

Analyzing Novels and 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 and use it to form a thesis, or argument, for your essay.

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 significant. Consider where the author's story takes place 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 like many dystopian fiction novels and short stories, the setting is not of the real world or time period. Consider this as you read.

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. *Climax*: The high point of the action, when the conflict or problem could either be resolved or cause a character's downfall. *Resolution*: The conflict or problem is solved and normalcy or a new order is restored

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.

Foil. A character used to contrast a second, usually more prominent character in order to highlight certain qualities of the more prominent character.

Foreshadowing. The use of hints or clues to suggest what will happen later in a literary work.

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.

Symbolism. The use of an object or action to mean something more than its literal meaning.

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.

Putting it together for your journal or essay

For a journal: 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.).

For an essay you will use a given prompt, however you will still 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 in order to support your claims and better develop your ideas. This allows you to become a better reader and writer.

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

- Summarize the plot
- Announce a general theme
- Offer a review of the book

References

A&M university. (2019). Analyzing novels and Short stories. Retrieved from <https://writingcenter.tamu.edu/Students/Writing-Speaking-Guides/Alphabetical-List-of-Guides/Academic-Writing/Analysis/Analyzing-Novels-Short-Stories>