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# Analysing Literature

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## 1. Critical Reading

Literary analysis is at the core of this subject and refers to the task of making meaning of a work of literature. According to Kusch, the analysis of literature entails a responsibility because, as “a public form of meaning-making”, it is “designed to contribute to a community of knowledge about literature as a whole and about particularly literary texts” (p. 18). Analysing a piece of literature, then, is not just summarizing what the text says; it is much more complex. You embark on a twofold experience: critical reading and written expression. The process requires you to carefully examine the work of literature, or a narrowed aspect of it, and offer an interpretation, which will be supported with evidence from the text and from other scholars, as well as with your own critical insights and arguments.

When you analyze literature, the focus is not on saying whether or not you liked the text; rather, the focus is on your own knowledgeable perspective based on the text’s interpretation. There are no right and wrong answers in literary analysis; there are, however, interpretations that can be sustained and interpretations that cannot be sustained. As both reader and writer, you will be bound by rules of evidence to ensure the validity of your claims. To guide you on what literary aspects need to be considered and discussed, you will be provided with topics and debate questions within your CAT instructions. This way, you will not feel overwhelmed by the task of writing your assignment or at a loss as to how to put it together.

As with any analysis, literary analysis requires the partition of the work into its component parts. Studying the different elements of a literary text is not an outcome in itself but rather a process in which you will learn to understand and appreciate the work of literature as a whole. Kusch compares literary analysis to detective work:

In detective fiction or real-world casework, the detective is given a text—the scene of a crime, the notice of a missing person. The initial scene is merely the surface of a much fuller story whose meaning is not yet understood. The detective then breaks the scene apart, carefully examining each detail and seeking more contextual information in order to uncover the meanings—motivations, consequences, even conclusions about human behaviour or the nature of justice—within the case (p. 20).

Like a detective finding clues and cracking puzzles, you turn to recurring motifs, arresting metaphors and unusual wording to solve the mystery of the text. In order to trace patterns among the words and interpret the detailed use of language, you resort to critical (close) reading strategies.

The method of ‘close reading’ is associated with the New Criticism of the mid-twentieth century, a school of criticism that focused exclusively on the text rather than on historical and ideological contexts, authorial intent, or

any other paratextual element. Probably because it is a requisite not just for reading but for reading well (or for reading with special attention), close reading has nowadays become a fundamental tool of literary study, regardless of the theoretical approach you adopt.

When you read critically, you identify details, ideas and patterns about the text and, more narrowly, about certain words or phrases, but you also keep a focus on interconnectedness, that is to say, on integrating the text based on considerations of a more general thematic, political or cultural nature. In a way, you are practising a form of ‘decoding’, which will certainly lead to the formulation of numerous questions about the structure of the text, the words the author has chosen, the characters’ motivations, the literary devices and the historical and cultural contexts. Asking yourself these questions constitutes the first stage in the critical reading process and will help you understand what you read, respond to it more intelligently and remember it for longer.

The second stage is about answering the questions. Once you are able to answer your questions about the text, you are ready to write about it and make the most of your critical reading work. But before your writing begins to flow, you have to sort through the evidence you have gathered from the text to figure out what is most convincing and useful to the argument you want to make and, conversely, what should be left out.

Placing a particular emphasis on the gathering of evidence and on the careful thinking about what this evidence can add to the literary analysis, Bennet and Royle use the expression ‘creative reading’ to describe this stage. In effect, they refer to a “mode of reading that seeks to be careful, faithful and accurate in its response to the text and its contexts and, at the same time, to lead on to new, even unthought-of perspectives, emphases and concerns” (p. 137). This approach to reading, of course, brings to the fore an awareness that reading is not a passive or superficial activity. When you read a work of literature, you are participating actively in the construction of meaning; the text encourages you to react to it, to think about it, and to interpret it. Ultimately, the goal of literary analysis is to enlarge and deepen your understanding of a work, and that can only be achieved by actively interacting with the text as you read.

## 2. Strategies for Critical Reading

Based on the idea that reading is an active process, that is to say, that it requires your critical engagement as well as some sort of written output, here you will find a series of strategies that will help you approach your reading assignments – the novel (CAT2), the short stories (CAT3), the poetry (CAT4) and the play (CAT5) – in ways that are both effective and pleasurable.

1) Though not impossible, it is certainly very difficult to do a written assignment on a text you have not read. So the first step in responding to a CAT is to read the text about which you are required to write. Before reading, however, it is recommended that you preview the text, that is to say, see what you can learn from the work by its title, front cover, introductory material and overall organization. When reading through the work for the first time, read once to get the ‘gist’ of it, that is to say, to understand the basic, surface-level plot. Read for enjoyment and do not be overly concerned about the CAT.

2) The second time you read, pay attention to word choice. If there are any unknown words, look them up in the dictionary. Exploring the subtleness of meaning prompted by word choice is especially important when reading poetry. Words usually have more than one meaning in poetry, each of which might lead to different interpretations. Write the meanings of the words in the margin of the text or on a note card, so that you can go back to them while writing your CAT<sup>1</sup>. As Bennet and Royle claim, “annotation (including underlining and sidelining) is indispensable” (2015, p. 16). Annotation is not a crime, if the book is yours. Annotate not only the definitions of unknown words, but indeed anything you find exciting or enticing: striking phrases, significant events or narrative changes, recurrent motifs, topics or figures, moments of self-reflection, alterations in narrative and temporal perspective, etc. It might be a good idea to keep a reading journal so that you can record your thoughts and responses while reading through the text.

3) Successive readings of the work will enable you to develop the skills of a ‘professional reader’ so as to read beyond the superficial level of plot development and recognize the more complex ways in which the text works. Being a professional reader also means that you are able to evaluate your own practice and work in a way that develops your critical reading skills. When re-reading the text, focus on the following:

a) Placing the text in its historical and cultural contexts. Your interpretation of the work should be informed by its contextualization within the framework of the values, social norms and ethos represented in the text: When and where does the story take place? Are there any historical or cultural events that took place at the same time or in the same place as the story? Is the author making

### Note

This section is adapted from the reading strategies described by Sharon J. McGee (2002), *Analyzing Literature: A Guide for Students*, New York: Longman; Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (2015), *This Thing Called Literature: Reading, Thinking, Writing*, London: Routledge; and Celena Kusch (2016), *Literary Analysis: The Basics*, London: Routledge.

<sup>(1)</sup>Advice on writing note cards: <http://www.studygs.net/wrtstr5.htm>.

connections between the literary work and real life? How is the temporal and spatial setting important to the theme? Are there any flashbacks, flashforwards or digressions?

**b)** Outlining the main theme and the subsidiary themes: What is the text saying about humanity, about the world or about a certain event? What is the meaning of the text? How do the plot, setting, characters and tone connect to the meaning? Is there a moral or a lesson that the author communicates through the text? What does the title suggest about the theme?

**c)** Evaluating the plot: What kinds of conflicts can you identify in the text? Where/when does the conflict or action begin? What triggers the conflict(s)? How does it climax? What about the resolution or denouement (the wrapping up of loose ends)? Is the plot credible? Does it have an emotive impact?

**d)** Identifying who is telling (or narrating) the story: Is it a first person narrator (a character within the story) or a third person narrator (someone outside of it)? Is the narrator biased or unreliable? Is the narrator omniscient ('all knowing') or limited omniscient? How do the traits, tone and social position of the speaker (or narrator) affect the meaning of the text?

**e)** Tracing the major images, metaphors and literary figures: Which images, words, sounds, or ideas recur and relate to one another literally, physically, or through their underlying connotations? How do these images or literary figures (many listed below in section 3 "Terms for Analysing Literature") relate to the general topic? What characters or objects are symbolic (stand for other things)? What do the images suggest to the reader?

**f)** Analysing characterization: Which character do you most closely identify with? Is there an antagonist? Your assessment of characters might include the use of adjectives such as 'flat', 'stale', 'round', and 'stereotypical'. What are the motives for one or more of the characters' actions? How do the characters interact with each other and with their environment? Do you see any changes in the characters' actions, motivations, and/or interactions?

**4)** Finally, compare and contrast the text with similar or related artistic works. By integrating a text into a continuous dialectic relationship with other artistic products, you will increase your understanding of why the author approached a particular issue or question in the way they did.



### 3. Terms for Analysing Literature

When you discuss a work of literature, you need to use specific ‘jargon’ or language. Below you will find a list of literary terms that can help you interpret, analyse, and respond to a variety of literary texts. This list is by no means all-inclusive, but it offers a first approach to the language frequently used by academics and students when they discuss literary works.

1) **Character:** invented, imaginary person in a dramatic or narrative work, who is given human qualities and behaviour. We learn about the characters through dialogue, action and description. Since E. M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) a distinction has often been made between ‘flat’ or ‘one-dimensional’ characters, who are simple and unchanging, and ‘round’ characters, who are complex, ‘dynamic’ (subject to development) and less predictable.

- **Protagonist:** the chief character in a play or story, who may also be opposed by an antagonist.
- **Antagonist:** the most prominent of the characters who oppose the protagonist or hero(ine) in a dramatic or narrative work. The antagonist is often a villain seeking to frustrate a heroine or hero; but in those works in which the protagonist is represented as evil, the antagonist will often be a virtuous or sympathetic character, as Macduff is in *Macbeth*.
- **Characterization:** the way in which a writer creates their characters in a narrative so as to attract or repel our sympathy.

2) **Diction:** the choice of words used in a literary work. A writer’s diction may be characterized, for example, by archaism or by latinate or Anglo-Saxon derivations; and it may be described according to the oppositions formal/colloquial, abstract/concrete, and literal/figurative.

- **Imagery:** figurative language in a piece of literature, or all the words which refer to objects and qualities which appeal to the senses and the feelings.
- **Metaphor:** the most important and widespread figure of speech, in which one thing, idea, or action is referred to by a word or expression normally denoting another idea, or action, so as to suggest some common quality shared by the two. Example: “You are the sunshine of my life”.

#### Note

This section is adapted from Martin Gray (2010), *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Harlow: Longman; Chris Baldick (2004), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, New York: Oxford University Press; and “Literary Analysis: Using Elements of Literature”, available at: <https://www.roanestate.edu/owl/elementslit.html>.

- **Simile:** an explicit comparison between two different things, actions or feelings, using the words 'as' or 'like', as in Wordsworth's line: "I wandered lonely as a cloud".
- **Hyperbole:** exaggeration for the sake of emphasis in a figure of speech not meant literally. An everyday example is the complaint "I've been waiting here for ages".
- **Metonymy:** a figure of speech that substitutes one aspect or attribute for the whole itself. For instance, referring to a woman as "a skirt" or the sea as "the deep".
- **Personification:** a figure of speech by which animals, abstract ideas or inanimate things are referred to as if they were human, as in Sir Philip Sidney's line: "Invention, Nature's child, fled stepdame Study's blows".

3) **Plot:** the pattern of events and situations in a narrative or dramatic work, as selected and arranged both to emphasize relationships between incidents – usually of cause and effect – and to elicit a particular kind of interest in the reader or audience, such as surprise or suspense.

- **Foreshadowing:** when the writer clues the reader in to something that will eventually occur in the story; it may be explicit (obvious) or implied (disguised).
- **Suspense:** the tension that the author uses to create a feeling of discomfort about the unknown.
- **Conflict:** struggle between opposing forces.
- **Exposition:** background information regarding the setting, characters and plot (where the conflict begins).
- **Rising Action:** the process the story follows as it builds to its main conflict.
- **Crisis:** a significant turning point in the story that determines how it must end.
- **Resolution/Denouement:** the way the story turns out.
- **Deus ex machina:** the 'god from a machine' who is lowered on to the stage by mechanical contrivance in some ancient Greek plays (notably those of Euripides) to solve the problems of the plot at a stroke. A later example is Shakespeare's introduction of Hymen into the last scene of *As You Like It* to marry off the main characters.

- **Frame narrative:** a story that an author encloses around the central narrative in order to provide background information and context. This is typically referred to as a “story within a story” or a “tale within a tale”. Frame stories are usually located in a distinct place and time from the narratives they surround. Examples of stories with frame narratives include *The Canterbury Tales*, *Frankenstein*, and *Wuthering Heights*.

4) **Point of View:** the way in which the narrator approaches their material (characters, action, setting, etc.) and their audience.

- **Speaker:** the person delivering a poem. Remember that a poem does not have to have a speaker and the speaker and the poet are not necessarily one and the same.
- **Narrator:** the voice telling the story or speaking to the audience. However, this voice can come from a variety of different perspectives, including:
  - **First person:** a story told from the perspective of one or several characters, each of whom typically uses the word ‘I’. The readers ‘see’ or experience events in the story through the narrator’s eyes.
  - **Second person:** a narrative perspective that typically addresses the audience using ‘you’. This mode can help authors address readers and make them part of the story.
  - **Third person:** describes a narrative told from the perspective of an outside figure who does not participate directly in the events of the story. This mode uses ‘he’, ‘she’, and ‘it’ to describe events and characters.

5) **Setting:** the time and place in which a story or play unfolds. In theatre, suitable scenery, costumes and props should assist the audience to recognize the setting straight away.

6) **Symbol:** something which represents something else (often an idea or quality) by analogy or association. Thus ‘white’, ‘lion’, and ‘rose’ commonly symbolize or represent innocence, courage and beauty. Such symbols exist by convention and tradition.

7) **Theme:** the abstract subject of a work; its central idea or ideas, which may or may not be explicit or obvious.

8) **Tone:** a very vague critical term usually designating the mood or atmosphere of a work, although in some more restricted uses it refers to the author’s attitude to the reader (formal, intimate, pompous) or to the subject-matter (ironic, light, solemn, satiric, sentimental).

