Intro to Literature

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Critical Thinking assignment for Writing Intensive section

1-  Why We Do This

An important part of being an advanced writer is critical thinking, including the ability to ask and answer appropriate and penetrating questions and then derive reasonable solutions, answers and even further questions if necessary. Exploring a learning situation this way is a quality of the Active Learner, one seeking understanding and ways to integrate it into one’s knowledge base.

I have posed various types of questions for you to consider and answer:  *Questions of Fact* have supported our literal reading of short stories.  *Questions of Interpretation* have aided us, for instance, in understanding the “shades” of meaning in a coming-of-age story such as “A&P”.  *Questions of Analysis* have allowed us to separate a story into the component Elements of Fiction.  We also have used Questions of Synthesis, Evaluation, and Cause and Effect (these six types were categorized long ago by educator Benjamin Bloom; essentially, any type of question we ask comes under one of these six types).

A student who has successfully completes our composition courses and now takes a course such as this is expected to do more than put together an essay with strong grammar, mechanics that only repeats back to the instructor what he/she has taught—this is not much of a way to demonstrate Critical Thinking skills, not a way at all, in fact.  One of the main goals expected of us is to help train our students to use strong writing skills as a medium by which to communicate their developing Critical Thinking.  The following assignment is committed to this goal.

2- The Assignment

For this assignment, you are using critical thinking questions to determine to what extent two stories meet the criteria of their genres as well as how they might compare and/or contrast. The first is a work of literary fiction, a new story we will read and discuss, and there will be a Discussion Board thread on it, and you will need to do some literary research on it. A story such as Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” is an example of what is called “Literary Fiction.”  The second story we will use is “Return to Paradise” by Eliza Riley; it is copied at the end of this handout.   This story is an example of “Commercial Fiction,” here a sub-genre of “Romance Fiction.”

What are the characteristics of Literary Fiction?  What are the characteristics of Commercial Fiction?  In what ways are they similar?  Different?  Why do some authors choose to write one type rather than the other?  Why do readers sometimes choose one rather than the other?  How and why are each valued for what they do and in relation to each other?  Answering these questions as well as others that will come up over the next two weeks will give us the answers needed for our discussions and for a final essay for the project.

Final Essay Topic:

Using researched criteria for the two genres and critical thinking questions, discuss what makes one work “literary” and the other “commercial.”

Format: MLA.  The Intro/Body Paragraphs/Conclusion follows the standard we used on the first essay and also from Composition I. Refreshers on the format can be found on the Purdue OWL website and many other resources.  Be sure to include direct quotations from both stories. You also should quote from whatever criteria handouts you have included; be sure to include citations both in text and on the Works Cited Page.  This essay draft must first be submitted either to me the week before due or to a tutor.

Due Date: TBA, for now, know that this will be at least a four-week project.

3-   Notes

I have included examples of the kinds of info everyone will need to research-what I have provided here is not enough to complete this assignment.  Another part of developing our students’ critical thinking skills is to focus on how we find information, where to go, evaluate its quality and its usefulness for our purposes.  To put it directly—Google is not enough for all college-level research.  The college’s Online Databases, for instance, cannot be accessed via Google searches, nor can many other sites.  Some of your tuition goes to subscribe to these databases, yet the majority of our students seem to know of them nor go to them.  This will change that. Definitely, take a look at the samples I have copied below, but use them only as starting points.  Also, as noted earlier, the Commercial/Romance fiction story we are using is the last reading copied here.

4- Characteristics of Literary Fiction

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Literary fiction is a term that has come into common usage since around 1970, principally to distinguish serious fiction (that is, work with claims to [literary merit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_merit)) from the many types of [genre fiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre_fiction) and [popular fiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_fiction) ([i.e.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I.e.), [paraliterature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paraliterature" \o "Paraliterature)). In broad terms, literary fiction focuses more on style, psychological depth, and character, whereas mainstream commercial fiction (the page-turner) focuses more on [narrative](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative) and [plot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plot_(narrative)).

What distinguishes literary fiction from other genres is somewhat subjective, and as in other artistic media, genres may overlap. Even so, literary fiction is generally characterized as distinctive based on its content and style ("literariness", the concern to be "writerly"). The term *literary fiction* is considered hard to define very precisely[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_fiction#cite_note-0#cite_note-0) but is commonly associated with the criteria used in [literary awards](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_award) and marketing of certain kinds of novels, since literary prizes usually concern themselves with literary fiction, and their shortlists can give a working definition.

From The Fuller Library, by Nancy Bouisseau

Literary Fiction can be very hard to define. According to Judi Clark at mostlyfiction.com, "it can be the broadest category and in a sense is a catch all, but the intention is to list books that really draw you in with language, imagery, character insight and sense of place".

According to Joyce Saricks, Literary Fiction is "critically acclaimed, often award-winning, fiction. These books are more often character centered rather than plot oriented. They are provocative and often address more serious issues...these are complex, literate, multilayered novels that wrestle with universal dilemmas".

In an article in the Guardian Unlimited, Robert McCrum wrote,"What is 'literary fiction'? To many, it's the titles on the short list for the Booker Prize. To some, it's those serious-minded novels of high artistic intent by writers with a passionate commitment to the moral purpose of fiction. To others, it's a slippery piece of book jargon. It's certainly a label that's attracted its share of critical opprobrium. 'Literary' can be synonymous with 'highbrow', but I've heard 'pretentious' and even 'unreadable'. Literary fiction is what many writers aspire to, though quite a few will also run a mile at the first hint of it, too. Every reader will have his or her idea of what constitutes such a category".

From a 2006 panel discussion in NYC among several major figures in literary publishing:

The first question I thought I would just throw out to the panel and whoever wants to answer it can answer it is we’re here to talk about literary fiction and I was thinking about how there’s a famous quote from a Supreme Court Justice but of course I can’t remember which one it is, who said that he didn’t know what pornography was but he knew it when he saw it, so I think we all talk about literary fiction, we all publish literary fiction, we read literary fiction, but I would be interested in somebody trying to define literary fiction. Anybody?

Morgan Entrekin

I’ll start because I had a conversation at lunch on exactly that topic with a friend of mine from Nashville who’s here, Todd, wherever you are out there, but we drew a continuum. I said over here’s commercial and over here is literary, and it’s sort of there’s a line in between and the phrase that I used was that literary fiction is fiction that seeks to entertain *and* enlighten whereas commercial fiction is fiction that simply seeks to entertain, and that was the simple way for me to define it, but I think it’s a fungible concept, and somebody’s idea of what’s literary is not necessarily everybody else’s idea of what’s literary.

Jonathan Burnham

I agree actually, but I think the other thing—and Sara mentioned this before we came in. I was just thinking—with commercial fiction, you can usually see how it’s done. You can usually see what the intention is, what the author is trying to do. With literary fiction, it does more than it seems to on the page. In other words, you’re not quite clear what it is that the novelist is after and after you stop reading, you’re not quite sure what he is or she has done, so I think it comes into that category somehow.

Sonny Mehta

Well, I do think you recognize when you see it, rather like sort of the way you can tell good fish from bad fish, but ultimately, it basically makes—it sets out to try to sort of make sense of the world. At least, that’s how I react to it, and anything that makes sense of the world, I think we need it.

Jonathan Burnham

Here, here.

Jonathan Galassi

You could almost say that literary fiction is everything that isn’t some other genre. It’s not a straight historical novel. It’s not a mystery. It’s not a thriller. It’s sort of by subtraction you could say. It’s everything else, but I think it’s true that to me it’s more about the voice of the author—is really dominant over other conventions.

Characteristics of Romance Fiction

To explore further into the definition: "A romance is a work in which the plot centers around a love relationship. The plot line must be substantial enough for the reader to maintain interest from chapter to chapter. In other words, the reader must be able to say when reading the book, "I care about these people and what happens to them. I want the best for them, despite the personal and circumstantial obstacles that war to keep them apart."

The genre of Romantic Fiction has two strict criteria: The first is that the story must focus on the relationship and romantic love between two people. Secondly, the end of the story must be positive, leaving the reader believing that the protagonists' love and relationship will endure for the rest of their lives.

If a novel does not fulfill those conditions, fans of the genre are likely to claim that it belongs to a related genre, such as women's fiction or chick lit, or that it is just a mainstream fiction novel.

Happy endings in Romantic Fiction

Some readers of paperback genre romances may only like romances with happy endings, but others may well argue that you shouldn't force that preference onto a definition of the form. Because, by removing tragic romances like Romeo & Juliet from the definition, we could be doing a disservice to romances as a respectable literary style.

One definition of Romantic Fiction is that romances are our modern fairy tale. A romance is a work in which the plot centers around a love relationship and draws its power from the feeling that falling in love is one of the defining moments of our lives: if it culminates in marriage and a family, it is an event that affects the future as well as the present.

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5-  Eliza Riley, “Return to Paradise” (reproduced with author’s permission)

Lisa gazed out over the Caribbean Sea, feeling the faint breeze against her face - eyes shut, the white sand warm between her bare toes. The place was beautiful beyond belief, but it was still unable to ease the grief she felt as she remembered the last time she had been here.

     She had married James right here on this spot three years ago to the day. Dressed in a simple white shift dress, miniature white roses attempting to tame her long dark curls, Lisa had been happier than she had ever thought possible. James was even less formal but utterly irresistible in creased summer trousers and a loose white cotton shirt. His dark hair slightly ruffled and his eyes full of adoration as his looked at his bride to be. The justice of the peace had read their vows as they held hands and laughed at the sheer joy of being young, in love and staying in a five star resort on the Caribbean island of the Dominican Republic. They had seen the years blissfully stretching ahead of them, together forever. They planned their children, two she said, he said four so they compromised on three (two girls and a boy of course); where they would live, the travelling they would do together - it was all certain, so they had thought then.

     But that seemed such a long time ago now. A lot can change in just a few years - a lot of heartache can change a person and drive a wedge through the strongest ties, break even the deepest love. Three years to the day and they had returned, though this time not for the beachside marriages the island was famous for but for one of its equally popular quickie divorces.

     Lisa let out a sigh that was filled with pain and regret. What could she do but move on, find a new life and new dreams? - the old one was beyond repair. How could this beautiful place, with its lush green coastline, eternity of azure blue sea and endless sands be a place for the agony she felt now?

     The man stood watching from the edge of the palm trees. He couldn't take his eyes of the dark-haired woman he saw standing at the water's edge, gazing out to sea as though she was waiting for something - or someone. She was beautiful, with her slim figure dressed in a loose flowing cotton dress, her crazy hair and bright blue eyes not far off the colour of the sea itself. It wasn't her looks that attracted him though; he came across many beautiful women in his work as a freelance photographer. It was her loneliness and intensity that lured him. Even at some distance he was aware that she was different from any other woman he could meet.

     Lisa sensed the man approaching even before she turned around. She had been aware of him standing there staring at her and had felt strangely calm about being observed. She looked at him and felt the instant spark of connection she had only experienced once before. He walked slowly towards her and they held each other's gaze. It felt like meeting a long lost friend - not a stranger on a strange beach.

     Later, sitting at one of the many bars on the resort, sipping the local cocktails they began to talk. First pleasantries, their hotels, the quality of the food and friendliness of the locals. Their conversation was strangely hesitant considering the naturalness and confidence of their earlier meeting. Onlookers, however, would have detected the subtle flirtation as they mirrored each other's actions and spoke directly into each other's eyes. Only later, after the alcohol had had its loosening effect, did the conversation deepen. They talked of why they were here and finally, against her judgement, Lisa opened up about her heartache of the past year and how events had led her back to the place where she had married the only man she believed she could ever love. She told him of things that had been locked deep inside her, able to tell no one. She told him how she had felt after she had lost her baby.

     She was six months pregnant and the happiest she had ever been when the pains had started. She was staying with her mother as James was working out of town. He hadn't made it back in time. The doctor had said it was just one of those things, that they could try again. But how could she when she couldn't even look James in the eye. She hated him then, for not being there, for not hurting as much as her but most of all for looking so much like the tiny baby boy that she held for just three hours before the took him away. All through the following months she had withdrawn from her husband, family, friends. Not wanting to recover form the pain she felt - that would have been a betrayal of her son. At the funeral she had refused to stand next to her husband and the next day she had left him.

     Looking up, Lisa could see her pain reflected in the man's eyes. For the first time in months she didn't feel alone, she felt the unbearable burden begin to lift from her, only a bit but it was a start. She began to believe that maybe she had a future after all and maybe it could be with this man, with his kind hazel eyes, wet with their shared tears.

     They had come here to dissolve their marriage but maybe there was hope. Lisa stood up and took James by the hand and led him away from the bar towards the beech where they had made their vows to each other three years ago. Tomorrow she would cancel the divorce; tonight they would work on renewing their promises.

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