PEARSON NEW INTERNATIONAL EDITION

A Short Guide to Writing about Literature

Sylvan Barnet William E. Cain

Twelfth Edition

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Toni Morrison*: No. I wanted to be a reader.*

Learning to write is in large measure learning to read. The text you must read most carefully is the one you write, an essay you will ask someone else to read. It may start as a jotting in the margin of a book you are reading or as a brief note in a journal, and it will go through several drafts before it becomes an essay.

To produce something that another person will find worth reading, you yourself must read each draft with care, trying to imagine the effect your words are likely to have on your reader. In writing about literature, you will apply some of the same critical skills to your reading; that is, you will examine your responses to what you are reading and will try to account for them.

Let us begin by looking at a very short story by Kate Chopin (1851–1904). (The name is pronounced in the French way, something like "show pan.") Kate O'Flaherty, born into a prosperous family in St. Louis, in 1870 married Oscar Chopin, a French-Creole businessman from Louisiana. They lived in New Orleans, where they had six children. Oscar died of malaria in 1882, and in 1884 Kate returned to St. Louis, where, living with her mother and children, she began to write fiction.

Kate Chopin

RIPE FIGS

Source: Kate Chopin: "Ripe Figs," 1893; "The Story of an Hour," 1894

Maman-Nainaine said that when the figs were ripe Babette might go to visit her cousins down on the Bayou-Lafourche where the sugar cane

grows. Not that the ripening of figs had the least thing to do with it, but that is the way Maman-Nainaine was.

It seemed to Babette a very long time to wait; for the leaves upon the trees were tender yet, and the figs were like little hard, green marbles.

But warm rains came along and plenty of strong sunshine, and though Maman-Nainaine was as patient as the statue of la Madone, and Babette as restless as a humming-bird, the first thing they both knew it was hot summertime. Every day Babette danced out to where the fig-trees were in a long line against the fence. She walked slowly beneath them, carefully peering between the gnarled, spreading branches. But each time she came disconsolate away again. What she saw there finally was something that made her sing and dance the whole long day.

When Maman-Nainaine sat down in her stately way to breakfast, the following morning, her muslin cap standing like an aureole about her white, placid face, Babette approached. She bore a dainty porcelain platter, which she set down before her godmother. It contained a dozen purple figs, fringed around with their rich, green leaves.

"Ah," said Maman-Nainaine arching her eyebrows, "how early the figs have ripened this year!"

"Oh," said Babette, "I think they have ripened very late."

"Babette," continued Maman-Nainaine, as she peeled the very plumpest figs with her pointed silver fruit-knife, "you will carry my love to them all down on Bayou-Lafourche. And tell your Tante Frosine I shall look for her at Toussaint—when the chrysanthemums are in bloom."

THE ACT OF READING

If we had been Chopin's contemporaries, we might have read this sketch in *Vogue* in 1893 or in an early collection of her works, *A Night in Acadie* (1897). But we are not Chopin's original readers, and, because we live more than a century later, we inevitably read "Ripe Figs" in a somewhat different way.

This difference gets us to an important point about writing and reading. A writer writes, sets forth his or her meaning, and attempts to guide the reader's responses, as we all do when we write an e-mail home saying that we are thinking of dropping a course or asking for news or money. To this extent, the writer creates the written work and puts a meaning in it.

As readers, we can and should make an effort to understand what the author seems to be getting at; that is, we should make an effort to understand the words in their context. Perhaps we need not look up every word we do not know, at least on the first reading, but if certain unfamiliar words are repeated and thus seem especially important, we will probably want to look them up.

It happens that in "Ripe Figs" three French words are used: *maman, madone,* and *tante. Maman* is "Mother," and *Tante,* in "Tante Frosine," is simple enough: It means "Aunt Frosine." Fortunately, the words are not crucial, and the context probably makes clear that Frosine is an adult, which is all that we really need to know about her. *Madone* is more interesting. It means "madonna," which is Italian for "my lady" or "madam," and which is commonly used to refer to Mary, the mother of Jesus. (You may know Raphael's painting *The Alba Madonna* or Dürer's *The Madonna and Child.*) It is unlikely that Chopin is saying that Maman-Nainaine *is* Mary: Good writers are rarely as heavy-handed as that. But the reference is there for a reason: Chopin wants us to notice it, and, no doubt, to see how it is connected later to the word *aureole,* which is the radiant light around the head or body of a sacred figure in a work of art.

The point is this: A reader who does not know—or who does not look up—the meanings of these words, or who does not know that chrysanthemums bloom in the late summer or early autumn, for instance, will miss part of Chopin's meaning.

Although writers tell us a good deal, they do not tell us everything. We know that Maman-Nainaine is Babette's godmother, but we do not know exactly how old Maman-Nainaine and Babette are. Further, Chopin tells us nothing of Babette's parents. It *sounds* as though Babette and her godmother live alone, but readers may differ. One reader may argue that Babette's parents must be dead or ill; another may say that the status of her parents is irrelevant and that what counts is that Babette is supervised by only one person, a mature woman.

In short, a text includes **indeterminacies** (passages that careful readers agree are open to various interpretations) and **gaps** (things left unsaid in the story, such as why a godmother rather than a mother takes care of Babette). As we work our way through a text, we keep reevaluating what we have read, pulling the details together to make sense of them in a process called **consistency building.**

Whatever the gaps, careful readers are able to draw many reasonable inferences about Maman-Nainaine. We can list some of them:

She is older than Babette.
She has a "stately way," and she is "patient as the statue of la Madone."
She has an odd way (is it exasperating or engaging or a little of each?) of connecting actions with the seasons.
Given this last point, she seems to act slowly, to be very patient.
She apparently is used to being obeyed.

You may at this point want to go back and reread "Ripe Figs" to see what else you can say about Maman-Nainaine.

And now, what of Babette?
She is young.
She is active and impatient ("restless as a humming-bird").
She is obedient.

Is there more you could add to this list?

READING WITH A PEN IN HAND

Perhaps the best way to read attentively is to mark the text, underlining or highlighting passages that interest you, and to jot notes or queries in the margins. Here is the work once more, this time with the marks that a student made after a second reading.

Kate Chopin

RIPE FIGS

Maman-Nainaine said that when the figs were ripe Babette might go to visit her cousins down on the Bayou-Lafourche where the sugar cane grows. Not that the ripening of figs had the least thing to do with it, but that is the way Maman-Nainaine was.

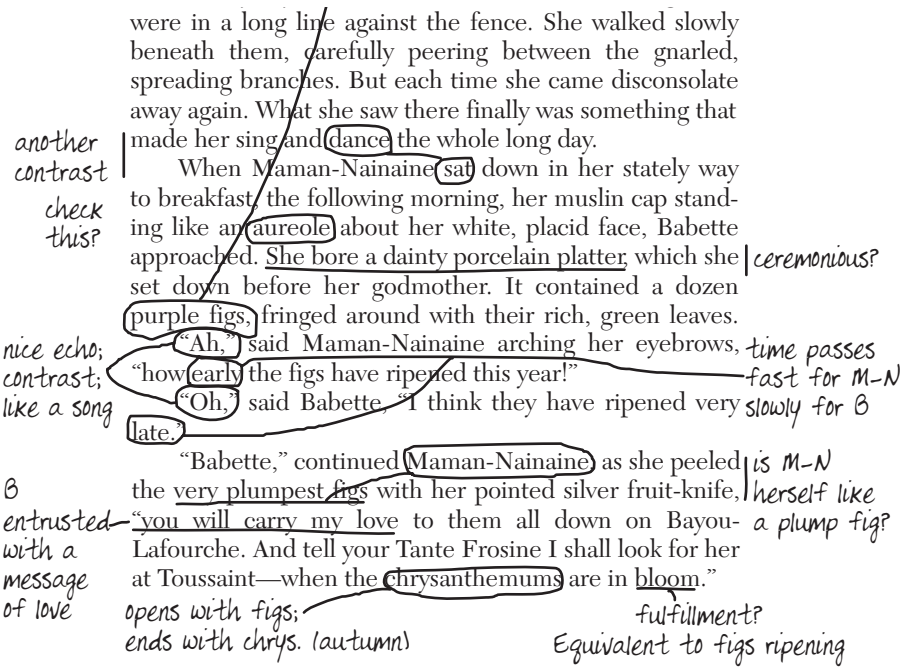
odd

Where is this place?

It seemed to Babette a very long time to wait; for the leaves upon the trees were tender yet, and the figs were like little hard green marbles.

But warm rains came along and plenty of strong sunshine, and though Maman-Nainaine was as patient as the statue of la Madone, and Babette as restless as a humming-bird, the first thing they both knew it was hot summertime. Every day Babette danced out to where the fig-trees

contrast between M-N and B



RECORDING YOUR FIRST RESPONSES

After you annotate your text, another useful way of getting at meanings is to write down your initial responses to the story, jotting down your impressions as they come to you in any order—almost as though you are talking to yourself. Because no one else is going to read your notes, you can be entirely free and at ease. You can write in sentences or not; it is up to you. Write whatever comes into your mind, whatever the story triggers in your own imagination, whatever rings true or reminds you of your own experiences. Here is the response of the student who annotated the text.

> I like the way the ''green marbles'' turn into ''purple figs.'' And I like the way Babette and M-N are sort of opposite. B sings and dances and is restless. On the other hand, M-N is ''patient'' and like a statue and she sits ''in a stately way.'' A young girl and a mature woman. But, come to think of it, B can also be dignified—she serves M-N the figs in a fancy dish. I feel I can see these people, I almost know them. And I'd like to see Aunt Frosine in the fall, in chrysanthemum time. She's probably a mature woman, like M-N, with lots of dignity.

Here is another student's first response to "Ripe Figs."

This is a very short story. I didn't know stories were this short, but I like it because you can get it all quickly and it's no trouble to reread it carefully. The shortness, though, leaves a lot of gaps for the reader to fill in. So much is *not* said. Your imagination is put to work.

But I can see Maman-N sitting at her table—pleasantly powerful—no one you would want to argue with. She's formal and distant—and definitely has quirks. She wants to postpone Babette's trip, but we don't know why. And you can sense B's frustration. But maybe she's *teaching* her that something really good is worth waiting for and that anticipation is as much fun as the trip. Maybe I can develop this idea.

Another thing. I can tell they are not poor—from two things. The pointed silver fruit knife and the porcelain platter, and the fact that Maman sits down to breakfast in a "stately" way. They are the leisure class. But I don't know enough about life on the bayous to go into this. Their life is different from mine; no one I know has that kind of peaceful rural life.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

Suppose you are beginning the process of writing about "Ripe Figs" for someone else, not for yourself. The first question to ask yourself is:

For whom am I writing? In other words, Who is my *audience?*

Of course, you probably are writing because an instructor has asked you to do so, but you still must imagine an audience. Your instructor may tell you, for instance, to write for your classmates. If you are writing for people who are familiar with some of Chopin's work, you will not have to say much about the author. If you are writing for an audience that perhaps has never heard of Chopin, you may want to include a brief biographical note of the sort given at the beginning of this chapter. If you are writing for an audience that (you have reason to believe) has read several works by Chopin, you may want to make some comparisons, explaining how "Ripe Figs" resembles or differs from Chopin's other work.

In a sense, the audience is your collaborator; it helps you decide what you will say. You are helped also by your sense of *purpose:* If your aim is