# L i t e r a t u r e   A n a l y s i s   B r a i n s t o r m   Q u e s t i o n s

Literature analysis examines selected elements of fiction or poetry to uncover relationships and meanings that may not be obvious on a first reading. Usually a paper focuses on one or two of these elements.

## Themes & ideas

A theme expresses (or implies) a belief that the author is trying to impart, usually about life, society, or human nature.

- What is the story's pervasive idea(s) about life, society, or human nature?
- How is the theme (or themes) implied?
- Is there a character (or narrator) who voices the theme?
- Does the theme relate to current thinking in history, science, ethics, economics, politics, or something else?
- Is the theme similar to or different from themes in other works?

For example, here is a claim about theme in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables: The theme of redemption is suggested by Hugo's third-person narrator when he says, "Those are rare who fall without becoming degraded."* One claim about theme in Michael Crighton's *Jurassic Park* looks like this: *It's the mathematician Ian Malcolm who expresses one of the central ideas of Jurassic Park: Life finds a way.*

## Characterization

Characters may be round, (fully-developed and believable), or they may be flat and intended only as foils to stronger characters. They may be dynamic or static. They may be protagonist or antagonist. (And protagonists may be "good" or "bad"—you don't necessarily have to feel sympathetic toward them.)

- Are the characters fully developed and believable, or not? How so?
- Do the characters learn, change, and evolve over time, or not?
- Which character seems most responsible for moving the action forward? Which characters oppose this?
- Does a character seem to embody a central theme or idea?
- To what extent does the setting (geography, weather, inexorable social forces) act like a character?

One writer's claim about characterization in *The Celestine Prophecy* is *It delivers utterly flat, undeveloped characters; they lack personal histories, convincing flaws, believable aspirations, or anything at all to recommend them to the reader as objects of interest.* The following writer discusses characterization in Shakespeare: *Lear elevates the storm to the level of another character when he cries, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!"*

## Point of view

Stories are usually told from an outsider perspective (third person—he, she, they) or an insider perspective (first person—I). (Second-person [you are the narrator!] stories are rare.) Narrators can be omniscient (all-knowing, all-seeing, and understanding all the strands of the story), or they can be limited in their knowledge. They can be reliable or unreliable.

- Whose voice tells the story? Is the narrator a character in the story, or a detached observer?
- Does the narrator know everything, or is his/her knowledge limited? What is the effect?
- Is the narrator reliable, or is his/her judgment questionable? What effect does this have?
- What is the social status of the narrator? Is the narrator biased? Informed or uninformed? How do you know?
- If the story is in 1st (or 2nd) person, what effect does this have?

Here is an observation about point of view in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Telltale Heart": *A crazed first person narrator contributes to the growing sense of agitation and claustrophobia in "The Telltale Heart."* In Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning*, the narrator is unreliable—yet omniscient: *Tan's "ghost narrator," Bibi, evinces godlike omniscience as well as all the foibles and prejudices of the once-living Bibi.*

## Tone

Tone reveals the author's attitude toward and emotional connection with the subject. Describe tone using adjectives, like *serious, lighthearted, brooding, playful, critical, optimistic, comic, claustrophobic….*

- How would you describe the author's attitude toward his subject? What words and lines make you think that?
- How do images and choice of details contribute to tone?
- How does connotation contribute to tone?
- How does story structure and sentence structure contribute to tone?

Using the dialogue, this writer remarks on the author's emotional connection in *Tortilla Flat*: *The characters' bantering dialogue reveals Steinbeck's affection for them, even while it seems likely their fate may be tragic.* The following writer comments about how sentence structure contributes to tone in Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*: *The staccato repetition of the short, bullet-like phrases that go through Brian's mind as the plane is about to crash contributes to the tone of catastrophic alarm: "Going to die, Brian thought. Going to die, gonna die, gonna die—his whole brain screamed it in the sudden silence. Gonna die."*

## Symbolism

A symbol is a recurring image that represents something else in the story, either by resemblance or association.

- Is there a recurring image that seems to represent something else?
- How does the symbol relate to the theme of the story?
- Does the symbol reveal or represent attributes of a character?
- Is the symbol used to conceal something?
- How do the characters respond to the symbol?

This analysis of Tolkien explains the symbolism of the One Ring: *The One Ring symbolizes the ultimate entrapment: domination, hubris, addiction, and slavery; the principal characters are simultaneously attracted and repelled.*

## Style and diction

Style includes many choices—words, sentence structure and length, figurative language, level of diction—that together create an author's voice.

- Does the author use words that are concrete and familiar? Why? What is the effect?
- Does the author use abstract or unusual words? Why? What is the effect?
- Which words have positive or negative connotations? What is the effect?
- Does the author seem to favor shorter or longer sentences? What is the effect?
- Does the author use rhythm, rhyme, alliteration or other poetic devices like personification or figurative language? What is the effect?
- What level of diction does the author use—formal or informal? Dialect? Slang? Does the level of diction represent a particular social, political, or cultural perspective?

For example, this writer connects sentence structure and characterization: *Steinbeck uses short, simple clauses alone or in strings of run-ons and adds Spanish endearments to suggest the childlike naiveté of his characters in* Tortilla Flat. Another writer makes a point about word connotation in Orwell's *1984: The warm connotations of the phrase "Big Brother" contrast with the cold, inescapable invasion of privacy that his image represents to the citizens of Oceania.* The writer of an analysis

of figurative language in Stevenson's *Treasure Island* has this to say: *Jim says, "Mutiny, it was plain, hung over us like a thundercloud," which reinforces the sense of looming, electric disaster that prevails throughout the book.*

## Structure

Structure is how the parts of a story are put together and for what effect on the reader's experience: in what sequence events occur, where rising or falling action begins, whether there is foreshadowing, what is the pace of events, where the climax occurs, how things are resolved or whether they are left unresolved.

- Is the storytelling sequential, or does the author use flashbacks or stream-of-consciousness?
- How many crises occur during the rising action? At what point does the main crisis occur?
- Does the story begin with the first crisis, or does it start somewhere in the middle? What is the effect?
- Is there a "hero's journey" through some kind of death to some sort of rebirth?
- Is there a resolution to the conflict?

For Falkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, this author says, *The flashbacks and stream-of-consciousness keep the reader constantly struggling to make sense of the whirl of events and images, like a window into Benjy's own world.*

## Context and purpose

Context includes the time and place from which the story emerges, the environment of ideas that surround the issues, and the events that prompted the story or led to its publication. Closely connected is the purpose of a piece—is it a satire? A critique? A memoir? A journal entry?

- In what historical era was the story written? What was going on?
- From what place or culture did the story emerge? What values were predominant?
- Were there controversial issues being widely discussed at the time and place of the story's origin?
- Does the story represent one side of a broader discussion in its society of origin?
- Was there a particular triggering event that encouraged the author to write the story?
- Is the story intended to satirize a social situation? Criticize it? Suggest a solution?
- Who was the story created for? What effect did the author intend?

This author examines context and purpose in "A Modest Proposal": *Swift's "modest proposal" to resolve Ireland's economic doldrums by eating the surplus babies produced by the poor emerged in the context of the Industrial Revolution, which made of poor laborers a mere economic commodity to be used to achieve greater production and profitability. Moreover, Swift's parody of the progressive proposals of his time was preceded by an earlier, more serious proposal by Bernard Mandeville which advocated harnessing the natural depravity of humankind to improve the economy.*

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