

# How to Read a Book, Adler

## Part Three: Approaches to Different Kinds of Reading Matter

### Ch 14: How to Read Imaginative Literature

The rules/guidelines set forth in the book until this point are for "expository literature," which is mainly non-fiction. Many of them still apply but need to be tweaked to apply to "imaginative literature."

Adler shares a paradox in this chapter: "The problem of knowing how to read imaginative literature is inherently much more difficult than the problem of knowing how to read expository books." And yet,

- The skill for reading imaginative literature is more widely possessed than reading science, philosophy, etc.
- Maybe bc we are better than we think – but only on a certain level, bc we can often say that we like a book, but we often can't "give an account of [our] enjoyment or tell what the book contained that caused us pleasure." P 204

"This may indicate that people can be good readers of fiction w/o being good critics...Those who cannot say what they like about a novel probably have not read it below its most obvious surfaces." P204

"Imaginative literature primarily pleases rather than it teaches. It is much easier to be pleased than taught, but much harder to know why one is pleased. Beauty is harder to analyze than truth." P 204

## 1. How NOT to Read Imaginative Literature

Note the differences between expository and imaginative literature

Expository books

- Aim to convey \_\_\_\_\_
- Knowing implies using our ...powers of judgement and reasoning (intellectual)

Imaginative books

- Aim to communicate an \_\_\_\_\_ – one the reader can have/share only by reading – and if they succeed, they give the reader something to be enjoyed
- Experiencing comes through the exercise of ...our senses & \_\_\_\_\_

### A) Don't try to resist the effect that a work of imaginative literature has on you

- (1) Let the story act on you – allow it to move you.
- (2) Allow yourself to \_\_\_\_\_ from the world you live in – into a "deeper, or greater, reality. This is the reality of our inner life...we should feel as deeply as we possibly can." P 206

### B) Don't look for terms, propositions, and arguments in imaginative literature (look for the experiences... and think about them!)

- (1) "Expository books teach primarily, while imaginative books teach only derivatively, by creating experiences from which we can learn. In order to learn from such books, we have to do our own thinking about experience; in order to learn from scientists and philosophers, we must first try to understand the thinking they have done." P 207

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C) Don't criticize fiction by the standards of truth and consistency that properly apply to communication of \_\_\_\_\_.

- (1) The "truth" of a good story is its verisimilitude, its intrinsic probability or plausibility. It must be a likely story but doesn't need to describe facts of life/society in a manner that's verifiable by experiment/research.
- (2) "When we read a novel, we want a story that must be true only in the sense it could have happened in the world of characters and events the novelist has created and re-created in us." P 208

## 2. General Rules for Reading Imaginative Literature

### A) Structural Rules for Reading Fiction

- (1) You must classify a work of imaginative literature according to its kind
  - (a) Lyric – tells its story primarily in terms of a single emotional experience
  - (b) Novels – have more complicated plots w many characters, emotions
  - (c) Plays – have more complicated plots w many characters, emotions AND narrates entirely by means of actions & speeches.
- (2) You must grasp the **unity** of the whole work – and be able to express that unity in a \_\_\_\_\_ or two.
  - (a) For an expository book, the unity resides ultimately in the main problem it tries to solve – so it can be stated by the formulation of the question or by the propositions that answer it
  - (b) For fiction, the unity is connected w the problem the author faced, tf the unity of a story is always in its **plot**.
    - (i) You have not grasped the whole story until you can \_\_\_\_\_ its plot in a brief narration (NOT a proposition or an argument!)
  - (c) You must not only reduce the whole to its simplest unity, but you must also discover how that whole is constructed out of all its \_\_\_\_\_; The parts of fiction are the various steps that the author takes to develop his plot – the details of **characterization** and **incident**.
    - (i) Parts of the narrative: Where it starts, crises that lead to the climax, the climax (where and how it occurs), and what happens in the aftermath.

### B) Interpretive Rules for Reading Fiction

These three steps are ways to "become progressively more aware of the artistic achievement of an imaginative writer...that should enable you to enrich your pleasure by knowing intimately the sources of your delight. **You will not only know \_\_\_\_\_ you like by also \_\_\_\_\_ you like it.**" P 212

- (1) You must become acquainted with... the **details of the incident and characterization** (in the same way that you "come to terms with the author" in expository literature)
  - (a) Elements of fiction = Episodes and incidents; characters & their thoughts, speeches, feelings, & actions
- (2) You must become acquainted with... **the author's imaginary world** such that you are at home in it!

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- (a) Expository literature: terms are connected in propositions  
Fictional literature: find the connections in his world so that you can imagine it!

- (3) You must become acquainted with... the **characters**  
(in the same way you "trace the movement of \_\_\_\_\_" in expository literature)

## C) Critical Rules for Reading Fiction

Expository works: do not criticize a book (don't say you agree or disagree) until you can first say you understand.

Fiction: "Don't criticize imaginative writing until you fully \_\_\_\_\_ what the author has tried to make you experience." P213

- The good reader of a story does not question the world the author creates – the world that is re-created in himself.
- IOW, "we do not agree or disagree with fiction. We either \_\_\_\_\_ it or we do not."
- Our critical judgment in the case of expository books concerns their truth, whereas in criticizing belles-lettres...we consider chiefly their beauty. The beauty of any work of art is related to the \_\_\_\_\_ it gives us when we know it well." P 213

### The maxims

- (1) Before you express your likes and dislikes, you must first be sure you have made an honest effort to \_\_\_\_\_ the work.
- (a) Appreciation = having the experience the author tried to produce for you by working on your emotions and imagination.
- (b) You cannot appreciate a novel by reading it passively (you must read it passionately!)  
This is similar to not understanding a philosophical book by reading passively!
- (2) After you have done structural and interpretive rules for reading imaginative literature, you are competent to judge. Your judgement must include both:
- (a) Whether you like or dislike the book – this is \_\_\_\_\_, it's about your tastes
- (b) WHY you like/dislike it – this is more \_\_\_\_\_, it's about the book

"The better you can reflectively discern the causes of your pleasure in reading fiction or poetry, the nearer you will come to knowing the artistic virtues in the literary work itself. You will thus gradually develop a standard of criticism." P 214