Content and Literature Papers: Analyzing Literature

Your instructor wants you to be able to analyze the content of literary works. In most cases, students spend more time describing characters and setting, as well as summarizing the various elements of plot, than analyzing the meaning behind the piece, exploring key characters’ personalities, or understanding the motives for their actions. Here are some tips for writing analysis rather than description.

**Narrator/Speaker:** Ask yourself the following questions:
- What sort of person is the speaker of this poem and how can you tell?
- Who tells the story and how would it differ if it were told from another perspective?

**Plot:**
- Interpret the plot points.
  - What external and internal conflicts can you list?
  - Which conflicts seem major, which minor? What is the function of the major (minor) conflict?
  - How is suspense created?
  - What is the turning point of the action?
  - Can any of the conflicts be generalized? Of what are they symbolic?

**Structure:** Look at the structural elements of the work. In a poem, for instance, identify the divisions and ask what the author is trying to accomplish with the different stanzas. Students may also try and identify rhyme schemes to help find meaning within a poem.

**Interpretation:** Instead of focusing on “who did what,” make an effort to understand “why” certain characters behave the way they do.
- How do you learn about the characters in this work? Through their actions? Speech?
  - Thoughts?
  - Are the characters fully drawn or one-dimensional, static or dynamic?
  - What does their presence add to the work?
  - What do other characters or the narrator suggest about the main character?
  - How do actions define the main character’s integrity or inner strength?

**Setting:** Pay attention to location, time period, and historical context.
- How does the setting function in the work?
- Does the setting help readers to understand the character(s) in a literary work? Its theme? Its plot?

**Language:** Think about the words that the author puts in the mouths and minds of characters.
- What effect does a character’s words have on your interpretation of a literary text?
- What do you learn about the narrator (speaker, character) from the kind of language he or she uses?
- How does one character’s language differ from another’s in this work, and what is the significance of this difference?
- Would the meaning of the text change if different words were used?
- How do the sounds, rhythms, and rhymes contribute to the sense of a poem?
- What patterns of imagery can you locate and what do they add to the work?
