ILLINOIS VALLEY
COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Tutoring and Writing Center

Writing a Literary Analysis

A literary analysis asks you to closely examine the features of a given piece of writing and to discuss how those features enhance your understanding of the text. In essence, you are creating an argument (interpretation) about the writing itself by focusing on particular textual elements. A literary analysis can take many forms, but many will answer questions such as the following:

- What is the meaning of the story?

- How do the textual components work together to create the meaning?

- How do the concerns or subject of the text relate to a larger social, political, historical, stylistic, or religious context?

- What is the significance of the choices the author makes in the writing?

Follow these steps when preparing to write your analysis:

1. Study the story. Look for the elements of literary analysis listed below. Closely read the text (several times, if possible) and annotate it.

2. Analyze the elements. Choose those most relevant for your assignment. Consider how these disparate elements affect the text as a whole.

3. Interpret the elements. Why did the author choose them? How do they affect your understanding of a character, the plot, the social context, the meaning, etc.?

Common Elements of a Literary Analysis

- **Character**: an actor within the story; usually a person, but sometimes an animal or object

- **Characterization**: the ways in which the personality of a character is revealed by the author (e.g. actions, dialogue, physical depiction)

- **Figurative language**: simile, metaphor, personification, and hyperbole; all are different ways to draw imaginative comparisons or deepen your understanding of a textual element

- **Imagery**: a mental picture the author draws in the mind of the reader through language, often sensory language

- **Plot**: the series of events in the story, which may be related in linear or non-linear fashion •

- **Point of view**: the viewpoint through which the story is told; the "eyes" or "voice" of the story. Some common points of view are first- or third-person narration, omniscient narrator, and unreliable narrator

- **Setting**: the location(s) of the story
- **Mood/atmosphere**: feelings evoked in the reader by the author (e.g. suspenseful, joyful)
- **Structure**: the way the story is built by the author (e.g. linear, non-linear, flashbacks, changing narration, etc.)   society
- **Symbol**: an object or element of the story that has a metaphorical meaning beyond its literal meaning; an object or element that represents some other, deeper meaning ○ Motif: a repeated symbol that gains special significance through the repetition
- **Tone**: the attitude of the text toward the subject, often conveyed through point of view (e.g. sarcastic, worshipful)
- **Theme**: the overall meaning of the work; the lesson the reader can take from the story
- **Conflict**: a struggle between opposing forces in the text; common literary conflicts are person vs. self, person vs. person, person vs. nature, and person vs. society
- **Author's life and times**: the biographical information on the author, which may inform your understanding of her or his work; the era in which the work was produced, which may be reflected in the concerns of the text

Thesis statements for literary analyses should include the author and title of the work you are studying. The thesis statement should preview which elements you will discuss and tie them into the larger meaning you have uncovered. Below, you will find some sample thesis statements that would work well for such an essay:

- In "The Wind of Evening" by Julia DiGiacamo, the author uses symbolism, structure, and setting to convey the theme of the loss of innocence.
- Margot Gosht-Rampling's novel *Hills, Leaves, and Leaving* demonstrates to the reader through her characters the uncertainty women faced in colonial America.
- While the structure of Elliot Tesol's "Hard Jobs" is complex, the message is simple: people should work to live, not live to work.

Notice that each of these statements is *debatable*; one could reasonably provide another viewpoint or interpretation that does not exactly align with your argument. In a literary analysis, there is no one "right" or "wrong" answer; **instead, the most important facet is that your argument (interpretation) is supported by textual evidence that reinforces your claims.**

Remember to narrow the **scope** of your thesis in an appropriate way. For example, in a three-page essay, you probably don't have space to discuss every symbol in a novel. However, you could choose the three most relevant or striking to discuss in that amount of space. Think about how to broaden or narrow your focus based on the length requirement for the paper.

Use the following **body paragraph structure** in a literary analysis:

- Start the paragraph with a **claim** about one of the literary elements. This claim should support your thesis statement.

- Develop your paragraph with 2-4 pieces of **evidence** and **analysis**. Draw the evidence from the story you are studying (and from secondary sources, if required). Use properly cited quotations, paraphrases, and summaries as evidence. Analyze each piece of evidence in your own words, using logical reasoning and connecting it back to your claim.

- Wrap up your ideas (and possibly prepare to transition to the next paragraph) in your final sentence.