

# **How to Read to Analyze Literature**

*Questioning a Work: An Approach to Analytic Reading*

**Advanced Placement English Literature**

## THE CUBED APPROACH TO READING LITERATURE FOR ANALYSIS

### SETTING

Where does it happen?

When does it happen?

Does the author identify the place and time, or give clues so that you can infer setting?

Can you draw a map of the setting from the author's presentation of it?

How does the author describe the time and place? What kinds of terminology does he use?

Does he name the places or are they well known?

Do the places and times have any associations with other significant events or works?

What "artifacts" (songs, books, etc.) of the period does the author use? How are they significant?

Is this specific setting essential to the meaning of the work, or would another setting be as appropriate?

How do the elements of the setting relate to each other and to other elements of the work?

### CHARACTER

What is each Character's name? Nickname?

Is the character called different names by different people?

Does any character's name have a denotative meaning listed in a good dictionary which might indicate the nature or function of the character?

What does the character do?

What does the character say?

How is he/she described?

At what point and where (setting) is he/she introduced?

How do other characters react to him/her?

What do other characters say about him/her?

To what extent are the other characters believable?

Why does the character do and say what he does: what is his motivation? Does he have multiple motives? Are his motives open or hidden? Are the other characters aware of his motivation? Are his motives stated by the author or implied in the character's words or actions?

Are there patterns in the language in which the character is described?

Does the author repeat any elements of the description? What does this repetition emphasize about the character?

### POINT OF VIEW

Who tells the story?

Does the persona (narrating person) remain the same throughout the work? If there are different narrators, how does this affect the story and the reader?

Does the persona see the events and characters of the work in the same way throughout the work? Does his attitude toward them change during the work? If so, why? Does he see them from the same viewpoint (age, status, level of understanding, attitude) throughout the work? Does his change of viewpoint change his attitude or understanding? How does the change in the persona affect the reader's understanding?

How is the narrator related to the action (e.g., participant, observer, outside the story)? If the narrator is outside the story, is he omniscient or is he limited in his knowledge?

Does the narrator remember accurately? Is he biased?

Is the narrator lying? How do you know?

Is the narrator deceiving himself/herself and/or you?

## ACTION

What happens?

What is the major conflict that causes these events to happen?

What other events do these events cause?

What happens that is not a result of the conflict?

How are these actions relevant?

Do these events reflect or repeat some older pattern or event?

What terms does the author use to present or describe the events or actions?

Do these terms evoke some other associations?

## STYLE

Are the events narrated in the same order that they happen, or in some other order? If in different order, what is the effect on the story and the reader?

Does the author's diction call attention to itself? How?

Does the diction ever seem inappropriate to the situation? How? When? What is the effect of this inappropriateness?

Does the author repeat himself: words, situations, etc.?

What is the effect of the repetition?

How does the author use literal language?

How does the author use figurative language?

How does the author create images? Does he use pattern(s) of images (imagery) to convey concepts?

Does the author use a concrete thing to represent an abstract idea - that is, does he use a symbol to clarify his idea? Does he use a set or pattern of symbols? What is the effect of the symbol(s) on the reader's understanding of the work?

Does the author use allusions to prior works or events? How or to what extent are these allusions significant?

Is there a pattern to the author's selection of details?

Is the author's syntax congruent to his diction and the situation? What is the effect when it is incongruent?

## THEME

What is the story **really** about? What does it tell? Why was it told?

What Ontological Question seems to be explored by the author? (see page 12 )

What do you know about Humanity, human situations and conditions that you did not know before?

When did this idea become obvious to you in the work?

If the story seems to have more than one theme, which is the "strongest"? Which can be supported with the greatest amount of evidence?

To what extent do the other elements work together to support the same idea or theme?

[Theme is the generalization about Life, Reality, the Human Condition, et cetera, that the author illustrates or clarifies in his work. Theme is always a complete idea - a predication - and is stated in a complete declarative sentence. The Theme statement is the Noun Clause that completes the sentence, " The theme of the work is that ...."]. It is an answer posed by the author to the major question the book raises about life and the human condition.

Another way to derive theme is to ask:

Who learns? (*This is the protagonist.*)

What does he learn? (*This is one part of the theme.*)

How does he learn it? (*This is the second part of the theme.*)

How do you know? (*This is the evidence.*)

#### OTHER FACTORS WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO A WORK

The time period in which the work was written - the events of the period

The author's life-circumstances, personality, interests

The language-history of the author

Philosophy

Psychology

Traditions - personal, cultural, etc.

#### READING-NOTES

In making reading notes on a work for analysis, separate the notes for each element, either by using a separate note-page for each element or by using a separate color of Post-it note for each element if you are using a Post-it system. You may want to keep observations about different characters on different pages.

On first reading, note those statements or ideas which call attention to themselves for some reason.

**BE SURE TO WRITE THE PAGE NUMBER OF THE WORK WITH THE NOTATION ABOUT AN IDEA THAT APPEARS ON THAT PAGE SO YOU CAN FIND IT WITHOUT RE-READING THE WORK.**

When you have finished reading, look at your note-pages, observe the patterns that appear and write down your conclusions about those patterns, or any other observations you have made about the work. If you are using Post-it notes, you may want to remove them from the book and lay them out on sheets of paper to organize your ideas. If you are using note-pages, you may want to use colored high-lighters to identify particularly relevant observations on each page. The Post-its or the highlighted comments can then serve as the outline for a paper; you can see quickly what patterns exist in the work and where the strongest supporting evidence is for each of them.

## QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF DRAMA

### GENRE

Is the play a tragedy or comedy, a melodrama or a farce?

If a comedy, is it primarily romantic or satiric?

Does it mingle aspects of these types of drama?

How important to experiencing the drama is the audience's awareness of the classification of the plot?

What specific word choices give the play its color?

Is the style of the play successfully reflected in the set, costumes, dialogue, and lighting?

### CHARACTER

(In addition to the questions on character in fiction, ask:)

Who is the protagonist?

Who is the antagonist?

Are there any foil characters?

What dramatic functions are served by the various minor characters? Do they shed light on the actions or motives of the major characters?

Do they advance the plot by eliciting actions by others?

Do they embody ideas or feelings that illuminate the major characters or the movement of the plot?

### In Performance

Do the characters seem real within the limits of the play?

Is any character symbolic of something else (e.g., love, hate, wealth, poverty, etc.)

How are the characters costumed? Are the costumes appropriate for the time period of the play?

Do the costumes fit the style of the play?

How does the costume contribute to the audience's interpretation of and reaction to the character?

Can the characters move easily in the costumes?

Does the costume extend the character?

Do the characters move according to the playwright's directions in italicized stage directions?

Do the characters move easily about the set and enter and exit on time?

Does the physical movement of the characters help the audience understand their mood on stage?

Does the movement of the characters look real and believable for the role they play?

### SETTING

(In addition to the questions on setting in fiction, ask:)

What amount of time is covered in the action?

How much of the action is presented as a report rather than dramatized on stage?

Is there a meaning behind the selection of events to be dramatized and those to be reported?

Does the play feel "loose" or "tight" in its construction?

Is that feeling appropriate to the themes and dramatic effects of the play?

### In Performance

What type of stage is used (Proscenium, thrust, arena)?

How does the lighting affect the set? Does it add to the mood and style of the play? Does it change during the play?

Is the set imaginary (a bare stage)?

Is the set design symbolic? Has the playwright or the director used platforms, ramps, steps, pylons to create the illusion of a place?

Is the set design realistic (representational)? Are actual furniture items used? Do the furniture pieces and properties reflect the time period and the description of the place as written by the playwright?

Is the set conducive to stage movement by the actors?

Does the set change during the course of the play? If so, how are the changes achieved? Do the lights go out or does the stage become blue so that the audience sees the changes being made?

### THEME

(In addition to the questions on theme in fiction, ask:)

What themes does the play present?

To what extent do the thematic materials of the play have an effect on the dramatic experience?

Does the power of the ideas increase or decrease the pleasure of the theatrical experience?

Does the play seem either too didactic or insufficient in its presentation of important human concerns?

### In Performance

Is the play historical? Is it contemporary?

Is the play simply to entertain?

Is there a message about the human condition in it?

Does it deal with a social issue?

Are human relationships the primary focus?

Does the play "teach a lesson"? If so, what?

At what point in the play does the audience discover the deeper meaning?

### CONVENTIONS

Does the play employ realistic or nonrealistic conventions?

On the spectrum from literalistic imitation of reality to stylized or surrealistic representation, where is the play under consideration situated?

Are there breaks from the conventions established as a norm in the play? If so, what is the dramatic effect of these departures? Are they meaningful?

To what extent does the play employ narration as a means of exposition?

Does the play have a narrator? If so, is he visible to the audience? Is he a character in the play or

does he set himself apart? Does the narrator advance time in the play, provide background information, or further the plot?

What other expository methods does it use?

Does the exposition have a function beyond communicating information about prior events?

What effect on the audience do the expository methods have?

How do the various physical effects - theatrical components such as sets, lights, costuming, makeup, gestures, stage movements, musical effects of song or dance, and so forth - reinforce the meanings and contribute to the emotional effects?

By what means does the playwright indicate the nature of these physical effects -explicitly, through stage directions and set descriptions, or implicitly, through dialogue between characters?

How is dramatic suspense created?

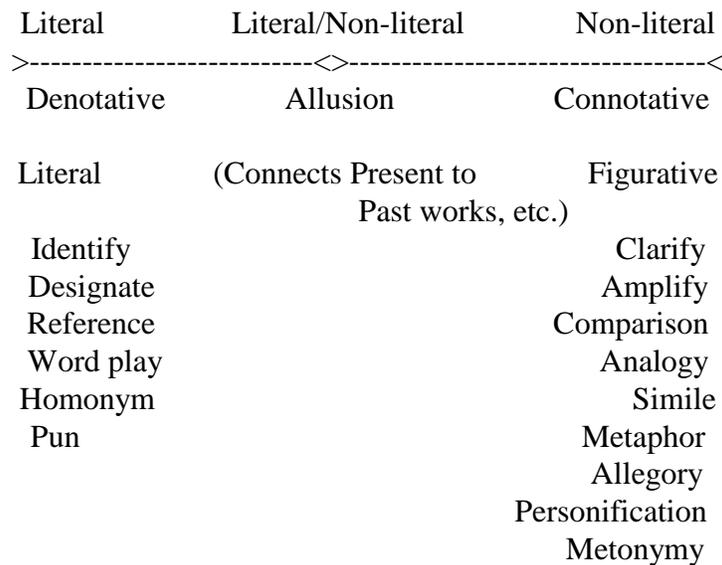
Is there a contrast in the amount of information possessed by the audience as the play proceeds and the knowledge that various individual characters have? If so, what is the effect of the contrast?

## ONE PROCEDURE FOR INVESTIGATIVE ANALYTIC READING OF LITERATURE

1. Set up Element Analysis Sheets, one page each for Character, Action, Setting, Point of View, Theme, and Style, and one additional sheet for each major character. You may want to use the questions in the "Cubed Approach" as a beginning point or you may simply label the top of each sheet for more open observations and notes.
  2. Divide the sheet for Style into columns to list specific references and comparisons (similes, metaphors, allusions, etc.)
  3. On first reading, note on the appropriate Analysis Sheet (write briefly, with page or line documentation) information given or comparisons made by author, narrator, or character (note which character). The questions in the Cubed Approach are useful here.
  4. Examine the Analysis Sheets to see whether patterns emerge from repeated observations or comments:  
identify repeated images;  
identify allusions (if any) and their sources/referents.
  5. On subsequent reading, using the Style Analysis Sheet columns headed with specific images, allusions, references, watch for instances that may have been overlooked in first reading and add notes as necessary.
- To this point, no inferences or conclusions have been drawn.
6. Examine the notes on the Analysis Sheets and identify patterns of images and references, noting progression or development within patterns and the relationship between patterns.
  7. Infer characterizations and themes from patterns.
  8. At this point, you have a collection of evidence on the content of the work and the techniques employed by the author. You may now propose (and answer) analytic questions of considerable depth about the work. You will be able to support your answers with specific references to the text without searching back through the text to find them.

## NATURE OF LANGUAGE

The characteristic of language that permits us to use it either literally, to say exactly what we mean, or non-literally, to say something other than, or more than, what we mean, or both literally and non-literally, is the characteristic of language that is most useful to authors. This range of language from Literal meaning to Non-literal meaning may be plotted on a continuum of characteristics.



Figurative Language is built on a literal base; it can produce irony, satire, paradox: metamorphosis in meaning.

Symbolism is a metamorphosis of meaning of things and ideas as figurative language is a metamorphosis of the meaning of words.

When dealing with an author's diction, use a good dictionary: look up his words, write down what you find, including the possible, not just the obvious. Make sure you consider the full derivation (history of the word) as well as the definitions.

## USE OF EVIDENCE IN WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

Kinds of evidence in writing about fiction:

### **Character**

- appearance
  - general appearance
  - details of appearance
  - diction author uses in describing appearance
- action
- dialogue
  - content
  - diction of dialogue
- opinions of other characters
  - content
  - diction in which characters express opinions
- author's direct or narrative statement
  - explicit - content
  - implicit - diction

### **Action**

- event
  - general events
  - details of event
  - diction author uses in conveying events
- conflict
  - plot-events [cause/effect-related events that advance the conflict toward resolution]
  - author's direct or narrative statement
    - explicit - content
    - implicit - diction

### **Setting**

- general environment of work
- explicit - descriptive details of setting
- implicit - diction author uses to convey setting
- character's statement about setting

### **Point of View**

- Author's narrative stance (1st person, third person, omniscient, etc.)
- persona [narrating voice]
- viewpoint - persona's relation to or attitude toward events
- focus of narration

### **Style**

- syntax - sentence structures, complexity, etc.
- diction author uses to tell story
  - literal language
  - imagery
  - figurative language
- symbolism
- allusion
- selection of detail
- organization [chronological, non-chronological, spatial, etc.]
- narrative structure

## **Kinds of Evidence in Writing About Poetry**

### **Diction**

- literal language
  - denotation
  - connotation
- imagery
- figurative language
- symbolism
- allusion
- selection of detail
- organization [chronological, non-chronological, spatial, etc.]

### **Sound devices**

- rhythm
- rhyme scheme
- onomatopoeia
- phonetic intensives

### **Syntax**

- relation of syntax to form
- relation of syntax to content

### **Form**

- stanza form
- line placement

### **Tone**

- sum of relation of all other elements

## **Application**

When you present evidence from a work in support of an assertion you have made about the work, make sure that you apply the evidence to your assertion. Don't just **say** that "This example shows ..."; **explain** what the evidence has to do with your assertion: "This example shows ... by ..." or "... shows ... because..." In other words, tie your evidence to your assertion; don't just drop it in and leave it. Help your reader make the connection that you have made.

See the green **Writing and Revision Guide** or the white **Directions for Book Analysis** for format of **documentation** of evidence.

## How I Write My Book Analysis

I. I ask, "What is this book about?" and list as many one-word or short-phrase answers as I can, such as-

- |                 |                  |                      |
|-----------------|------------------|----------------------|
| -change         | -growing up      | -war and peace       |
| -good and evil  | -friendship      | -deception           |
| -poverty        | -effects of fear | -the power of memory |
| -responsibility | -parenthood      | -misunderstanding    |
| -love           | -choices         | -ambition            |

II. I ask, "What question about life or the human condition (Ontological Question) does this author examine?" (This is his **Theme Question**) How, and to what extent, does he propose an answer? What answer, if any, does he propose?" (This is a Theme Statement)

III. Then I select a few of these topics and for each one, say, "What this book demonstrates about this topic is that,

"People often \_\_\_\_\_  
 because \_\_\_\_\_, and as a result,  
 \_\_\_\_\_." Therefore, \_\_\_\_\_."

I select the one of these statements that seems most true. I may use just the "Therefore,..." conclusion of one of these statements. *This statement will become my Theme Statement for the work.*

Another way of determining **Theme** is to ask,

1. Who learns as a result of the action?
2. What does he learn?
3. How does he learn it?
4. How do you know this is true: What evidence supports your assertion?

IV. I ask, "What ideas does the author convey that lead me to this conclusion?"

I list the ideas (not the events, but *my ideas about* the events or characters).

*These ideas become the minor assertions of the paper.*

V. I ask,

A. "What does the author put into the story that leads me to this conclusion?"

I list, from my reading notes, the events, character qualities, descriptions, or other strategies of the author that support each of the minor assertions. *This is evidence from the work that supports my assertions. Evidence must be documented with source page numbers.*

B. I ask, "What techniques or elements of literature does the author use most effectively to convey these ideas?" I select the most effective element from my list of examples.

C. I ask, "How does the author use **plot and** this element or **technique** to convey his Theme?"

*The answer to this question is the Major Assertion or Thesis Statement of my paper.*

VI. I follow the paragraph format of

Assertion

Evidence

Application of evidence to Assertion (showing how the evidence is relevant to the assertion)

Application of minor assertion to Theme Statement (showing how the supporting ideas lead to the Major Assertion or Thesis Statement).

**Assertion-Evidence-Application Pattern**

Major Assertion <i>(Thesis Statement)</i>	Tom Smith is guilty of the murder of John Doe.
Minor Assertion	Tom Smith had the means to murder John Doe.
Evidence	John Doe was killed by a .38 calibre slug.
Evidence	Tom Smith owns a .38 revolver.
Evidence	Ballistics tests show Smith's gun fired the bullet that killed John Doe.
Evidence	Smith's fingerprints were on the gun.
<i>Application</i>	Since Smith had the means by which Doe was killed, Smith probably killed Doe.
Minor Assertion	Tom Smith had a motive to murder John Doe.
Evidence	John Doe had eloped with Tom Smith's daughter, even though Doe already had a wife out of town.
Evidence	Tom Smith had been seen raging in public about the hurt and humiliation his daughter had suffered because of this bigamy.
Evidence	Tom Smith had often said that if Doe came back to town he would kill him.
<i>Application</i>	Since Tom Smith had a strong motive to kill Doe, Smith probably killed Doe.
Minor Assertion	Tom Smith had the opportunity to kill John Doe.
Evidence	Tom Smith saw John Doe drive in to town.
Evidence	Tom Smith was seen following John Doe around town.
Evidence	Tom Smith was seen standing over John Doe's body in the alley moments after shots were heard.
<i>Application</i>	Since Tom Smith had the opportunity to kill John Doe, Smith probably killed Doe.
Conclusion	Tom Smith had the means, motive, and opportunity to kill John Doe, therefore Tom Smith is guilty of the murder of John Doe.

Note: There is **no** contradictory evidence (**counter-evidence**) in this case: Tom has no alibi, for example. If there is counter-evidence or counter-example, it must be considered before the assertions are formed. It may prove the assertion invalid.

## The Overwhelming Question(s) addressed by authors

### *Ontological (of or relating to essence or the nature of being) Questions*

What is the meaning of life?

How should I live?

How can I accept the idea that someday my life will end?

What does it mean to be a good person?

What is truth?

Am I brave, or a coward? Does courage matter?

Do the rewards of life balance or outweigh its pain?

Is man a creature of the earth or of the sky? . . . a child of God or a beast crawling in the mud?

How should people treat each other?

What do women/men want? How can the sexes coexist harmoniously?

How can man live in the ugliness of modern world without despair?

Why do evil and suffering exist?

How can we tell the false from the genuine?

Does my existence matter? (Do I dare disturb the universe?)

How can dreams affect one's life?

Is following the rules of society (morality) more important than survival as an individual?

Can one's insecurities be destructive?

Does one's ethical standard outweigh the moral standard of society?

Is it right to resist or oppose authority?

How can one find meaning in life?

What is the responsibility of parent to child or creator to creation?

Can one recapture or relive the past?

What is the result of attempting to avoid the consequences of one's actions?

How can one learn his identity?

How can one prevail against the pressure of his society?

Since Life always ends in death, how can it have meaning?

