

Critical Lit Review

ASSIGNMENT

For this assignment, find a book published within the last few years. A recently published book will give you the opportunity to read with fresh, untainted eyes and will encourage you to derive your own interpretations and evaluations. One of the highest levels of thinking involves judgment, and this assignment requires that you judge the merit of the book.

If one of your goals is to add to your literary arsenal for the AP Lit Test open questions, you might seek out a book that *seems* to be high-caliber literature (perhaps based on the author's name, the dust jacket comments, or word of mouth). However, it's more important that you choose a book for which you will have no pre-conceived opinions (i.e., not an author or series with which you are deeply familiar) and a book that you think will truly interest you.

Your critical essay will explain how well this book measures up against the established criteria for good fiction and good literature. Your task is not just to analyze, but to critique. Your review may be a mixed bag – that is, there may be some elements of the book that you find excellent, and others that you find lacking. Whatever your judgment, you must provide specific textual examples that support your conclusions.

FORMAT

Begin with a brief synopsis of the book. Don't give a blow-by-blow rehash of the plot; rather, describe the setting, the main characters, and the main conflict. Explain if the book fits into a particular genre. Tell enough about the book to familiarize your reader. Because this is an academic review, feel free to reveal the ending; your purpose is not to sell the book, but to completely evaluate it.

Proceed to your evaluation. Three questions to consider are: What is the author's purpose? How well does the author achieve this purpose? How significant is this purpose? Address some of the questions below. Decide first how to organize your review. You might start with the negatives, then go on to the positives, or vice versa, depending on which you want to emphasize. Be sure to provide textual evidence for each of your judgments. If appropriate, you could compare the quality of the book to others written by the same author, others of the same genre, or others with similar themes.

Wrap up your discussion. Give your overall assessment of the book: How far up the scale of excellence does it rise? Is it mediocre? Good? Great? Can it be considered a fine piece of literature? A good read but not profound? Trivial? One for the ages? Bargain bin fodder?

STYLE

Good reviews are as entertaining to read as the books they evaluate. Your enthusiasm or disdain should come through clearly in your style. Your voice should be appropriate for the book's subject and tone. You wouldn't write an ironic, flippant review of a sincerely poignant novel of struggle and loss. On the other hand, a hopelessly melodramatic potboiler with cardboard characters and incompetent writing might merit a few barbs. Have some fun finding your critical voice in this essay.

QUESTIONS FOR EVALUATION

Plot

- Is the plot well conceived or does it rely on superficial action and coincidence to move the story?
- Is the struggle of the protagonist one with which the reader can identify?
- Does the plot sustain interest and rise to a climax that is intellectually and emotionally satisfying?

Characters

- Are the characters deep, rounded, and unique, or shallow, superficial, and stereotypical?
- Do you care about the people and how the events affect them?
- Is the characterization consistent? Does it follow some sort of internal logic, or are the characters slaves to plot?
- Are the characters' dynamic changes or realizations believable?

Style

- Does the author display mastery in the use of the English language (diction, syntax, grammar)?
- Are there passages that you find beautiful or creative?
- Does the author use figurative language?

Theme

- Does the book give you insight into life, society, human nature?
- Is the theme original or surprising?
- Does the author put a new twist on a familiar theme?
- Does the author employ techniques that elevate this book above pedestrian commercial fiction?
- Can you identify striking imagery, motifs, symbols, or interesting uses of point of view?

Overall Judgment

- How well did the author achieve his/her purpose?
- Whether this book is truly "literary" or not, does it represent excellence for its genre?
- Is it a complete success, or do one or two factors keep it from being fully satisfying?
- Would you read another book by this author?