

Literary Analysis – Basic Elements of Literature

"How can a story be analyzed, and what am I looking for in it?"

The study of literature is the study of life through the eyes of an artist, and as such is an important part of a liberal arts education.

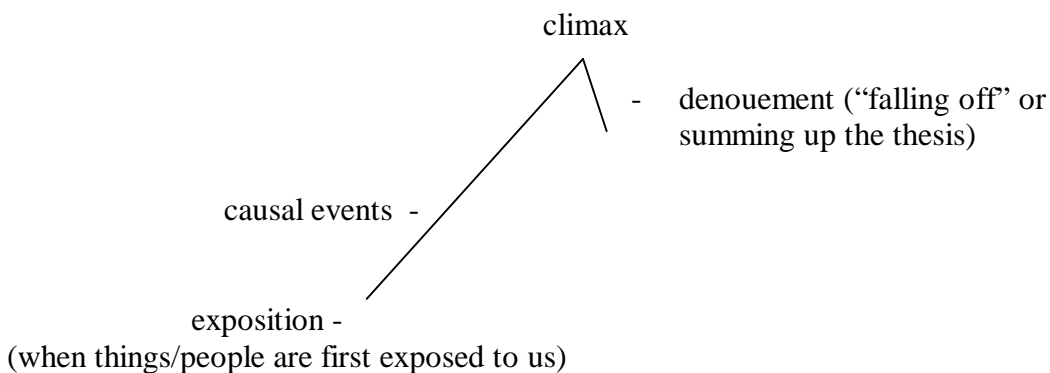
Composition students in ENG 102 often engage in literary analysis. When you analyze a literary text, you will deal with basic elements of literature, like plot, theme, character, point of view, and setting. Close study of these elements will then lead to an essay focusing on one aspect of the work.

Literary analysis is also known as literary criticism. In this context, "criticism" means a close reading and interpretation of a literary text, such as a poem, a short story, a play, a novel, or even a movie. The elements that make up a literary work are closely examined for their meaning and significance. Some of these elements are theme, character, and plot. Regardless of what aspect you choose to write about, your essay will focus on one controlling idea that can be stated in one direct sentence. For example: "Although most critics regard Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* as a great love tragedy, it is actually a mockery of a tragedy, for Cleopatra is incapable of love, and Antony is interested only in sex." This student then introduced evidence from the play to prove her thesis.

Following are some thoughts to keep in mind when you analyze literary texts:

Plot Summary

Sometimes, students will be assigned a plot summary as a formal essay, as prewriting which will lead to a deeper analysis, or as part of a longer analysis (such as in a research paper).



The above structure is called a Freytag Pyramid and is used as a basis for analyzing plot. Each of the above levels must be examined in relation to the story being read. Remember that both the causal events and the climax can be physical, mental, or emotional. In addition to the terms on the "Pyramid," a few others must be taken into consideration. "Foreshadowing" happens when little hints are given about what might happen in the

future, and “backflash” occurs when a character uses what most of us call “hindsight” as the character recalls some clue given earlier that he or she might have picked up on but probably didn’t.

Character Analysis

What kind of person is the character being analyzed? This is an inference you make based on the following:

- ? What the person says (what he or she says need not be taken at face value; the person may be hypocritical, or self-deceived, or biased)
- ? What the person does
- ? What others (including the narrator of the story) say about the person
- ? What others do (their actions may help to indicate what the person could do but does not do)
- ? What the person looks like - face, body, clothes (these may help to convey the personality, or they may in some measure help to disguise it)
- ? Determine the character's appearance, personality, and ethical qualities.
- ? Use descriptions of other characters sparingly (comparison/contrast) to make your point about the main character(s). Sometimes the environment (setting) even functions as a character.

Also, there are some terms of characterization that are important to consider:

Protagonist – the lead character

Antagonist – the character who operates in opposition to the lead character
(Either or both of these can be human, animal, or a force of nature)

Round/Complex character – interesting character, can’t be “second guessed”

Flat/Simple character – not very interesting, often a stereotypical character

Dynamic character – evolves as the story progresses

Static character – stays the same throughout the story

Setting

In simple terms, *setting* is the time, place, and social reality within which a story takes place. We have to understand where we are, in which period of time, in which society and at which level in that society if we are to interpret correctly the other elements in the story.

In stories in which *place* is the important element of setting, the writer usually provides specific, sometimes extended descriptions of the place

In other stories, the treatment of *time* is more significant than place. In literature, *time* functions in three different ways: the period of time in which a story takes place, how

much time passes during the plot of the story, and how the passage of that time is perceived by the lead character (such as, if he or she is having fun time goes quickly, but if he/she is lonely or worried time drags).

Just as important as time and place, is the *social context* of a story, which is often a product of time and place. We must understand enough about the society—its customs, values, possibilities—to know what constraints the characters face, what they are free to choose, and what they may not do.

Point of View

Point of view is the perspective from which the reader will view the events in a story.

Each potential point of view has significant advantages and corresponding limitations. An outside point of view provides greater flexibility and suggests a greater sense of objectivity. An inside point of view provides more intimate, often more involving, narration. Following are the main points of view used by writers:

Third-person omniscient – lets the reader know all that is being said, done, thought, and felt by all characters. This gives a full over-view, yet prevents the reader from “identifying with” any particular character.

Third-person limited omniscient- lets the reader know all that is being said, done, thought, and felt by only one character. This encourages emotional involvement between the reader and character.

Objective – limits the reader exclusively to exterior reality (what can be seen or heard). The thoughts, fears, loves, feelings of no characters are available, and there is no interpretation or comment.

First-person – when a character within the plot is telling the story. This point of view can allow readers to see either a very clear picture of what is going on...or to see a misleading one. How reliable is the narrator? Does he/she mean to tell the truth? Does he/she have emotional biases that make for unreliability? Does he/she have the maturity and experience to know what is truly going on?

Theme

- ? Theme should be stated in one sentence.
- ? The theme should be stated as a generalization about life, not as reference to a specific character or action in a story (for example, if a story includes a major action of robbery and the results of that action, the theme might be that negative behavior of that sort doesn't pay off in the long run).
- ? Theme(s) is/are the central and unifying concept(s) of the work.
- ? Statement of theme should not be cliché.