

Analyzing Novels & Short Stories

Literary analysis looks critically at a work of fiction in order to understand how the parts contribute to the whole. When analyzing a novel or short story, you'll need to consider elements such as the context, setting, characters, plot, literary devices, and themes. Remember that a literary analysis isn't merely a summary or review, but rather an interpretation of the work and an argument about it based on the text. Depending on your assignment, you might argue about the work's meaning or why it causes certain reader reactions. This handout will help you analyze a short story or novel—use it to form a thesis, or argument, for your essay.

Summary

Begin by summarizing the basic plot: “*Matilda* by Roald Dahl is about a gifted little girl in small town America who learns to make things move with her mind and saves her teacher and school from the evil principal.” This will help ground you in the story. (When you write your paper, you probably won't include a summary because your readers will already be familiar with the work. But if they aren't, use a brief summary to orient them.)

Context

Research the author's background and other work. This can give insight into the author's perspective and bias, as well as tell the reader what he might be commenting on. For example, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is about a group of friends who embark on an epic journey and fight a great war. Knowing Tolkien fought in the Battle of Somme during World War I and that his closest friends were killed helps explain his sentiments about war.

Other questions about context can stem from the story itself. Consider the narrator's personality and their role in the story. In *The Outsiders*, the narrator is the character of Ponyboy Curtis and not the author, S.E. Hinton. Also consider who the narrator is addressing. At the end of *The Outsiders*, for example, you find out that the entire book was an essay for one of Ponyboy's teachers, which makes the story seem more honest and real.

Setting

When and where a story takes place can be profoundly significant. Consider where the author's story is placed and why the author made that decision. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, for example, the setting is Italy, although Shakespeare was writing in England. He set his play elsewhere, in part, so he could make social commentary about England without incurring the wrath of English rulers.

Remember, many stories would be irretrievably altered if their setting were different and setting is, therefore, integral for interpreting the story's meaning. For instance, the setting for Faulkner's work—the American South after the Civil War—is essential to his overall message. Faulkner's characters are people who can't move on, and through them he suggests that the South similarly can't get past the Civil War and the wrongs of slavery.

Plot

Story lines usually follow patterns like those in the example below. Identifying essential plot points will help you to analyze, interpret, and explain the story.

Main Problem (Conflict): The plot hinges on some major problem, often a conflict between characters or an obstacle that must be overcome.

Ex. In Roald Dahl's novel *Matilda*, Matilda's parents neglect her and the Trunchbull is evil to everyone, including Miss Honey. The Trunchbull is Miss Honey's aunt and cheated her out of her inheritance.

Climax: The high point of the action, when the conflict or problem could either be resolved or cause a character's downfall.

Ex. Matilda uses her telekinetic powers to scare the Trunchbull into believing the ghost of Miss Honey's father is haunting her. The Trunchbull runs away, leaving Miss Honey her house and belongings.

Resolution: The conflict or problem is solved and normalcy or a new order is restored.

Ex. Matilda's family flees so her dad can escape prison, but Matilda gets to stay and live with Miss Honey.

Characters

Characters are the driving force behind stories, both major characters and minor ones, and authors use them to broadcast their most important messages. You won't be able to analyze every character, but pick out several important ones to consider.

First, describe the character for yourself; next, consider why the character was portrayed in that way. The following are some guiding questions:

- What are the character's main personality traits? Why did the author give him these traits?

Ex. In the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, the character Dumbledore is wise, calm, courteous, protecting, encouraging, powerful, and ambitious. As the story progresses, his faults and imperfections appear. Rowling creates Dumbledore as a force to protect and guide Harry.
- What is the character's role in the story? Is she the hero? The bad guy? A secondary character? Why did the author give her this role?

Ex. Dumbledore is the classic "teacher wizard" figure, in that he is all wise and has magical powers that others do not. People have an instinctive trust in this type of character; he voices many of Rowling's most important themes.
- What are the character's morals or ethics? Why does the author give him those?

Ex. Dumbledore's morality is based on compassion, understanding, and respect for all. If the respected, powerful teacher says something, Rowling's readers, and Harry, will be more likely to believe it.
- Why does the character do what she does? Why did the author make her act that way?

Ex. Readers find out that Dumbledore was not born wise and all knowing, but was ambitious and egotistical when he was young. His wisdom was gained through pain and tragedy. This illustrates Rowling's theme that a normal, flawed person, with courage and love, can save the world.
- What is the character's relationship to other characters and why? Why did the author create the relationships?

Ex. To Cornelius Fudge, Dumbledore is a threat because of his power and influence. In being frightened and resentful of Dumbledore, Fudge shows himself to be a weak man who blames others for his mistakes—Rowling's comment on government.

Literary Devices

Various literary devices help convey meaning or create a mood. Look for these in a story to identify key points and their contribution to the author's overall meaning. The following are a few common literary devices.

Allusion. An indirect reference to another artistic work or person, event, or place (real or fictitious). The author makes the allusion with the intention that the well-known object will create an association with the new object in

the reader's mind. For example, the title of William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* is an allusion to a line in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*—a futile speech made by an embittered man who has ruined his life. Alluding to that speech in the title helps Faulkner set the tone for his story of a family in ruins.

Foil. A character used to contrast a second, usually more prominent character in order to highlight certain qualities of the more prominent character. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Fortinbras is a foil for Hamlet in that he is unhesitating in action and war-like in nature; in contrast, Hamlet is thoughtful, analytical, and careful.

Foreshadowing. The use of hints or clues to suggest what will happen later in a literary work. For example, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet tells her nurse to find Romeo's name: "Go ask his name. If he be married, my grave is like to be my wedding-bed." This foreshadows the danger of Romeo's name being Montague and of Juliet's death because of their marriage.

Irony. An implied discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. There are three kinds of irony: verbal irony is when an author says one thing and means something else; dramatic irony is when an audience perceives something that the characters don't know; and situational irony is a discrepancy between the expected result and the actual result. For example, in *Macbeth*, the three witches recount the prophecies that must be fulfilled for Macbeth to fall. He therefore believes he is invincible—ironic because these prophecies cause his downfall.

Symbolism. The use of an object or action to mean something more than its literal meaning. For example, in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, one of the principle characters, Caddy, falls and stains her white dress when she's a child. The stained dress symbolizes (and foreshadows) her later loss of purity. A character can also be equated with an object throughout a work, another form of symbolism. In Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*, an aunt is repeatedly seen carrying an empty bag, which symbolizes her childlessness.

Themes

Themes are big ideas that authors comment on throughout a work using tools such as context, setting, and characters. Common themes are good vs. evil, human nature, religion, social structure, authority, coming-of-age, human rights, feminism, racism, war, education, sex, friendship, love, compassion, and death. Most books deal with multiple themes, some more obvious than others. Identifying an author's themes gives you a starting place for your thesis. It gives you a general topic. However, a theme is general. You have to dig a little deeper to identify the author's statement or attitude about that topic.

Ex. Theme T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* deals with the theme of authority, among others.

Ex. Specific Theme Other Arthurian writers associate King Arthur's greatness with military glory and valorous deeds. White is different in that he presents Arthur as a political innovator and implies that king is not great because of an aptitude for war, but because of his ability to balance government strength and social justice.

Tying It Together

Once your analysis is complete, develop a thesis that makes an arguable claim about the text. It should connect one of the themes you've identified with specific proof from the text (i.e. setting, context, plot, characters, symbolism, allusions, etc.). Sometimes, you will also use the support of other analysts or literary experts.

Ex. Thesis In *The Once and Future King*, White shows that the ideal leader is not one of military strength, but one who balances government power and social independence. He achieves this through his satire of the knighthood, his depiction of Merlin's philosophical experiments, and his portrayal of Arthur.

Remember that a thesis for a literary analysis should NOT merely:

- Summarize the plot ("*The Once and Future King* tells the story of the legendary King Arthur.")
- Announce a general theme ("*The Once and Future King* gives important ideas about leadership.")
- Offer a review of the book ("*The Once and Future King* is a literary classic that everyone should read.")

Before you begin to write, check the assignment and follow your instructor's specific guidelines.

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