not having much, instead of the important parts. I will try to tell it the way he did, if I can.

Carla's next task was to brainstorm to find ideas. As she searched for a topic for her essay, she found it helpful to brainstorm separately on plot, character, setting, point of view, tone and style, and theme to see which suggested the most promising possibilities. Her brainstorming list follows on the next page.

Brainstorming List

Plot

Flashback — narrator remembers story father told.
 Story: Phil loved rich banker's daughter, wrote song for her, girl married someone else, Phil sold song for \$2500, married another woman.
 Ordinary, predictable story of "star-crossed lovers" from different backgrounds ("Probably by now many of you have guessed . . ."), but what actually happened isn't important.

Character

Phil — Italian, never went to high school, ordinary job in restaurant, extraordinary piano player.
 Girl — no name, pretty, rich, educated
 Narrator — ?
 Mother — romantic
 Father — mechanic; gentle, practical

Setting

"Small town in northern Michigan"
 Part — when narrator's father was a young man
 In woods — near lake
 Roadhouse — dancing, drinking, beat-up piano

Point of View

Narrator tells story to reader, but there's a story inside the story.
 Father tells his story, mother qualifies his version (she's "not part of the story" but has heard it), narrator tells how they told it.
 Point of view keeps shifting — characters compete to tell the story ("I would like to intrude further . . .")
 Father's version: stresses Depression, hard times
 Mother's version: stresses relationship, "sad parts"
 Readers encouraged to find own point of view; narrator of story addresses readers.
 Three characters invent and reinvent and embellish story each time they tell it.

Tone and Style

Conversational style — narrator talks to reader ("Well, here's the kicker part:").
 Like a fairy tale (girl = "as pretty as she was rich"; father = "a gentle but practical man")
 Casual speech, contractions: "Well," "some guy," etc.

Theme

Which is "real" story?
 Subject of Phil's story = missed chances, failure.
 Subject of narrator's story = the past?
 Values of different characters? Conflict between real events and memory?

When Carla looked over her brainstorming list, she saw at once that character and point of view suggested the most interesting possibilities for her paper. Still, she found herself unwilling to start drafting her essay until she could find out more about the story's title, which she thought must be significant. She asked around until she found someone who told her that the title was the name of an actual song—and supplied the lyrics. She recorded her reactions to this information in a journal entry.

Journal Entry

"Sleepy Time Gal" = name of song
 Mother says Phil got inspiration for song from the way his girl looked when she got sleepy. ** Does title of story refer to girl or to song? **
 Song = fantasy about the perfect married life that should follow the evenings of dancing in a "cottage for two" wife will be happy cooking and sewing for her husband and will end her evenings early. She'll be happy to forget about dancing and be a stay-at-home wife.
 Maybe lyrics describe what Phil wants and never gets?

At this point, Carla decided to arrange some of the most useful material from her brainstorming list, journal entry, and annotations into categories. She gave these categories headings that corresponded to the three versions of Phil's story presented in "Sleepy Time Gal," and she added related supporting details as they occurred to her.

Three Versions of Phil's Story

Mother's Version

"Likes the sad parts" and the details of the romance: the way the father made the daughter promise not to get involved with a man until she finished college, the way the women got tears in their eyes when Phil played his song.

Remembers girl's husband had French cuffs.

Remembers Phil's wife = "big and loud."

Notes people were trying to cheer Phil up.

Remembers girl resting head on Phil's shoulder, and how he got idea for song.

Father's Version

Depression/money: mentions Phil's patched tires and engine, how he spent a week's pay on new clothes, how girl's husband pays cash for a new Pontiac.

"Times were tough"

Narrator's Version

Facts of story — but wants to add more about Phil's process of writing song (because he, like Phil, = artist?), more about romance ("you could see it in their eyes").

Wants to embellish story.
("I wish I could put more in...")

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Whose Story?

Midway through Gary Gildner's short story "Sleepy Time Gal," the narrator acknowledges, "I've already intruded too much in a simple story that isn't even mine" (215). But whose story is "Sleepy Time Gal"? It is presented as the tale of Phil, an ordinary young man of modest means who falls in love with a rich young woman, writes a song for her, and loses both the woman and the song, as well as the fame and fortune the song could have brought him, apparently because he is unwilling to fight for either. But actually, "Sleepy Time Gal" is not Phil's story, and it is not the story of the girl he loves; the story belongs to the three characters who compete to tell it.

The story these characters tell is a simple one; it is also familiar. Phil is a young man with an ordinary job. He has little education and no real prospects of doing anything beyond working in a restaurant doing menial jobs. He is in love with a girl whose father is a rich banker, a girl who goes to college. Phil has no more chance of marrying the girl than he has of becoming educated or becoming a millionaire. He has written a song for her, but he is doomed to sell the rights to it for twenty-five dollars. Phil may be a man with dreams and

Paper title is centered

Title is in quotation marks

Parenthetical documentation identifies page on which quotation appeared

Thesis statement

Brief plot summary is combined with interpretation

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expectations that go beyond the small Michigan town and the roadhouse, but he does not seem to be willing to struggle to make his dreams come true. Ironically, he never achieves the happy married life his song describes; his dreams remain just dreams, and he settles for life in the dream world of a movie theater.

Father's perspective

The character who seems to be the author of Phil's story is the narrator's father: he is the only one who knew Phil and witnessed the story's events, and he has told it again and again to his family. But the story he tells reveals more than just what happened to Phil; it says a lot about his own life too. The father is a mechanic who eventually leaves his small Michigan town for

Past tense used to identify events that occurred before story's main action

Detroit. As the narrator observes, he is "a gentle but practical man" (214). We can assume he has seen some hard times; he sees Phil's story only in the context of the times, and "times were tough" (216). The narrator says, "My father, when he told

Ellipsis (set in brackets) indicates words omitted from quotation

the story, [...] would tell it in an offhand way and emphasize the Depression and not having much, instead of the important parts" (214). In the father's version, seemingly minor details are important: Phil's often-mended car engine, "a gingerbread of parts from different makes" (215), and incidents like how Phil spent a week's pay on a new shirt and tie, "the first tie he ever owned" (215), and how the girl's husband paid cash for a new Pontiac. These details are important to the father because they have to do with money. He sees Phil's story as more about

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a particular time (the Depression era) than about particular people. Whenever he hears Phil's song on the radio, he remembers that time.

Mother's perspective

The narrator's mother, however, sees Phil's story as a romantic, timeless story of hopelessly doomed lovers. She did not witness the story's events, but she has heard the story often. According to the narrator, she "likes the sad parts and is eager to get to their last night before the girl goes away to college" (215). She remembers how the women in the roadhouse got tears in their eyes when Phil played the song he wrote. The mother's selective memory helps to characterize her as somewhat romantic and sentimental, interested in people and their relationships (the way the girl's father made her promise to avoid romantic entanglements until after college; the way Phil's friends tried to cheer him up) and in visual details (the way the girl rested her head on Phil's shoulder; the French cuffs on her husband's shirt). In the interaction between the characters, she sees drama and even tragedy. The sentimental story of lost love appeals to her just as the story of lost opportunity appeals to the father.

Narrator's perspective

The narrator knows the story only through his father's telling and retelling of it, and he says, "I will try to tell it the way he did, if I can" (214). But this is impossible: as he tells the story, he embellishes it, and he makes it his own. He is the one who communicates the story to readers, and he ultimately

Point is supported by specific references to story

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decides what to include and what to leave out. His story reflects both his parents' points of view: the focus on both characters and events, both romance and history. In telling Phil's story, he tells the story of a time, re-creating a Depression-era struggle of a man who could have made it big but wound up a failure; however, he also recounts a story about people, a romantic, sentimentalized story of lost love. And, he tells a story about his own parents.

The narrator, like Phil, is creative; he needs to convey the facts of the story, but he must struggle to resist the temptation to add to them—to add more about how Phil went about writing the song, "maybe show him whistling the tune and going over the words slowly and carefully to get the best ones" (214-15), more about the romance itself. The narrator is clearly embellishing the story—for instance, when he says

everyone knew Phil and the girl would get married because "you could see it in their eyes" (215), he admits that this detail is not in his father's version of the story—but he is careful to identify his own contributions, explaining, "I couldn't help putting it in there" (215). The narrator cannot help wondering about the parts his father did not tell, and he struggles to avoid rewriting the story to include them. Sometimes he cannot help himself, and he apologizes for his lapses with a phrase like "I have to break in here [. . .]" (214). But, for the most part, the narrator knows his place, knows it is not really his story to tell:

Narrator's
perspective
continued

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"I wish I could put more in, especially about the song and how it felt to Phil to sing it and how the girl felt when hearing it and knowing it was hers, but I've already intruded too much in a simple story that isn't even mine" (215).

Phil's story is, as the narrator acknowledges, a simple one, almost a cliché. But Gary Gildner's story, "Sleepy Time Gal," is more complex. In it, three characters create and re-create a story of love and loss, ambition and failure, all contributing the details they feel should be stressed and, in the process, revealing something about themselves and about their own hopes and dreams.

Conclusion
reinforces
thesis

Carla's paper focuses on the story's shifting point of view and the contributions of the three central characters to Phil's story. She supports her thesis with specific references to "Sleepy Time Gal"—in the form of quotation, summary, and paraphrase—and interprets the story's events in light of the points she is making. Her paper does not include every idea in her notes, nor should it: she selects only those details that support her thesis.

53d Writing about Poetry

When you write a paper about poetry, you follow the same process discussed in 53c. However, you concentrate on the elements poets use to create and enrich their work—for example, voice, form, sound, meter, language, and tone.