

Analyzing Literature

A Guide for Students

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ANALYZING LITERATURE: A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

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THINKING ABOUT THE GENRE

Literary analysis is a genre that in many ways resembles an argument: you make a claim about the work and support your claim with evidence from the text as well as reasoning and analysis. The purpose of a response to literature is to persuade the readers that your analysis and interpretation of the work are valid, reasonable, and logical.

When you write about literature, you participate actively in the construction of knowledge about the text. That is to say, the text itself creates only part of its message. The writer of the work has done his or her part to convey its meaning by using symbols, language, setting, plot, character, foreshadowing, and the like, to suggest the text's message. Unlike "hard sciences," however, literature cannot be empirically tested in the laboratory; its meaning comes from its readers. In fact, literature begs for *readers* to read, react to, think about, and interpret the text. Having engaged in those steps, the process continues with another step: communicating to others the meaning you, as a reader, have constructed from the text. Your interpretation and analysis, then, add to the body of meaning about the text.

Most likely, you have been asked to write about literature before: perhaps you've read a book and written a report or review of it for your junior high English class; perhaps you've studied an author and researched his or her life and work; perhaps you've read a piece of literature and answered essay questions about it on an essay exam. Because literature is a focus of many English classes, it is likely that you have had some experience with reading and responding to literature in your past academic life; in the university, you will also read and respond to literature—even if you're not planning to major in English. Since many colleges and universities require their students to take a literature or humanities elective, you will probably continue reading and responding to literature in college.

As a genre, literary analysis differs from other types of writing you may have done about literature, such as an evaluation. For instance, as an assignment for school, you may have watched a play or read a story and had to write a review of it. A review calls upon the writer to make an evaluation, to describe and analyze the work in question. The purpose of writing a review is to persuade the readers that your evaluation, which is based on criteria, is a sound assessment of the work. (“Don’t read this book because it lacks a clear plot.”) For example, you can find reviews of books and music printed at online bookstores such as Amazon.com. Here people who have read the book (or listened to the CD) provide their evaluation of the work to potential book or music buyers to help them make informed decisions.

With literary analysis, however, the focus is not on offering your opinion about the work; rather, the focus is to interpret and analyze the text. Certainly, you offer your informed opinion of the text’s interpretation, but you do not assess the merits of the text or tell readers whether or not you liked the work. Literary analysis, then, tends to be more objective than a review might be. For that reason, literary analyses are written using third person pronouns. Other features of literary analysis include a clearly stated thesis (often called a claim) that is supported by reasons and evidence from the text. Writers use present tense verbs to discuss the work rather than past tense.

Why do schools put emphasis on literature? First, literature is a way to experience a way of life, a time period, a culture, an emotion, a deed, an event that you are not otherwise able, willing (as, say, in the case of murder), or capable of encountering in any other manner. Literature, then, opens doors to new and different life experiences.

Second, the critical reading skills that you bring to reading short stories, poems, novels, plays, as well as non-fiction, are the same types of critical reading strategies that serve you well in any other type of reading that you do—whether it be reading a computer manual, a biology text, a legal document, or the like. In order to write well about literature, you must be able to read the text closely, looking at its structure, the words the author has chosen, the characters’ motivations, the patterns of language and literary devices. Certainly, you don’t read a biology text looking for

literary devices and uses of language; rather, you read that text searching for an understanding of the structure of the interaction within an organism, how the organism relates to other organisms, the biochemical pathways involved in those interactions. However, in either case—reading a piece of literature or a technical document—you read closely and carefully, looking at not only what the writer is saying, but also looking at why it’s being said and how it’s being said. Furthermore, the critical reading strategies that you employ in reading literature heighten your sense of observation and draw upon your life skills. For instance, as you read a literary text and notice the characters, you have to think about and respond to each character’s motivation. (Why did she do that? What makes her “tick”?) Reading literature, then, enhances your critical reading skills.

Likewise, being able to write about literature demonstrates your ability to read critically and engage in the higher level thinking skills of analysis and interpretation. However, it is unlikely that you will write a literary analysis paper outside of a classroom. Literary analyses tend to be only a “school” assignment for most people (unless you work for *The New Yorker* or other literary type magazines). On the other hand, the skills that you bring both to analyzing literature and writing about it are applicable to situations outside the classroom and to other writing assignments within the classroom. Being able to construct a reasonable claim, supported by evidence and logic, is essential to many other types of expository writing tasks (as you can see from the types of writing in this text). Regardless of the writing task or audience, it is essential to be able to communicate your ideas clearly and effectively, whether you’re writing a feasibility report for your boss or a literary analysis paper for your teacher.

Often, students are intimidated when it comes to writing about literature because they feel that they do not know enough about literature to write about it or that the author is surely hiding some meaning in the text that they just can’t find. It is important, though, to keep in mind that readers are integral to making meaning with literary texts. Readers complete the writer’s work, bringing their own life experiences and ideas to it to make meaning. Sometimes students feel as if the whole purpose of writing about literature is to be critical of the work—and that’s difficult to do if you happen to really like the work. Responding to literature, however, does not have to be intimidating if you read carefully and critically,

keeping your mind set on thinking about and analyzing the text, and if you write about an aspect of the work that sparks your interest, whether positively or negatively.

STRATEGIES FOR READING A WORK OF LITERATURE

Like other types of reading assignments, reading literature in an effort to respond to it requires more than just a quick read-through. In other words, reading literature for a course or for the purpose of responding to it is much different than reading the latest John Grisham novel while on vacation at the beach. Reading with the intent of writing about the work requires multiple readings of the text. When reading the Grisham novel at the beach, we usually read the text only once and often quickly. The following strategies offer suggestions for reading a story, poem, play, or novel for coursework:

1. When reading through the work for the first time, read as you would at the beach: get the “gist” of the plot (yes, poems often have a plot, too), the characters, and a general idea of the meaning of the piece. Enjoy the work and don’t be stressed out about any upcoming writing assignment!
2. During the second read, pay particular attention to words that you do not know and look up those words in the dictionary. If a word has multiple meanings listed, consider each of the meanings. Often writers will use antiquated or secondary meanings of words. You may find it helpful to write the meanings of the words in the margin of the text or on a separate note card, so that you can easily refer to them when reading, writing, and thinking about the work. Paying attention to word choice is especially important when reading poetry. Because poems are often short, every word counts, which means that poets select their words very carefully. Often in poetry, words may have dual meanings, each of which makes sense within the poem but offers differing interpretations.
3. Think about the setting of the work and its culture. Is the work set in the 20th century or another time? Is it set in the U.S. or another country? In what region of the U.S. or world? What are customs, traditions, and lifestyles like in that particular region? What is the socioeconomic status of the characters—are they rich, middle class,

poor? What is the ethnicity of the characters? Considering these issues gives valuable insight into the work's meaning and perspective.

4. During subsequent readings, methodically begin to pay attention to how characters interact with one another, how the writer uses words to convey meaning, how the characters speak, who is telling (or narrating) the story, the kinds of images the writer uses, or any other aspect of the text that seems important to you. Ask yourself along the way what you think about each aspect and why you think that way. Many students find it helpful to keep a reading journal, as well, when they read through a text. In a reading journal, you can record your thinking about the work. As you continue analyzing the text, add to your notes.
5. Annotating the text (by underlining or circling passages and writing in the margins) is helpful because your annotations can refer you to particular sections of the work later. Since you will need to draw the evidence for your interpretation from the work itself, having already marked sections of the work will aid you in garnering your evidence when writing the paper later.

Terms for Analyzing Literature

Literary critics and scholars use discipline-specific terms to talk about a work of literature. These terms make it easier for writers of literary analyses to communicate with each other. By using the same “jargon” or language, literary critics do not have to define common ideas constantly. The following are terms (the definitions of which have been simplified) that may help you as you read and write about literature:

- **Character:** A character is a “person” in a literary work. Characters have moral and psychological features that make them human in some way or another. We often think of characters as being either *flat* or *round*. *Flat characters* are one-dimensional; they act stereotypically or expectedly. *Round characters*, on the other hand, are more complex in their make-up; they may act in contradictory or unexpected ways.
- **Drama:** This term actually has several meanings; however, in this unit, drama refers to plays, works of literature that can be read and performed on stage.

- **Fiction:** Work that comes from a writer’s imagination is considered fiction. Types of fiction include short stories, novels, fairy tales, folklore, and fables.
- **Foreshadowing:** Foreshadowing uses either action or mood to prepare the reader for something that will happen later in the work of fiction or drama. It is often helpful to think of foreshadowing as clues that a detective might follow when solving a mystery. The writer leaves hints along the way to set the stage for what is to come later.
- **Narrator:** The narrator of a literary work is the person who tells the story. Sometimes the person who tells the story is a character within the work; we call this person a *first person narrator*. Other times, the story is told by someone who is not part of the action; this type of narrator is called a *third person narrator*. A third person narrator can know everything about the characters—their history, their minds, their emotions—in which case, the narrator is considered an *omniscient narrator* (“all-knowing”). An omniscient narrator can also move back and forth through time and space. A third person narrator who has only limited knowledge of the events and characters, or who only knows the minds of some characters and not others, is a *limited omniscient narrator*.
- **Personification:** Giving animals or inanimate objects human characteristics is personification.
- **Plot:** The term plot refers to the action or “story line” of the literary work. Drama and fiction have plots, but sometimes poems do also. Plot usually involves conflict between two or more characters or between a character and himself or herself. Traditionally, the plot of drama or fiction follows a particular pattern, which includes the *exposition* (where the conflict or action begins), the *rising action* (the events that promote the conflict), the *climax* (the point of greatest emotional tension in the work), and *the resolution or denouement* (where the loose ends are wrapped up). However, literary works do not have to follow this pattern.
- **Setting:** Setting is where the action takes place and includes both the physical location as well as the time period.
- **Symbolism:** Writers use symbolism so that a person, object, or event can create a range of emotional and intellectual responses in the readers. For example, using a flag as a symbol might conjure patriotic feelings in one person, anti-patriotic feelings in another, or perhaps,

like a warning flag, a sense of danger. By using symbols, the writer can evoke a wide body of feelings.

FOR PRACTICE

Read the following short story by Mary Robison and practice the reading strategies offered in this section.

Mary Robison

“Yours”

c. 1983

Allison struggled away from her white Renault, limping with the weight of the last of the pumpkins. She found Clark in the twilight on the twig-and-leaf-littered porch behind the house.

He wore a wool shawl. He was moving up and back in a padded glider, pushed by the ball of his slippered foot.

Allison lowered a big pumpkin, let it rest on the wide floorboards.

Clark was much older—seventy-eight to Allison’s thirty-five. They were married. They were both quite tall and looked something alike in their facial features. Allison wore a natural-hair wig. It was a thick blonde hood around her face. She was dressed in bright-dyed denims today. she wore durable clothes, usually, for she volunteered afternoons at a children’s daycare center.

She put one of the smaller pumpkins on Clark’s long lap. “Now, nothing surreal,” she told him. “Carve just a *regular* face. These are for the kids.”

In the foyer, on the Hipplewhite desk, Allison found the maid’s chore list with its cross-offs, which included Clark’s supper. Allison went quickly through the daily mail: a garish coupon packet, a bill from Jamestown Liquors, November’s pay-TV program guide, and the worst thing, the funniest, an already opened, extremely unkind letter from Clark’s relations up North. “You’re an old fool,” Allison read, and, “You’re being cruelly deceived.” There was a gift check for Clark enclosed, but it was uncashable, signed as it was, “Jesus H. Christ.”

Late, late into this night, Allison and Clark gutted and carved the pumpkins together, at an old table set on the back porch, over newspaper after soggy newspaper, with paring knives and with spoons and with a Swiss Army knife Clark used for exact shaping of tooth and eye and nostril. Clark had been a doctor, an internist, but also a Sunday watercolorist. His four pumpkins were expressive and artful. Their carved features were suited to the sizes and shapes of the pumpkins. Two looked ferocious and jagged. One registered surprise. The last was serene and beaming.

Allison's four faces were less deftly drawn, with slits and areas of distortion. She had cut triangles for noses and eyes. The mouths she had made were just wedges—two turned up and two turned down.

By one in the morning they were finished. Clark, who had bent his long torso forward to work, moved back over to the glider and looked out sleepily at nothing. All the lights were out across the ravine.

Clark stayed. For the season and time, the Virginia night was warm. Most leaves had been blown away already, and the trees stood unbothered. The moon was round above them.

Allison cleaned up the mess.

“Your jack-o-lanterns are much, much better than mine,” Clark said to her.

“Like hell,” Allison said.

“Look at me,” Clark said. Allison did.

She was holding a squishy bundle of newspapers. The papers reeked sweetly with the smell of pumpkin guts.

“Yours are *far* better ,” he said.

“You're wrong. You'll see when they're lit,” Allison said.

She went inside and came back with yellow vigil candles. It took her a while to get each candle settled, and then to line up the results in a row on the porch railing. She went along and lit each candle and fixed the pumpkin lids over the little flames.

“See?” she said.

They sat together a moment and looked at the orange faces.

“We’re exhausted. It’s good night time,” Allison said. “Don’t blow out the candles. I’ll put new in tomorrow.”

That night, in their bedroom, a few weeks earlier than had been predicted, Allison began to die. “Don’t look at me if my wig comes off,” she told Clark. “Please.”

Her pulse cords were fluttering under his fingers. She raised her knees and kicked away the comforter. She said something to Clark about the garage being locked.

At the telephone, Clark had a clear view out back and down to the porch. He wanted to get drunk with his wife once more. He wanted to tell her, from the greater perspective he had, that to own only a little talent, like his, was an awful, plaguing thing; that being only a little special meant you expected too much, most of the time, and liked yourself too little. He wanted to assure her that she had missed nothing.

He was speaking into the phone now. He watched the jack-o-lanterns. The jack-o-lanterns watched him.

FOR CRITICAL INQUIRY

Although this story shows only one day in the life of this couple, what does the story reveal about their lives? What specific details in the story lead you to this interpretation?

1. Allison and Clark are of different ages. When you first read of their age difference, what did you expect to happen in the story? Why did you think they were together? How does our culture feel about couples with such an age difference? By the end of the story, how do their ages work differently than you perhaps expected?
2. Why does the story begin and end with pumpkins? How are the pumpkins transformed from the beginning of the story to the end? What ideas or feelings do you usually associate with pumpkins? How might your associations work with the theme of the story? What specific details of the story can you use to justify your thinking?
3. Why is the title of the story “Yours”? In what way does the title give clues to the meaning of the story? What evidence from the story backs up your analysis?
4. Why does a narrator and not one of the characters tell the story? How would the story be different if told from the point of view of Clark? Of Allison?

WORKING TOGETHER

Working with two or three classmates, discuss your answers to the questions about “Yours.” Compare and contrast your thinking about the story with that of your classmates. Did your group members have different answers to the questions? Are their answers and yours reasonable and valid? Why or why not?

After discussing and thinking about your different interpretations of the story, think about why three people could read the same story and come up with different, albeit reasonable, answers to the same questions. Together, write a paragraph explaining your thinking.

LOOKING AT THE GENRE

Krista Williams’s essay compares and contrasts the attitudes toward sexual relationships of the main characters of two novels, *The House on Mango Street* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. She wrote this essay in an Honors English course which focused on American culture. In her essay, Williams compares and contrasts Esperanza’s and Holden’s views of sex and relates those views to each characters’ upbringing and cultural background.

Krista Williams

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Sharon McGee

Essay #5, Final Draft

To Have Sex or Not to Have Sex:

That is the Issue

“A boy once held me so hard, I swear, I felt the grip and weight of his arms, but it was a dream” (Cisneros 73). Esperanza, from The House on Mango Street, dreams about having intimate relationships with men, but she cannot make these relationships real because of legitimate fears about the consequences of sexual relationships. Holden Caulfield of The Catcher in the Rye also has this problem of wanting to have sex while fearing the implications of having meaningless sexual relationships. He can’t even hire a prostitute without feeling bad about having sex: “It made me feel sort of sad when I hung [her dress] up” (Salinger 96). Later, he lies to the prostitute and tells her that he can’t sleep with her because of a supposed injury to his “clavichord.” Esperanza and Holden share a similar confusion about whether or not they want to engage in sexual

relationships and this confusion is brought about by exposure to different environments and by unique perceptions of these environments.

Esperanza is a young Hispanic-American girl growing up in a very poor area of Chicago. Most of the women she encounters on Mango Street play very domestic, repressed roles in which their only power comes in the form of sexual appeal. Esperanza is unsure about what she wants her life to be like, because she wants to have the sexual appeal that she sees displayed all around her, but she doesn't want to have to deal with the consequences of a sexual life. She wants to have intimate relationships with men, but she doesn't want to lose her independence and self-respect. For instance, in one part of the novel, Esperanza tells the reader about a boy named Sire who had exchanged deep, "hard" stares with her. She says, "It made your blood freeze to have somebody look at you like that" (73). From this statement, the reader can infer that Esperanza's experience with Sire was frightening. However, this experience also causes her to say, "I want to sit out back at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt. Not this way, every evening talking to the trees, leaning out my window, imagining what I can't see" (73). However, Esperanza knows that if she gives in to her desires, she

will become a sex-object and a possession. Thus, she wants to have a sexually-oriented relationship, but she can't allow herself to do this because she doesn't want to become dependent upon men like most of the women she has observed.

Esperanza wants to wield her sexual power without losing her strength and independence. She wants to emulate the image of the "beautiful and cruel" woman portrayed in the media who "drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away" (89). Unfortunately, Esperanza is not able to do this because she isn't confident about her physical appearance, and because men are extremely frightening to her in sexual situations.

Esperanza's beliefs stem directly from her experiences on Mango Street. She is aware of a domestic trap which exists for the women of Mango Street in which women get married to escape from the homes of their parents but are dependent upon their husbands for the rest of their lives. Esperanza recognizes that sexual relationships lead to marriage, and that marriage leads to a long, domestic, dependent life. Because she wants to avoid such a life, Esperanza avoids sexual relationships. She tries to help her friends avoid this trap as well, but she is unsuccessful because her

friends don't recognize the consequences of sexual relationships. At one point in the novel, Esperanza's friend, Sally, agreed to kiss some boys so that they would give her keys back to her. Esperanza was angry at the boys and wanted to defend her friend, so she "ran back down the three flights to the garden where Sally needed to be saved. [She] took three big sticks and a brick and figured this was enough" (Cisneros 97). However, Esperanza was very confused when she arrived to find out that Sally didn't want to be saved. Sally was entering the trap of domesticity and there was nothing Esperanza could do to stop her. Later, Sally married an abusive marshmallow salesman who never let her out of the house and was trapped for life. This example shows the reader what life might have been like for Esperanza if she had not avoided sexual relationships.

Esperanza was lucky enough not to end up like her friend. Unfortunately, there were some instances when she was unable to avoid sexual encounters, and these experiences were very violent and frightening for her. The first man who ever kissed her passionately was an old Oriental man who befriended her at work and then grabbed her when she agreed to give him a birthday kiss. Later, Esperanza was raped by an older boy when she went to a carnival with Sally. Because of the violence

and violation involved in these first sexual encounters, it is reasonable to assume that Esperanza doesn't want to be a part of similar experiences. Thus, it is very difficult for Esperanza to come to terms with the kinds of sexual relationships which she wants and the kinds of relationships which she has experienced. She wants to have an intimate relationship, but doesn't want to be vulnerable.

Holden Caulfield's confusion with sex in The Catcher in the Rye is very similar to that of Esperanza, but his confusion stems from a very different problem. Holden likes women and wants to have sex with them, but he feels bad about his desires because he feels that it's wrong to sleep with women that he doesn't care about. At one point, Holden tells the reader, "I think if you don't really like a girl, you shouldn't horse around with her at all" (62). However, most of the women he has sexual relations with give him a "pain in the ass" (Salinger 63). Thus, he's caught in the confusion of wanting to be sexually active but not wanting to do anything "crummy." For example, to demonstrate how much he doesn't understand sex, he states the following: "I keep making these sex rules for myself, and then breaking them right away. Last year I made a rule that I was going to quit horsing around with girls that, deep down, gave me a pain in

the ass. I broke it, though” (63). Holden really wants sex to be part of an intimate, emotional relationship, but he usually just ends up in relationships with girls that he doesn’t really care about. This confuses and depresses him.

Holden is so caught up in the romantic ideals of sex that he is repulsed by its realities. He wants to exist in a fantasy world with the girls he’s romantically tied to, so he makes up ridiculous plans about running away with his former girlfriend, Sally (who he doesn’t even like), living in the mountains together, and chopping firewood for her. This is also why he thinks about his old friend, Jane, so much. Jane is the only girl who he has ever respected and felt emotionally attached to, so throughout the book, he’s preoccupied with thoughts of her. More specifically, Holden repeatedly mentions the fact that Jane “keeps all her kings in the back row” when playing checkers (Salinger 42). This detail is included to illustrate how much Holden cares about her, since the reader knows that he appreciates her personality quirks and her innocence instead of only appreciating her body.

Holden thinks it’s “crumby” to sleep with a girl that he’s not particularly attached to because of the social mythology that sex is a part

of romantic, caring relationships. Unfortunately, the only girl he actually cares about (Jane) supposedly has sex with Stradlater, Holden's roommate from Pencey Prep. This makes Holden very angry. He feels like his meaningful relationship with Jane has been violated by Stradlater, so he picks a fight with him. Later, Holden looks for sexual relationships with other women, but is unable to follow through with them because he sees himself as violating the principles in which he believes.

Holden's ideas about sex come indirectly from exposure to an environment very different from Esperanza's world on Mango Street. While Esperanza lives in a very poor, low-class neighborhood, Holden Caulfield comes from an affluent part of New York City and has attended several expensive boarding schools on the East Coast. Holden's upper-class environment has severely depressed him because he perceives himself to be surrounded by "phony" people and inconsistent social conventions. Throughout the novel, he searches for something real that he can admire and emulate. It is this quest for reality which makes Holden unhappy and confused about most areas of his life, including the area of sexual relationships. Holden's society has projected an image of sex as part of a relationship between people who love each other deeply, and

marriage is usually involved in this. However, most of the sexual relationships which he observes are very superficial. This double standard of society depresses Holden just as much as all the other double standards he observes, so he can't have sexual relations with a girl without becoming unhappy and confused.

Perhaps this common confusion of Holden and Esperanza stems from similar struggles that both characters participate in. Holden and Esperanza want to give in to their sexual desires, but neither character wants to become a part of his or her adult world. Because Esperanza is trying to avoid the traditional life and duties of a grown woman, her struggle with her sexual desires can be seen as a fight to retain the innocence of childhood. Similarly, Holden doesn't want to become a part of the conventional adult life which is filled with double-standards, responsibilities, and uncertainties. Through his frequent admiration of children and their activities, Holden indicates that he wants to remain childlike and innocent. He always seems to be looking for sex, but the reader knows that he remains a virgin throughout the novel. Because virginity is often associated with innocence, perhaps Holden's sexual confusion is a continuation of his struggle to maintain his childlike

innocence in a “phony” adult world. Thus Holden and Esperanza want to keep their innocence and avoid living lives similar to those of the adults around them.

Both Holden and Esperanza are looking for meaningful sexual relationship in their lives, but neither knows how to find one. Esperanza is afraid of becoming a sexual possession and Holden is afraid of becoming a part of the phony world which disgusts him. However, both characters’ ideas about sex have been derived from observations about their respective environments and from the decisions which they have made to differentiate themselves from those environments. Neither character wants to be like the people who they observe in their everyday lives, so they avoid having sex, even though they both have strong sexual desires. Perhaps when Holden comes to terms with his phony world, he will be able to have a meaningful relationship with a woman without feeling guilty about the implications of sex. Similarly, when Esperanza finally escapes Mango Street, she won’t have to view sex and marriage as domestic traps, and will be able to find fulfillment in her life.

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ANALYSIS

Krista Williams's essay begins by setting up the contrast between Esperanza and Holden, then proceeds to discuss each character's view of sex separately. She writes her essay in third person, without using "I," and she uses present tense verbs when talking about the text, which are common features of literary analyses. Although she does not cite from outside sources, Williams uses plenty of evidence from the texts to support her argument about each character's sexual issues, and she connects those views to the characters' cultural perspective. Especially important to note is the fact that Williams does not rely on plot summary to tell us about the complete story of Esperanza and Holden; rather she brings in appropriate background detail only to support the point she is making. She assumes, then, that the essay's readers will have some familiarity with the texts.

FOR CRITICAL INQUIRY

1. Literary analyses make an argument about a text (or texts, as in this case) and support that claim with evidence. In your own words, summarize Williams's argument in this essay. Now consider the evidence that she uses to support her claim. How many times does Williams quote directly from each text? How often does she paraphrase or summarize information from the texts? Why does she choose to quote particular passages and paraphrase or summarize others? How do quotations support her claim differently than summaries?
2. Develop a detailed outline of Williams's essay. How does each paragraph function in the essay? In other words, how do the paragraphs work together to create an argument?
3. You may have noticed how Williams integrates quoted material into her paragraphs. For instance, in paragraph 2 she writes: "However, this experience also causes her to say, 'I want to sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt. Not this way, every evening talking to the trees, leaning out my window, imagining what I can't see.' (73)." Why does Williams connect the quoted material to the paragraph in such ways? How does this integration of quoted material help the overall flow of the essay?

CALL TO WRITE: RESPONDING TO LITERATURE

Writing Assignment

For this assignment, write about a piece of literature you've been assigned to read for your course. Your essay should be an argument that provides your interpretation/analysis of the work and supports that claim with appropriate and sufficient details (evidence) from the work. Unless your instructor specifies otherwise, your interpretation should come from *your own* reading and thinking about the work—not from critical or literary analyses you have read about it.

INVENTION

Exploring Your Topic

To get ready to write your analysis, it may help you to examine what you already think about the text after your initial reading.

Exercise

In your reading journal or notebook, write about your initial reaction to the text you've selected. Doing so will give you a place to begin further analysis of the work. When you write, don't worry if your answers seem incomplete or insufficient; however, try to respond to these questions with as much detail as you can at this point. As you review your writing, though, and re-read the text, keep in mind the gaps in this crash-through writing. Those gaps will provide clues to particular points in the text that you will want to analyze further. Consider the following questions as points of departure for your crash-through journal writing:

- What is my “gut reaction” to this text? Do I like the work? What, specifically, do I like or dislike about it?
- Do I like the characters? Why? Are there any characters that I dislike? Why?
- How are the experiences of this character (or these characters) like or unlike my own experiences? Does the difference in our experience make the work more difficult to understand? Does the similarity in our experience make me connect with the character(s) more closely?
- What is the setting of the work? What do I know about this setting? How is it like or unlike my own experience?

- What recurring images or objects did I notice in the work? What might they mean? Do those objects have any cultural significance?
- What is the title of the work and why did the author choose that title? What alternative titles might the author have chosen and why?
- Who is “telling” the story? Why did the author select this character to tell the story? How would the story be different if told from someone else’s point of view?
- Why might the author have written this work?

Exercise

After your initial reading, follow the reading strategies outlined previously as you read through the work several more times to prepare for your writing assignment

Cultural and Historical Perspectives

One way to analyze literature is to think about the cultural and historical perspectives of the piece. When literary work that was either written several years, decades, or even centuries ago, it is often easy for us to forget to place that particular piece of literature in a specific historical framework. It is easy to forget that the world was not as advanced as it is today. It’s easy to overlook the fact that cultural and societal mores have changed. For example, if we’re reading Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we might be appalled at the way the townspeople treated African-Americans in their community. We might wonder why the jury consisted of all white men, no women or African-Americans. To understand the novel, though, it is important to investigate the cultural and historical moments of the text. In other words, we might need to research civil rights in the South during the 1950s to begin to understand why this particular text was so important in its time and why that impact is still felt today. For another example, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, a novel about horrible working and sanitary conditions in the meat-packing industry in Chicago early in this century, may seem bizarre to us when we currently have strict government regulations regarding the handling and processing of food products as well as “labor laws” to protect the worker. However, at the time Sinclair wrote the novel, those regulations were not in place. Workers were not guaranteed any safety or health controls in the workplace. No government regulations existed concerning the processing

of food products. However, as a result of the book, many of these issues came into the forefront of American thinking and changes resulted.

Other Perspectives for Analyzing Literature

Other than exploring the historical and cultural perspectives of the work, there are other ways to analyze literature, including psychological, Marxist, biographical, and feminist. These methods are often employed by literary critics who want to revisit texts with new frameworks or lens to understand the text in new and different ways. It is beyond the scope of this guide to give you background into these varied ways of reading a text. However, one of the more traditional ways to analyze a text is by using a formalist perspective.

In the formalist perspective, the text is viewed to be a complete unit that stands on its own without consideration to external issues such as history, economics, biography, and the like. When using a formalist perspective, you will focus on the text itself and its use of literary devices, tone, and language. Formalist critics examine how the text works as a whole unit: how, for instance, do language and characterization create a unified text. The formalist perspective is often called a “close reading” because, with this method of analysis, you pay close attention to what’s in the work—not what’s outside it.

Exercise

Choose one element (such as characters, tone, or symbols) of one literary work you’ve been assigned to read for your course. Think critically about this element. Why might the writer have opted for this particular character, tone, or symbol? How many possible reasons can you come up with? How would the work be different if he or she had chosen a different character, tone, or symbol? How does the element make the text “work”?

GOING ON-LINE

The Internet can be a resource for discussing your literary text with others. Perhaps your instructor has arranged a class listserv in which you and your peers can share ideas about your texts. You may also be able to find forums at other universities in which you can discuss your thoughts about

the work. For example, using an Internet search on *The Catcher in the Rye*, you might come across a website based at Palo Alto College in which Palo Alto students as well as other “surfers” can participate in a forum on the novel. The web site, which is currently under construction at the time of this publication, also has links to other resources about the novel; in addition, the site plans to post student papers about the novel so that you can see what other students have to say about *The Catcher in the Rye*. You can browse this website at <http://lonestar.texas.net/~mseifert/salinger.html>.

PLANNING

Developing a Claim

A strong literary analysis requires a central, controlling claim—the main argument you plan to support in your essay. Literary critics, academics in the field of literary studies, may or may not state their claim early in the essay; nevertheless, they have a claim in mind when writing. Without a clear claim, the essay goes nowhere—it rambles, making points that seem unrelated.

Exercise

Review the notes that you have taken while reading the text you’ve chosen. As you reflect on these notes, what strikes you as an interesting issue about the text? What idea do you keep thinking about or coming back to in your notes? Most likely, what interests you will interest your audience as well. Write your claim as a complete sentence, keeping in mind that you should state it in third person.

Arranging Your Material

To build your argument you need to garner effective and appropriate evidence from the text to support your claim. Linking that evidence together as a chain is also important. A chain of evidence often relies upon “mini-claims,” or smaller ideas that build upon one another to create a solid wall of argument. Notice how Williams builds her mini-claims in the first part of her essay:

- Paragraph 2: Esperanza sees women in her neighborhood playing subservient roles to men; she sees them as powerless. They use sex as a weapon.
- Paragraph 3: Esperanza wants power, strength, and independence.

- Paragraph 4: Esperanza fears sex because she sees sex as a way women become entrapped in dependent relationships with men.
- Paragraph 5: Esperanza encounters sexual relationships with men that leave her vulnerable. These experiences reinforce her views of sex and power.

Each paragraph takes one aspect of the total argument, supports it with details/evidence from the text, and offers the writer's analysis of the point. Together, the paragraphs create a unified argument: each point builds on the previous one.

Exercise

Above you see the first part of an outline for Williams's paper. Continue developing an outline for the remaining part of the paper, particularly on her discussion of Holden. Write the mini-claims she uses to build her case.

Writers of literary analyses often use one of the following types of arrangement:

- Chronological.
- Comparison and contrast.
- Least important to most important or most important to least important.

Exercise

To begin, write the mini-claims you will need to make in each paragraph in order to build your argument. Then, consider the evidence from the text that you can use to support each mini-claim. Do you have any gaps without evidence? If so, review your notes and search the text for anecdotes that bolster your claim.

WORKING DRAFT

Using the working outline you have developed, write a draft of your literary analysis. While you are writing, you may want to consider the issues raised in Paragraph Development and Citing from Literary Texts.

Paragraph Development: Sandwiching Information

One technique for developing paragraphs in a literary analysis paper is to link your mini-claim to solid textual evidence. Since a strong literary analysis relies on evidence from the text itself, this is a helpful strategy to follow. In addition, though, you must be sure to connect your evidence in your own words to the point that you are making. You cannot assume that your reader will see the connection between the evidence you cite and the claim you are making. Notice in Krista Williams's essay how she states her mini-claim, explains it, supports it with information that is either quoted directly or paraphrased from the text, explains the paraphrase or quote, then brings in more evidence. This explanation of material is sometimes called a "sandwich effect": You tell the reader what the quote or paraphrase means to the overall argument. The sandwich effect does not imply that your readers are stupid. However, since we all read material different ways and since you are taking the paraphrase or quote out of the entire context of the work, your explanation helps the reader understand how you are interpreting the citation. Think of the sandwich effect as the mortar between bricks in a wall: it fills in any gaps that the reader may have and makes for a solid argument.

Along with paraphrases and quotes, you may want to summarize sections of the text for the readers; however, you want to avoid a plot summary in which you summarize the entire plot for the reader. When you use a summary in a literary analysis, you will want to summarize only a section of the text, picking out the main idea and relating it to your purpose or claim. Another way to use a summary in a literary analysis is to summarize events leading up to a particular quote that you want to use. In this case, your summary will be very brief, perhaps one or two sentences, and simply will set the stage for the quote. Review "Paragraph Development: Using Summaries" in Chapter 8 of the main text for help with how and when to summarize.

Citing from Literary Texts

When quoting from literature, it is important to keep in mind MLA conventions. (Most literary analyses use the MLA documentation system instead of APA.) Refer to Chapter 17 for a detailed discussion of MLA format. The following sections address particular concerns for citing from literary works.

Citing from Novels or Short Stories

When quoting from novels or short stories, if the quote is four typed lines or less, you can integrate the quote into the paragraph by placing it in quotation marks. If it is necessary to include a parenthetical page number, put the page number in parentheses followed by a period.

“In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits,” begins John
Updike’s short story “A & P.”

Sometimes you may just want to quote words or a phrase, not a complete sentence, from a text. In this case, you simply put the word or phrase in quotation marks.

In order to execute his revenge on the King and his court, Poe’s disabled character Hop Frog “encased [them] in tight-fitting stockinet shirts and drawers. They were then saturated with tar.” Later, Hop Frog sets them ablaze.

Notice, also, in this example that it was necessary to add the pronoun “them” in brackets in order for the sentence to make sense. At times, you find it necessary to add a pronoun, insert a missing word, or even change the tense of a verb. When you do so, place the added word or amended parts of a word in brackets.

If you are quoting material that is more than four typed lines long, you begin the quote on a new line, indented one inch from the margin. Each line of the quote is also indented one inch. Do not use quotation marks with an indented quote. You can either use a colon to introduce the quote or no punctuation. Double space throughout the quote. Unlike quotes that occur within the text, with an indented quote, the parenthetical reference occurs after the period at the end of the quote; it is not followed by a period.

In Toni Cade Bambara’s short story “The Lesson,” the main character

begins contemplating the consequences of the expensive toys she saw while on a field trip to FAO Schwartz. She thinks

Thirty-five dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen's boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Granddaddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars would pay the rent and the piano bill too. Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1000 for toy sailboats? What kind of work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it? We are is who we are, Miss Moore always pointin out. But it don't necessarily have to be that way, she always adds then waits for somebody to say that poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie and don't none of us know what kind of pie she talking about in the first place. (4)

Although she begins to contemplate the social and economic plight of her family, in the end, she brushes off this realization.

Citing from Poetry

You may quote one to three lines of poetry by placing the line(s) in quotation marks within the text of your paper. Separate lines of poetry using a slash mark (/). Leave a space on each side of the slash. In parentheses place the line numbers of verse you've quoted.

Emily Dickinson begins her poem "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—" with her characteristic use of punctuation and capitalization: "The Brain—is wider than the Sky-- / For—put them side by side-- / The one

the other will contain" (1-3).

When citing more than three lines of poetry, begin the verse on a new line, indented one inch. Double-space the indented quote. As with novels and short stories, do not use quotation marks and place the parenthetical reference with line numbers after the period or other mark of punctuation. Reproduce the lines as they appear in the poem, breaking for a new line as the poem does even if there is more space left on your line. If the line of poetry is too long to fit, you continue on the next line, but indent an additional three spaces. When beginning the following line, come back to your original one-inch indentation. If you begin your quote somewhere in the line other than the beginning, indent the first line the approximate number of spaces to replicate where in the line you are beginning.

Poet Langston Hughes broke with African-American poetic tradition by writing about jazz and racial issues and by using the language of the common person instead of lofty literary language. These lines from his work "Lenox Avenue: Midnight" reflect both his choice of topic and his use of language:

The rhythm of life

Is a jazz rhythm,

Honey.

The gods are laughing at us. (1-4)

If the poem uses unusual spacing, try to replicate that spacing as close as possible in your indented quotation.

Poet Nazik Al-Mala'ika uses unusual spacing to structure his poem "I Am."

The night asks me who I am

Its impenetrable black, its unquiet secret

I am

Its lull rebellious. (1-4)

Citing from Drama

If you quote from a play, you will most likely be quoting dialogue from two or more characters. After indenting one inch, you must include each character's name in all capital letters followed by a period. Start the speech on the same line. Begin each subsequent line of the character's speech indented an additional three spaces. When a new character begins speaking, return your indentation to the original one-inch indentation mark and follow the same process as before, indenting subsequent lines three spaces. Other formatting follows those outlined in short stories and poetry.

Willy Loman, the protagonist of Arthur Miller's *Death of Salesman*, loses his travelling salesman job, beginning Willy's downward spiral:

WILLY. Howard, are you firing me?

HOWARD. I think you need a good long rest, Willy.

WILLY. Howard—

HOWARD. And when you feel better, come back, and we'll see if we can work something out.

WILLY. But I gotta earn money, Howard. I'm in no position to--

PEER COMMENTARY

Exchange the working draft of your paper with a classmate or with a peer group. Respond to these questions fully in writing.

1. Read through the draft once for a first impression. What is your overall impression of this draft after your initial reading?

2. Now read through the text again more slowly. In your own words, summarize the author's main claim. Does the author "prove" his/her point by the end of the essay? Is this claim reasonable and logical given your understanding of the original literary text? Explain. Does the claim seem outrageous or completely off base? If so, why?
3. Does the writer use effective evidence from the story to support his/her claim? Are there places where more evidence is needed to support the claim? If so, note those places. Has the writer used the evidence appropriately? In other words, has the writer accurately reflected the text author's intent? Have any quotes been taken out of context? Does the writer provide sufficient context for the quoted material to make sense?
4. Is the paper organized logically? Do the points lead smoothly from one to the next? Are there any big leaps of logic that the writer makes? If so, where are they?
5. Has the writer integrated quotes into the text appropriately? If not, note spots where the writer needs to do more.
6. Did the writer strike an effective balance between providing context for the evidence and plot summary? (Remember, an effective literary analysis does not rely on plot summary.)
7. Has the writer followed MLA documentation appropriately?
8. What suggestions do you have for this writer to improve the literary analysis?

REVISING

Before revising your literary analysis, reflect on your essay now that you've had some distance from it. What do you think is the strongest part of your literary analysis? Why? What do you think is the weakest part? Why? Think about your claim: Is it reasonable and logical? Are you making a point you believe in or are you just trying to fulfill the assignment? Are you making the argument you want to make? If not, how can you revise your claim to reflect this new idea?

Now read through the peer commentary carefully. Do you agree with the critique your peer responder provided? What areas do you think need the most revision? Do you disagree with your peer responder on any points? Why?

Consider the following points as you revise:

- Is your claim clearly understood by the readers? How can you make your claim clearer?
- Is your essay organized logically? Are your points connected with strong transitions to help the reader follow your argument?
- Do you use sufficient evidence to support your claim? Do you need more evidence?
- Have you integrated your quoted material smoothly into the text?
- Did you follow proper MLA format?
- Read your essay aloud. Are there any sentences that seem difficult to get through or confusing?

CONNECTIONS AND COHERENCE

As you revise your essay, you'll want to pay attention to the coherence of your argument: Does the argument "hang together"? One technique for examining the coherency of your literary analysis is to write down the first and last sentence of each paragraph on a piece of paper. Now look at each "paragraph." Do the first and last lines of each paragraph relate in some way to one another? Does the last sentence of one paragraph advance or lead into the idea of the following paragraph? If there are gaps at any point along the way, you'll want to examine that particular paragraph in more detail. Perhaps you'll need to revise the ending sentence of the paragraph, or perhaps the paragraph is out of order and should be moved elsewhere in the essay. You can also use this technique to look for connections or transitions between paragraphs. You may want to rely on techniques discussed throughout this textbook in the "Connections and Coherence" sections for ways to transition from one idea to another.

WRITING A LITERARY ANALYSIS PAPER AS AN IN-CLASS ASSIGNMENT

So far this chapter has talked about how to write an out-of-class literary analysis, one on which you will work for several days, planning, drafting, and revising. However, sometimes you will be asked to write a literary analysis paper under pressure, either in-class or as part of an essay exam. Many of the strategies discussed in this chapter apply to writing an in-class literary analysis: You will still need a strong claim supported by evidence from the text, effectively organized and presented. If you are writing an in-class paper, though, you most likely will not have access to the literary text about which you are writing. How do you incorporate specific evidence from the text into your analysis? How do you write an effective paper in such a short period of time? This section will offer strategies for writing an in-class literary analysis.

Preparing to Write

In order to write a strong in-class literary analysis, you will still need to engage in the reading strategies discussed earlier in this chapter. Just as for any exam or pressure situation, you must be prepared. If you have read carefully, taken notes, and thought about the text ahead of time, you should be familiar with and prepared for any question that your instructor may provide you. It is also important that you read the exam carefully and answer the question or prompt that you have been given.

Likewise, you should approach the in-class paper much the same way you would prepare for an essay exam. Review the chapter in your text on how to prepare for an essay exam for tips and strategies for successfully approaching an essay exam.

Writing a Good In-Class Literary Analysis

To write an in-class literary analysis, follow the guidelines for writing any essay exam. The most important points to keep in mind are:

- Get to your thesis quickly and efficiently.
- Provide plenty of specific details from the text to support your claim.
- Write a conclusion—even a brief one—to tie your main points together.

The following student sample was written by Carolyn Chipperfield. The question she was given was to compare/contrast the theme of death in three poems that had been read in class. This essay was written as part of a longer exam for a class. In total, she had 75 minutes to complete the entire exam. Since the essay portion counted 50 points (out of 100 total), she budgeted her time so that she spent approximately half of her time on the essay portion. This was a closed-book exam, which means that she could not use her book or notes.

Everyone seems to have a different interpretation of death. Some think it is a depressing time due to the loss, and others feel it is a joyous time because of heaven and life after death. These many different perspectives on death are discussed very well in Frost's "After Apple Picking," Keats's "To Autumn," and Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." Through images, diction, symbolism and other literary devices, these poets show death in different views.

Frost conveys one of his themes, being the fragility of life, in his poem, "After Apple Picking." In this poem he shows a person who has "tired feet" from apple-picking. He is ready to quit. This symbolizes that he is accepting death and is ready to go on to better things. It talks about how he has picked "thousands and thousands of apples," thus showing the many things that he has done throughout his lifetime. However, there are yet a few things that he needs to do, "and there may be two or three apples left to pick," before he dies. It also mentions how there is one bucket left to fill. However, the narrator doesn't seem too concerned to get that bucket filled; he is ready to quit. The narrator also mentions about the cellars full of cider stored up for winter. I think that this is symbolizing that the narrator has done many things in his lifetime to lay up treasures in heaven. He is ready to go on to better, more restful things. In the winter, there is no apple picking that has to be done. Similarly, in the winter, or death time of the narrator's life, he doesn't have to do anything, because he has already lived and done "thousands and thousands" of things. The image of the apples is a very good image for this poem also. Apples symbolize opportunity and knowledge, which the narrator has.

"To Autumn" by Keats is also a poem that shows a person who is very accepting about death and old age. Autumn is the maturing, or old age, time of life, which is personified in this poem as a beautiful and friendly old man. The narrator is talking about the beauty of autumn and old age. "The plump gourds and blooming hazelnuts," are some images that are used to show this. The narrator says how he loves to watch the cider oozing from the trees. Overall, he is saying how old age is a glorious time of life that everyone should enjoy. It is a relaxing

time. There are many people who don't see the beauty of the "green leaves falling off the trees," but the narrator here is living this time of his life to the fullest.

There is also a feeling of acceptance in Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." In the beginning of the poem, Dickinson portrays death as a kind gentleman who is picking her up in a carriage to go for a nice ride. Along with personifying death, she also personifies Immortality, which is riding along with them. "Death" and "Immortality" are both capitalized to imply these human-like characteristics. She talks about how Death took her past the "school children" and the "gazing grain" and the "setting sun." This shows a very peaceful and enjoyable ride through the different stages of life. However, Dickinson switches her view about death towards the end of the poem. All of a sudden she realizes that he is taking her with him to the grave, "the house in the ground." This causes her to start fearing Death. Images that convey this tone that Dickinson uses in her poem are "for only Gossamer my gown" and on "only Tippet my Tulle." She suddenly realizes that her gown is very thin and she probably feels naked and helpless. At the end of the poem she says that it was a long time ago that death nearly took her, but it feels like only a day. I believe that this shows again that it was a very memorable experience that she couldn't forget very easily. It was both wonderful and frightening to her.

It is very evident in these three poems that the speakers had their own individual perspectives of death and old age. Through images and symbolism, these aspects are revealed to us. Both Keats and Frost showed the acceptance of death, while Dickinson shows both acceptance and fear of it. Death is a very inevitable thing that everyone must face at some time in their life. Therefore, I believe that the acceptance of death is a wonderful and needed viewpoint.

Now read the three poems on which she based her exam.

Robert Frost

“After Apple-Picking”

c. 1914

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap

As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe it coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

John Keats
"To Autumn"

c. 1819

I
Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,

And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

II
Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting carelessly on the granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cider-press, with patient look,

Thou watchest the last ooziings hours by hours.

III

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,--
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river swallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft,
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Emily Dickinson

“Because I could not stop for Death ”

c. 1863

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For his Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
we passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a house that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—‘tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were Toward Eternity

Exercise

Read through Chipperfield's essay again. This time underline specific references to each poem that she used. How do the references (either paraphrases, quotes, or summaries) support her argument?

Looking at the Genre of In-Class Literary Analysis

Because she didn't have the text in front of her when she wrote the paper, Chipperfield had to rely on her memory to provide the specific support for the essay. However, she does use many details from each poem to add support to her claim. It makes sense that she didn't directly quote entire lines from the poems because that would be hard to do without the text. Likewise, she did not have to cite line numbers for the poems. As you can see, though, she did refer specifically to poems in many places. For instance, in the second paragraph, she mentions the speaker's "'tired feet' from apple picking," how he is "ready to quit," because he "has picked 'thousands and thousands of apples'." She mentions the bucket left to fill before the speaker stops apple picking. These are specific details because they come directly from the poem itself.

Look at the following re-write of the first part of Chipperfield's second paragraph:

Frost conveys one of his themes, being the fragility of life, in his poem "After Apple Picking." In this poem, he shows a speaker who is tired from the job that he has been doing. He is ready to quit. This symbolizes that he is accepting of death and is ready to go on to better things. He has harvested much, which shows what he has done in his lifetime. However, there may be a few things that he needs to do before he dies.

How does this re-write differ from the original? It is certainly much less specific; all of the references from the text have been omitted or barely mentioned. As a reader, do you get a sense that the writer has read and thought about the poems? Do you accept the claim being made? It is much more difficult to buy into the claim since the writer is not using any specific details from the poem to show that her position is valid and reasonable. It is for this reason that it is important to have specific details in your in-class paper; otherwise, you have not proved your claim.

Remember that an in-class or essay exam is to demonstrate your mastery of the material. In order to show that you have a grasp on the material, you must refer to it in your writing.

WRITING INVENTORY

The assignments that have been described here ask you to take on the role of literary critic as you offer your own interpretation and analysis of a literary text. Reflect back to your reading journal or notes. What ideas seem to creep up time and again about the work you've chosen? Why did this idea or point interest you in the first place? What did you find particularly engaging about this story? Did you focus your essay around this idea? Why or why not? How might you weave this interest into your paper if you haven't already?

A CLOSING NOTE

Certainly, it is not fair to say that your literary analysis is of the same level as a literary critic who has spent years studying texts, their production, and interpretation. However, as a novice literary critic, your voice is still important to the on-going conversation about the text. After all, literature requires readers. Together with your class, consider posting your essays to a website or beginning your own chat room to discuss the work(s) you've read. These are two accessible forums for adding interpretations to conversations.