

Analyzing Literature

(from *HH* ch. 11)

Analyzing elements & rhetorical situation of a literary work

- Vocabulary for discussing literature (*HH* 237-241):
 - *characters*
 - *protagonist* (main character)
 - *conflict* between main character and:
 - another character
 - an institution
 - himself or herself
 - *imagery* (descriptive language)
 - *narrator* (or speaker)
 - *plot* (sequence of events understood in terms of conflict and resolution)
 - *setting*
 - *symbols* and
 - *theme* (specific main idea of the literary work).
- What messages are being conveyed?
- Based on your analysis, what/who are the:
 - purpose and
 - audience?
- What claim can you make about the significance or meaning (theme and message) of the literary work?

Contexts and approaches for interpreting literature (*HH* 242-246)

- **Reader-response theory**: different readers (or the same reader at different times) bring different values and experiences to the text, leading to different interpretations—how do the elements of the work support your interpretation?
- **Feminist and gender-based literary theories**: how is the literary work promoting or challenging the prevailing intellectual or cultural assumptions of its day regarding issues related to gender and sexuality?
- **Race-based literary theory**: how is the literary work informed by race relations and the imbalance of power in the literary work's historical and social setting?
- **Class-based literary theory**: how do differences in socioeconomic class explain the conflict between the characters or between characters and communities or institutions?
- **Text-based literary theory**: what interpretation is supported only by specific examples in the text itself (without historical context, etc.)?
- **Context-based literary theory**: what context from the time the literary work was written (historical, cultural, economic, class-based) does the literary work interact with?
- **Psychoanalytic theories**: what sexual impulses and unconscious motivations drive the author, characters, and reader? What archetypes (meaningful images recurring throughout literature) contribute to the meaning of this literary work?
- How does analyzing the literary work and the larger context help you arrive at a claim (about the literary work's significance or meaning—its theme and message)?

Analyzing the genre of the literary work

- Literature and its genres (*HH* 233-234):
 - fiction
 - novels
 - short stories
 - drama
 - stage
 - film
 - television
 - poetry
 - nonfiction
- Compare the literary work you are analyzing with other similar ones.
 - What features do they share?
 - How is your example different?
 - How do those similarities/differences affect the overall meaning and purpose (theme and message) of the literary work or its effect on the audience?

Rhetorical reading and literary interpretation (*HH* 234-237)

- How do readers (the audience) respond to the literary work? What do they think its meaning, theme, and message are?
 - you
 - classmates
 - literary experts
- What does *evidence in the text* suggest are the literary work's meaning, theme, and message? Use the following tools:
 - *close reading* (demonstrate you have read carefully)
 - *interpretation* (explain what you see in the work)
 - *analysis* (interpretation explaining the contribution of a feature of the literary work—a character, scene, symbol, or theme—to the work's overall meaning)
 - *explication* (usually for interpreting short poems—interpretation that attempts to explain every element in a literary work)
 - *evaluation* (usually in book, theater, and film reviews—gauging how successfully the author communicates meaning to readers or how successfully one part of the work contributes to the meaning conveyed by the other parts)

Analyzing the rhetorical appeals of a literary work

What appeals does the literary work make:

- to reason and logic?
- to emotion?
- to character and credibility?
- Does the author use multiple appeals (to reason and to emotion, for example)?
- How effective are these appeals in achieving the author's purpose for the intended audience?
- How does your analysis of these appeals lead to your claim (about the literary work's significance or meaning—its theme and message)?

Guidelines for Writing About Literature: Evidence & Analysis

- Identify **patterns or connections** among the particulars of the text. What you do with the specific language and concrete details of the text is where the original and interesting work happens.
- **Prove your points.** Whenever you make a claim, support it by referring directly to evidence from the text (or sometimes other sources).
- **Cite** every piece of evidence, **quote** from the work, and **explain/analyze** your quotations.
- Usually a big block quotation is not the most effective form of textual evidence. (When it is appropriate, you have to spend a fair number of your own words explaining it.) Instead, **quote key phrases and interweave them** throughout your own prose.
- Quote and analyze the **part of the text that proves your point**, not part of the text that doesn't prove your point. (Your analysis needs to make clear how the quotation proves your point.)
- Your **analysis** should pay attention to language and form, consider how the text creates meaning, work with nuance and complexity, and push beyond the obvious—but not beyond what is supportable through textual evidence.
- **Acknowledge direct, literal meanings** before making a case for secondary, suggestive meanings. (For example, acknowledge that “dying” refers to the “dying fire” going out, but add that it also suggests the idea of human death.)
- **Don't speculate** about the effect of a work on generic readers. (If you want to know what real readers thought at the time, I can help you look for early book reviews or newspaper accounts, etc.) What you can talk about—based on evidence in the work itself, and what the author wrote about the work—is the effect the author tried to achieve.
- If you make connections to **biography and history**, these need to be backed up with strong arguments based on **evidence inside the text**. (The fact that something happened in the author's life does not automatically mean it is relevant to the text.)
- Your **secondary sources** (which are optional) **should be academic sources**, not random websites. Check with me about the sources you use—some websites are in fact good sources, and I can also help you find more.
- If you do use secondary sources, interact with them explicitly: **Smith says this, but I say that.**
- **Don't make broad generalizations** about society or literature.