Analyzing Literature: Poetry Analysis

Analyzing Literature

When you read the literary selections in this collection, your initial responses, whether positive or negative, enthusiastic or indifferent, were personal and subjective. You’re not required to defend your first thoughts and feelings about a work. However, when you dig deeper and begin to analyze a work of literature, you must become more critical and objective because you must be able to support your conclusions. When you write a **literary analysis,** you examine a selection’s parts, or literary elements, and how they work together to produce an overall effect. In this workshop you will focus your critical attention on the elements of a poem.

Prewriting

Choose and Analyze a Poem

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| **A Work of Substance** To begin your analysis, choose a poem of moderate length, approximately ten to twenty lines. Because your literary analysis should be at least 1,500 words long, the poem should be rich in meaning and complex enough to require careful analysis. You will select one of the poems from the poetry unit for your paper. It is important that you utilize the graphic organizers to assist with the development of this paper as we move through the unit.  **I Spy with a Critical Eye…**   After you’ve chosen a poem, read it carefully, examining the poem critically to discover its unique aspects—what distinguishes it from other poems. Read it as many times as it takes to feel comfortable in your understanding of the ideas it expresses. The following chart explains the basic **literary elements** you’ll find in poetry and provides analysis questions for each.  \ **Element**   **Analysis Questions**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Speaker** is the imaginary voice, or persona, assumed by a writer. | Who is the speaker? Is his or her voice immediately identifiable? Is the speaker speaking about himself or herself or about others? Is the speaker speaking to someone? Is the speaker describing a scene or emotion or is the speaker narrating a story? | | **Stylistic devices** are the techniques a writer uses to control **language** to create effects. | How does **diction** (word choice) affect the poem’s tone? What effects does the poet create through **rhythm,** **rhyme, alliteration,** and **onomatopoeia?** Does the poet use **figurative language,** such as similes or metaphors, to suggest feelings or ideas? Does the poet use **imagery** that appeals to readers’ senses? How do these images affect the mood of the poem? | | **Theme** is the central idea or insight of a work of literature. | What main idea does the poem express about its subject? Does the poem examine a universal theme, common problem, or life experience? Does it reveal any insight into the human condition? | | **Tone** is the attitude a poet takes toward the reader or subject of the poem. | What’s the poet’s attitude toward the subject? sarcastic? reverent? What’s the speaker’s attitude toward the audience? intimate? condescending? What words and details convey the tone? How does the tone affect your response to the poem? |   Repeat the process of critical reading until you have a comprehensive understanding of the **significant ideas** in the poem and a firm grip on the elements that help communicate those ideas. Because there are often many elements working at once to create a poem’s overall effect, plan to focus your essay on just one or two elements. In poems of ten to twenty lines, one or two elements usually dominate.    **Digging Deeper**A deep, thoughtful literary analysis identifies the **ambiguities, nuances,** and **complexities** of a work and elaborates on their impact on the poem. The chart below provides definitions of these characteristics as well as student examples based on Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 73” (page 318).  AMBIGUITIES, NUANCES, AND COMPLEXITIES   |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Ambiguities** are lines or words that lend themselves to more than one interpretation. | The word “consumed” in the third quatrain is ambiguous. It can mean that the speaker’s youth has been destroyed by a metaphorical fire. It could also mean that he has wastefully spent his youth or that he’s engrossed or obsessed with thinking about his youth. | | **Nuances** are changes in the tone or meaning of the poem. | “Sonnet 73” begins with a somber tone in the first three quatrains and ends with a happier, hopeful tone in the final couplet. | | **Complexities** result when a poem is rich in meaning but difficult to interpret. | The first quatrain of “Sonnet 73” uses a complex metaphor, going beyond the traditional association between winter and old age to create the image of an elderly person whose thin arms and legs (boughs, or limbs) shake in the cold. |     Tip Use the literary present tense whenever you summarize the plot or subject matter of a literary work or refer to an author’s relationship to his or her work; for example, “‘Sonnet 73’ begins with a somber tone” and “Shakespeare writes about the universal theme of love and loss.” |

State Your Thesis and Gather Support

**A Statement of Intent**   Review your notes, and pull together all your information to determine what your essay will say about the poem. To do this, ask yourself the following questions.

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| **•** | Do one or two literary elements stand out as more interesting or significant than others? |
| **•** | What overall effect do the elements create? |

Using your answers to these questions, draft a **thesis statement,** like the student example below, that identifies the one or two elements you have chosen to analyze and states your main idea about their effects.

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| In “Sonnet 73” Shakespeare develops a solemn metaphor for old age, leading up to a final statement of the poem’s hope-filled theme: Love grows strong in the face of approaching death. |

**The Evidence Will Show**   Your literary analysis is an interpretation, your unique viewpoint, that you must support through evidence and elaboration. Select three to five **key points**—the ideas about the literary elements you are discussing that are most important to proving your thesis. Support your key points by gathering **literary** **evidence**—direct quotations and paraphrases of lines or passages. You may need to review the poem repeatedly to find accurate and detailed **references** from the text of the poem that support your key points and thesis. **Elaborate** on the evidence you find by explaining its meaning and tying it to your thesis statement.

**The Importance of Being Orderly**   A strong thesis and compelling evidence won’t convince readers that your interpretation is valid if your essay’s organization is hard to follow. Your essay’s focus will help you determine how you organize your ideas. If your essay focuses on a single literary element, you may want to use **chronological order,** tracing the development of the element from its first appearance in the poem to its last. If it focuses upon two literary elements, you may want to organize them by **order of importance,** from most important to least, or vice versa.

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| A Writer’s Framework |
| **Introduction**    * Create an engaging opening with an interesting quotation or a bold statement. * Introduce the poem you’re analyzing by title and author. * State a clear thesis that identifies the literary elements and your main idea about their effects. |
| **Body**   * Discuss the key points of your analysis. * Provide literary evidence from the text of the poem. * Elaborate on your evidence. * Organize your essay by order of importance or by chronological order. |
| **Conclusion**   * Restate your thesis in a memorable way. * Leave readers with a closing thought to consider. |

Rubric: Analyzing Literature

**Evaluation Questions**   **Tips**  **Revision Techniques**

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| Does the introduction engage the reader’s interest and introduce the subject of the analysis? | **Put parentheses** around the engaging opening. **Circle** the title of the poem and the name of the author. | If necessary, **add** a quotation or a bold statement. **Add** the name of the poem and author |
| Does the introduction include a thesis statement that clearly identifies the literary elements and states a main idea about their effects? | **Highlight** the thesis statement. **Bracket** the literary elements and the main idea about their effects. | If needed, **add** a thesis statement that identifies the poem’s literary elements and states your main idea about their effects. |
| Are the key points clear? Do they support the thesis? | **Underline** the key points. **Draw** **an arrow** from the key points to the thesis. | **Rewrite** key points that are not clearly expressed. **Replace** key points that don’t support the thesis with ones that do. |
| Does literary evidence support all key points about the thesis? Does the essay elaborate upon all evidence? | **Put a check mark** by each direct quotation or paraphrase from the poem. **Put an X** by elaboration of literary evidence. | If necessary, **add** literary evidence for key points, or **add** elaboration to all evidence. |
| Are the key points arranged logically so that they are easy to follow? | **Review** the underlined key points to see if their arrangement is logical. | **Rearrange** key points by order of importance or by chronological order. |
| Does the conclusion restate the thesis? Does it include a thought-provoking closing thought? | **Highlight** the sentence restating the thesis. **Underline** the sentence or sentences containing the closing thought. | **Add** a sentence restating the thesis or a closing thought, if either is needed. |
| Does the essay include transitional words and phrases that guide the reader | **Draw a box** around transitional words and phrases. If there are none, revise. | **Add** transitional words and phrases to make the connection of ideas in the analysis clear. |
| Is the paper free of spelling and grammar errors? Are all lines cited by their number? | **Circle** all errors | **Edit** paper by using spelling and grammar check. **Revise** all line numbers to ensure they are correct |