

Writing Handout L-2

Analyzing a Novel

Know the Assignment — If you are assigned to analyze a novel, you are being asked to identify your personal reaction to the work and develop a clear explanation of your reaction, providing supporting arguments. You may be required to provide support from external sources (books, articles, etc.). These assignments usually are written in the third person, present tense. Remember: An analysis is not a simple recitation of the plot.

The following guidelines provide possible approaches to an analysis.

Starting Points to Consider

What is your impression of the author's purpose? Is the novel written to be entertaining, informative, philosophical, argumentative, or a combination? Hint: Title, chapter headings, or opening lines may give indications of the purpose. Then consider the following questions as possible starting points:

1. Do you agree with the ideas presented in the work? Why or why not?
2. Does the author's imaginative environment seem realistic and engaging? How? Why?
3. How does this novel compare to other works by the same author? To works by other authors?
4. Does the novel reflect any historical, sociological, religious, or psychological concerns?
5. Do you agree with evaluations of the novel by other critics? If not, why?

Point of View

Does the narrator speak in first person ("I") or in third person? If there is a first-person narrator, is that person a major character or a minor character observing the main action? If the narration is in third person, is the narrator omniscient (able to see anything and tell us what is in the characters' minds), or is there limited omniscience so that we see into the mind of only one character? Does the point of view change? How does the point of view impact the story or theme?

Plot

- Are there major and minor events? How are they related?
- Is time a factor in the plot? Does the novel unravel in chronological order? If not, why not? Are any later incidents foreshadowed in the story? Are flashbacks used? If so, why?
- Is the story logical? Does the plot depend on coincidence, or does it develop from the characters' actions?
- What are the conflicts? Are they internal conflicts (psychological, theological) or external conflicts (sociological, biological, or environmental)?
- Are conflicts resolved? Is there a surprise conclusion? Is the conclusion plausible, satisfying?

Theme

- Does the title suggest a theme?
- Are themes revealed through the plot (actions, dialogue) or personalities of the characters?
- Are there other symbols, images, and/or descriptive details in the work that suggest themes? Look for repeated words and images as clues.

Setting

- What is the setting of the work? Is there more than one? Consider historical period, season, time of day, and geographical location.
- What mood or atmosphere (gloomy, tense, cheerful) is created by the setting?
- Why has the author chosen the setting? Does the setting simply provide a backdrop, or is it symbolic? If so, of what?

Character

- Are the characters believable? Why or why not?
- Is there one protagonist (main character) or several? Does the story have traditional heroes or heroines (protagonists) and villains (antagonists)? An antagonist can be anything in conflict with the protagonist, such as nature.
- Does the author reveal characters through the comments and thoughts of other characters or through the characters' own actions, words, and thoughts? How do the characters help convey the theme?
- What are the most important traits of the main characters? What is the author's attitude toward the characters? Are readers supposed to sympathize with the characters or criticize them?
- How do the secondary and minor characters function in the novel? Do they provide parallels or contrasts with traits of the main characters?
- Are the main characters dynamic (evolve, change, or learn something), or do they remain static (unchanging)? How? Why?
- If dialect or colloquial speech is used, what is its effect?
- Are the social classes and occupations of the characters significant? Does the social, economic, political, or religious environment affect the characters and support the theme?

Imagery, Symbolism, and Tone

- What images (any details that appeal to the physical senses) are used in the novel?
- Are the images literal (a description of an old man) or figurative ("He was as old as the hills")?
- Are there repeated images or related images (light and dark)? If so, what is the significance?
- Are symbols conventional ones (spring symbolizing a new beginning, the color red representing passion) or unusual (the sea symbolizing life in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*)? Symbols are often open to the reader's interpretation.
- What is the prevailing tone of the work? How does the author feel about the work? How does the author make the reader feel about the characters? Sympathetic? Humorous? How does this tone affect the story?
- How do the imagery and symbolism affect the novel's theme? Do they stand by themselves or serve as representations of deeper, meaningful concepts.

Checklist for Analysis

Main characters _____

Setting (time, place) _____

Conflict _____

Climax (turning point) _____

Resolution _____