***10th Honors World Literature*  *2020* *Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Carwile, Dr. Power***

Directions: Choose one or more of the following four categories for your reading focus. For this choice novel study, you may choose to work alone, with a small group within your own class or even within another 10th Honors class at Milton High School. Plan on having your novel finished by May 1.

1. **Point of View**. Perhaps the novelist’s hardest task is deciding who should tell the story. Main character? Secondary character? And what’s his attitude toward others in the tale and the events therein? Is he or she speaking from within the events as they happen or long after? An outside voice? Limited to a single character or omniscient? Telling all or holding back? Amused, bemused, deeply involved, or bored with it all. It is sometimes said that a change of viewpoint is a change of religion.

Narrative Presence. Now we can speak of that other *who*. Is this voice disembodied or possessed by a personage, inside or outside the story? Is this a servant talking about her masters, a victim talking about his persecutors, a perpetrator speaking of his victims? They often give us hints right away. What about third-person narrators? In the 18th century, narrators were often full of personality, genial companions who, were men and women of the world, who understood what people were like, who were amused by the foibles of their neighbors. By the time we get to the 20th century, that third-person narrator is often impersonal, detached, and cool.

Narrative Attitude toward characters and events. How does the narrator feel about the people and action in the novel?

1. **Structure and Style**. Does your novel have short or long sentences? Simple or complex? Rushed or leisurely? How many modifiers—adjectives and adverbs and such?

Tone. Every book has tone. Is it elegiac or matter-of-fact, or ironic?

Diction. What kinds of words does the novel use? Are they common or rare? Friendly or challenging? Are the sentences whole or fractured, and if the latter, on purpose or accidental?

Syntax. Sentence structure is another matter altogether. So, long sentences, short sentences, simple, complex, mixed. There are no rules for sentence length and structure except those dictated by the novel in which they’re used. Style—sentences, their length and structure and arrangement, paragraphs, word choice, word order, the lot—is a decisive element in that narrative, governing or reflecting what can be told and how, the rate of revelation, the attitude of the novelist toward his world, the relationship of writer to reader.

Rhythm. Of one sort. There are two levels of rhythm in a novel: prose and narrative. Narrative rhythm will take a while to establish, but the prose starts showing up at once. Better, it often suggests how the larger narrative’s rhythm will work. Rhythm is related to diction, but with this difference: diction has to do with the words a writer uses, rhythm with how they’re deployed in sentences.

Structure. Does it matter, having or not having chapters? Without chapter breaks, when do you turn off the lamp and go to sleep? But chapter breaks—and the text that separates them—are more than mere rest areas on the reading interstate. Done right, they tell us that something significant has happened, that a certain interval of time or unified activity or narrative unit has passed. They sometimes have clever titles explaining their contents. They may have beginnings, middles, and ends. Sometimes, in recent novels, they’re freestanding stories that may or may not seem like parts of a single narrative body. Whatever their shape or external features, all chapters have some aim involving readers and meaning, some reason for looking the way they do.

1. **Setting**. Place is a sense of things, a mode of thought, a way or seeing. Geography has the power to create a particular atmosphere and to shape characters. The idea of “home” can be magnetic, elusive, or suffocating, and many characters travel to either find it or escape it. Often, geography is “a metaphor for psyche,” meaning the external landscape of a literary work reflects the internal mind of one or more characters. Frequently, characters travel to a particular location in order to find that their impression of that location was in fact an image of their own hearts or minds. Geography can even be a character, such as the Vietnamese village in Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*, which becomes a kind of enemy figure to the American soldiers.

Symbolic Associations. Some landscapes have specific associations within different literary traditions; examples include hills and valleys. High places can represent purity, isolation, life or death, while low places are often associated with people, crowds, dirtiness, and also life or death. Note that neither place has any fixed meaning, but rather a possible set of meanings that can shift depending on what the location is contrasted against.

Time Frame. Geography also instigates plot momentum. When is all this happening? Contemporaneously or a long time ago? How can we tell? Does the novel cover a lot of time or a little? In what part of the narrator’s life, is she a character?

Time Management. Will time go fast or slow in this novel? Is it being told in or near the now of the story or long after?

1. **Characterization**. There is a large set of conventions for establishing character, and strangely enough, less is generally better. Beginning fiction writers almost always err on the side of excessive detail, offering lengthy descriptions, character histories, explanations of drives and desires. But this one place where Hemingway’s iceberg theory—the savvy novelist keeps the vast majority of what he knows about his characters and situations buried under the surface—really comes into play. How this works is that character creation is outsourced to the readers. Writers give us enough to begin to form a picture of a character, but not so much it will overwhelm us with detail. We supply what else we might need from our own storehouse of information about how people look in the real world. We each bring a great deal of our own lives, our own perspectives, our own reading of other works, to each new novel that we’ll never see the same things.

Minor Characters. Minor characters require minimal development since they are only on stage briefly and have very specific roles to play. This all gets back to E.M. Forester’s theory of flat and round characters. Minor characters tend to be flat—that is, two-dimensional cardboard cutouts rather than fully developed, complete persons. Major characters, by comparison, are more fully fleshed out, more three-dimensional or “rounded.”

Law of Universal Specificity. Another consideration is the Law of Universal Specificity, in both characterization and setting. Writers can’t write about everyone or everywhere, only about one person or one place. Hemingway shows the disillusionment and loss of World War I veterans in Jake Barnes. Joyce’s Dublin, and Melville’s ship stand for every place.

Foster, Thomas C. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading between the Lines.* Quill, 2003.