

# Read, Think, Interpret

- A literary analysis is **not a summary of a plot**. A literary analysis expresses a student's interpretation or critical evaluation of a novel, short story, poem, or play. The student's explanation requires research into the **primary source** (the work being analyzed) and often requires references from **secondary sources** (critical works by others).
- A literary analysis requires students to **study** an author's work and to **think** about **how and why** it was written.
- The purpose of a literary analysis is to **interpret** an author's message and demonstrate why or how that author used specific ideas, language, plot, or characterization to convey the message.

## Plot Versus Analysis

In *The Heart of the Matter* by Graham Greene, Major Scobie is a police commissioner in Sierra Leone during World War II. He borrows money from a loan shark so he can send his unhappy wife on an expensive vacation. While she is gone, Scobie falls in love with a young widow and is blackmailed by the loan shark into participating in a smuggling operation. Because he feels guilty about his actions, Scobie commits suicide.

In *The Heart of the Matter* by Graham Greene, the theme of failure is threaded throughout the plot. Each of the main characters in the novel fails in some way. All of their individual failures stem from the impossibility of anyone to truly understand another person. The main characters in the novel all mistakenly believe that their thoughts and actions are transparent to others. These misconceptions ultimately lead to a variety of failures.

# Getting Started

- **Make certain that you follow the assignment.**
- **An assignment might involve only a certain aspect of a work.**

## Examples

- How do you think the title *Heart of Darkness* relates to the theme?
- What is the significance of the setting in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*?
- How would you describe the relationship between Yusef and Scobie?
- Why do you believe the author uses flashbacks to advance the plot?
- How does *The Scarlet Letter* reveal the moral values of Colonial America?
- What critical choices does the narrator make concerning religious values?
- Compare “The Road Not Taken” to another poem about life choices.
- What do the two main characters seem to think about life? How are these philosophies revealed?

# Some Interesting Possibilities

If you have freedom of choice, an analysis of a literary work may include any of the following:

- How the various components of an individual work relate to one another: plot, characterization, language.
- How two separate literary works deal with similar concepts: either comparing and contrasting works from a same author or two works from two separate authors.
- How concepts in a literary work relate to larger aesthetic, political, social, economic, or religious contexts.

# A Universal Approach

What is your impression of the **author's purpose**? Is the work written to be entertaining, informative, philosophical, argumentative, or a combination?

Then consider the following questions as possible starting points.

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

# Elements to Consider: Point of View

- Does the narrator speak in first person ("I") or in third person? Why?
  - **First person:** I was astounded when I reached the top of the mesa and saw the Anasazi ruins below.
  - **Third person:** She was astounded when she reached the top of the mesa and saw the Anasazi ruins below.
  
- 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 readers 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?

# Elements to Consider: Plot

- Are there major and minor **events**? How are they related?
- Is **time** a factor in the plot? Does the story 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?

# Elements to Consider: Theme

A theme is the main idea or an underlying meaning of a literary work; it may be stated directly or indirectly.

## Examples

Love	War	Tragedy	Mystery	Betrayal	Revenge
Ambition	Courage	Fear	Prejudice	Suffering	Justice
Truth	Loyalty	Duty	Freedom	Happiness	Theology

- Does the title of the work suggest a theme?
- Are themes revealed through the plot or personalities (actions, dialogue) 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.

# Elements to Consider: Setting

## Examples of Settings

**Historical Period**

**Season**

**Time of Day**

**Location**

- What is the setting of the work? Is there more than one?
- 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?
- Does the social, economic, political, or religious environment affect the characters and support the theme?

# Elements to Consider: Character

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

# Elements to Consider: Imagery, Symbolism, and Tone

- What **images** (any details that appeal to the physical senses) are used in the work?
  - 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?

# A Novel Approach

- **Step 1: Know the Assignment** — If you are assigned to analyze a novel, you are being asked to identify your reaction to the work and develop a clear explanation of your reaction, providing supporting arguments. You will be required to provide support from the novel, as well as from secondary sources (books, articles, etc.).
- **Step 2: Take notes** — As you read the novel, take notes of anything you find interesting about the plot, characters, or any other elements. Be sure to note page numbers for future reference.
- **Step 3: Review** — Read your notes to see if you can find a pattern that will provide a thesis and supporting details for your paper. Examine secondary sources for clues and support for your thesis.

# The Short Story

- **Step 1: Know the Assignment** — If you are assigned to analyze a short story, you are being asked to identify your personal reaction to the work and develop a clear explanation of your reaction, providing supporting arguments. You might be required to provide support from external sources (books, articles, Web sites, etc.).
- **Step 2: Read** — Read the entire story, trying to identify the writer's main idea.
- **Step 3: Review** — Summarize the story in your own words, using no more than two sentences.
- **Step 4: Read the story a second time** to analyze how the author has supported his or her ideas. Take notes, including page numbers for future reference.

# A Poem

- **Step 1: Examine the title** — Is it indicative of a conflict or a human condition? Is it symbolic of something else? Is it sarcastic, satiric, humorous, or serious? Is it descriptive? Why do you think the author chose it?
- **Step 2: Read the poem — What images are evoked?** Are there any indications of the meaning? What is the topic? The setting? The voice (the speaker)? Is there a historical or cultural link?
- **Step 3: Look for structure** — Is there an organization? A sequence? Rhyme scheme?
- **Step 4: Consider the mood** — What is the author's attitude toward the subject?
- **Step 5: Study the ending** — Where has the poem taken you? How did it affect you?

# A Play



- **Step 1: Note the genre** — Is the play tragic? Humorous? Insightful?
- **Step 2: Study the major characters** — Who is the protagonist? Antagonist? How do the characters relate to one another? What is their function in the plot?
- **Step 3: Determine the conflict** — Is the conflict external (man vs. man) or internal (man in conflict with self)?
- **Step 4: Note the language** — **Dialogue is central to any play.** How does the author use language to develop the characters? Advance the plot?
- **Step 5: Reveal the theme** — What is the significance of the play? How is the theme revealed through the characters? The plot? The dialogue?

# Writing Is a Matter of Time

Start thinking about your paper **as soon as possible**.

➤ **Writing an essay takes time.** That's why writing is often referred to as a **process**. In other words, there are several stages to go through before you can complete a **successful** essay.

1. Select a topic
2. Collect information (research, notes)
3. Formulate a thesis statement
4. Create an outline
5. Write a rough draft
6. Revise (edit for content and style)
7. Proofread

# Simple Strategy for Writing an Analysis Essay

1. **Decide the author's main idea.** Sum up the author's theme (main idea) in a single sentence. Use that information to create a thesis statement.
2. **Determine which elements** (point of view, characters, plot, etc.) seem important and supportive of your thesis statement.
3. **Make an outline** that includes your thesis and main ideas.
4. **Write an introduction:** Include the full name of the literary work and author and the author's purpose (your thesis).
5. **Write the paper:** Each body paragraph can address one aspect (character, plot, etc.) of the work being analyzed. The topic sentence of each paragraph should state the aspect. Then give support, citing specific examples.
6. **Draw a conclusion:** In the concluding paragraph, give your opinion of how successful the author has been in achieving his purpose. Include a summary of the elements discussed in your paper.