

## **WRITING CRITICALLY ABOUT LITERATURE**

One purpose of literary analysis is to understand your reactions to a literary work. To “analyze,” as its etymology indicates, is to break up or to loosen a whole into its component parts in order to understand it. In literary analysis, this means you should consider such matters as character, point of view, imagery and language, narrative structure, and so forth. One of the most useful perceptions to keep in mind as you read a literary work is that it is a crafted artifact. Every detail is included for a purpose, and your task as a commentator on a work is to arrange some of the parts of the whole into a useful perspective to shed light on that work.

Since the purpose of analysis is to understand the work, it is logical to expect that your essay will have a controlling idea or thesis, which your analysis has produced. In this way, literary essays are no different from any other rhetorical or professional writing you may have done. You are basically making an assertion about the meaning, the form (i.e., the writer’s techniques), or background of a work, and then substantiating your assertion with proof from the work. Simply summarizing the plot, however, is not analysis. You should only retell parts of the plot to help you illustrate the point you are making. You should always assume your reader knows the sequence of events.

An analytical essay ought to be tightly organized around some central idea about the work. Everything in the essay should be directly related to this idea or should contribute to the reader’s understanding of the idea. Writing is one of the most exciting process of discovery and creation that you can experience. Writing does involve considerable labor though. In planning and writing your themes, the following plan may help you see how the writing process works.

1. Read through the work at least once for general understanding.
2. Reread and take notes with your specific assignment in mind.
3. Try to develop a central idea or point to argue once you have collected all the evidence from the text.
4. Make an outline and then write a rough draft.
5. Revise and edit.

### **Character Analysis**

When we speak of character in literature, we are talking about how humans interact with their circumstances. The focus is usually the inner self and hence on dialogue, self-reflection, and behavior as a way of expressing character. In writing about a literary character, you should describe the major traits that make character worth caring about. Be sure to also consider physical descriptions, though you must always try to decide how the physical relates to the mental. For example, Hamlet is described as wearing an “inky cloak.” You should try to discover why Shakespeare includes this detail. In many works you will discover that characters change or grow. Try to decide how and why this happens (another way of putting this is you must try to discover the relationship between this character change and the shape of the plot). In rereading a work with character analysis in mind, ask the following questions:

1. What do the characters say themselves (or think, if the author gives their thoughts)?
2. What do the characters do? Sometimes you will discover that there is a difference between what the characters say they will do and what actually happens. This is a form of irony you must also observe.
3. What do other characters say about them? Sometimes the remarks must be tempered with an understanding of who said them.
4. What does the author say about them, speaking as storyteller or observer?

SAMPLE TOPIC: Is Hamlet the tragedy of a man who thinks too much and doesn't act enough, or is it one of a man who has been defeated by thought and acts finally because he has been the meaninglessness of all action?

### **Point of View**

Point of view describes the vantage point from which the author presents the action of a story or the way in which a reader is presented with the materials of a story. The point of view in fiction is mainly created by the character or narrator who does the talking. If the story is told by an "I," the author is using first-person narration; if the narrator is not introduced as a character and the work is described in the third person (i.e., he, she, or they said), the author is using third-person narration. In drama, where we don't usually have a narrator (except in the chorus of a Greek play), point of view will often be used ironically to contrast how different characters perceive the same events or to contrast what one character knows with what the audience knows. In writing about point of view, you must determine the nature of the speaker. Special areas of concern are language, selection of detail, characterization, interpretive commentary, and narrative development. You should be interested in determining how point of view has contributed to making the story unique, interesting, or valuable.

SAMPLE TOPIC: How does Shakespeare use perspective in the first meeting of Hamlet and Ophelia (III.i, where the King and Polonius overhear them) to make ambiguous the problem of Hamlet's madness? That is, Hamlet's behavior towards Ophelia, if he knows her father is listening, seems designed to convince others of his madness (which he is feigning). If he doesn't know her father is listening, perhaps Hamlet is mad.

### **Imagery**

The verbal texture (i.e., created through the use of imagery, symbolism, allegory, etc.) of a literary work is used to deepen the meaning by pointing to something beyond its literal or primary meaning. Simply put, imagery a comparison of something known (frequently a physical description of a familiar object or action) with some situation or emotion the author is trying to communicate. Imagery works by means of analogy, for example when Hamlet says his father is like Hyperion (the sun-god), Shakespeare is using this exaggerated comparison to suggest young Hamlet's ideal and naive view of human nature. The imagistic texture of a work is often complicated by the fact that allusions are often made to other things through imagery, such as the classics, the Bible, other works, contemporary events, etc. thus you may need some help in deciphering the imagery of a work fully. When examining a work in terms of its language, you must study it carefully, often word by word, to discover individual images and especially

patterns of imagery. When discussing imagery, you should try to relate your assessment of the impact of the imagery to the meaning of the work as a whole. Some things to consider are:

1. The meaning and effect of the imagery.
2. The appropriateness of the imagery to the subject matter.
3. The frequency, types, and patterns of imagery.
4. The effect of one image, a pattern, or other images to the work.

SAMPLE TOPIC: In Hamlet how does the imagery of sickness serve to characterize the general condition of Denmark during the play?

### **Structure**

Structure refers to the basic organization or arrangement of events, words, images, etc. of a literary work. Studying the complexities of structure helps you to see the total meaning of a work—but simply summarizing the plot is not an analysis of structure. Essentially, you are trying to decide why things happen as they do. For example, Hamlet is generally governed by the conventions of “revenge tragedy”—Hamlet must avenge the death of his father. But the larger issue of the pollution in Denmark stretches from King Claudius to Hamlet’s mind itself. An analysis of the structure of Hamlet would help you see how Shakespeare is relating these various conflicts to each other. Since plot in large measure means “conflict,” your analysis must account for the conflicts (between several characters or between characters and circumstances) that create the plot. Most narratives move clearly from a beginning to an end due to causality and logic which the narrative itself creates: expectations created in the opening must be satisfied in some way before the narrative can end. Hamlet’s father must be avenged before the action can end satisfactorily and Denmark can be purged. [Often the terms exposition, rising action, climax, and denouement are used to describe the stages of the action.] One area you should pay special attention to is the use of side actions or subplots to complement the main plot by providing some insight into it.

Structure in poetry, especially lyric poetry, is often created as much by certain literary conventions (or traditions) as much as by patterns of sound, meaning, etc. Thus it is quite helpful to know that sonnets have a particular rhetorical structure and typical themes. You should always try to discover what kinds of literary conventions are being evoked in a work; consult a scholarly edition of the work (i.e., one with good notes and introductions) for help in determining the relevant conventions.

One last bit of advice: Write naturally, as if you thought that literature and literary criticism were read by human beings. Use clear and concise syntax and civilized diction. Do not attempt to imitate your professor, no matter how pompous he or she might be. Just express yourself—naturally.

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Adapted from: Roberts, Edgar V., Writing Themes About Literature, 1982