

A Guide to Reading Literature ENGL 2121: British Literature I – Dr. Brian Ray

Based on the website of Professor John Lye (<http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.html>)

Go beyond just looking at and enjoying the effect of the words.

Go beyond the literal, entertaining value of literature.

Attempt to analyze what is being read. Literary analysis begins with asking questions about the work and exploring possible answers to those questions.

An analysis explains **what** a work of literature means, and **how** it means it.

It is essentially a statement and an explanation of an interpretation of the overall meaning or theme of a work of literature.

Literature is created by the writer with a purpose: communication of some idea to the reader.

Reasons for analyzing literature:

1. To achieve a deeper understanding and a fuller appreciation of the literature -- you learn to see more, to uncover or create richer, denser, more interesting meanings.
2. Analysis can lead to a more astute and powerful use of the tools of meaning with regard to language usage on the reader's part.
3. To be aware of the cultural delineations of a work, its ideological elements. Art is not eternal and timeless but is situated historically, socially, intellectually, written and read at particular times, with particular intents, under particular historical conditions, with particular cultural, personal, gender, racial, class, and other perspectives. This can be of particular use in understanding our own culture and time, but has historical applications as well.
4. Through close reading and through reflection, the reader comes to have a sense both of meaning and of the different kinds of understanding there can be about matters of importance to human life.

I: Critical Analysis of Poetry

How to analyze a poem

Here are some general ideas to help you begin to read and analyze a poem:

1. look at the title
2. read the poem for the major indicators of its meaning -- setting, topic, voice (the person who is speaking)
3. read the ending of the poem -- decide where it "gets to"
4. divide the poem into parts: try to understand what the organization is, how the poem proceeds, and what elements or principles guide this organization (is there a reversal, a climax, a sequence of some kind, sets of oppositions?)
5. pay attention to the tone of the poem -- in brief, its attitude to its subject, as that is revealed in intonation, nuance, the kind of words used, and so forth
6. read the poem out loud, trying to project its meaning in your reading

Elements of analysis

Here then are some questions to apply to your analysis in order to see how the poem is making its meaning:

1. What is the genre, or form, of the poem?
2. Who is speaking in the poem? (NOTE: This is rarely, if ever, the voice of the poet directly.)
3. What is the argument, thesis, or subject of the poem

4. What is the structure of the poem?
5. How does the poem make use of setting?
6. How does the poem use imagery?
7. Are there key statements or conflicts in the poem that appear to be central to its meaning?
8. How does the sound of the poetry contribute to its meaning?
9. Examine the use of language.
10. Can you see any ways in which the poem refers to, uses or relies on previous writing?
11. What qualities does the poem evoke in the reader?
12. What is your historical and cultural distance from the poem?
13. What are the world-view and the ideology of the poem?

II: Analyzing fiction

Fiction is a narrative, with characters, setting, a narrator, and represents “the real world” in some fashion.

- 1. Plot:** a certain arrangement of events which have a relation to one another – to create significance, raise the level of generality, extend or complicate the meaning
- 2. Character:** explores aspects of human experience – depict particular traits of human nature with significance to the kinds of characters used and to their relation to each other –can vary from the particular/unique to the most general and symbolic
- 3. Setting:** may have particular culturally coded significance -- can add significance to the narrative.
- 4. The Narrator:** someone (or more than one) who tells the story, from a particular point of view, with a particular sense of distance or closeness, with different possibilities of knowledge and interest.
- 5. Figurative language:** tends to be used to characterize the sensibility and understanding of characters as well as to establish thematic and tonal continuities and significance.
- 6. Representation of reality:** might be very concrete and adhere closely to time and place, representing every-day events, or it may represent psychological or moral or spiritual aspects through symbols, improbable events, and other devices –it requires exclusion and meaningful relation to each other of narrative elements.
- 6. World-view:** represents experience in some way, makes claims about the nature of the world – the structure of values that underlie the fiction; the distances and similarities between the world of the fiction and the world that the reader inhabits; and the selections and exclusions of the narrative in representing human experience.

Some Elements of Analysis of Fiction

A. The language:

- a. What kind of language is used?
 - abstract or concrete language
 - language of emotions or of reason
 - language of control or language of openness
- b. What are the connotations of the language?
- c. What aspects of feeling are supported or created by the sound of the language?

B. Sentence structure:

- a. Stresses and rhythm of the sentences
- b. Length of the sentences
- c. Repetitions, parallels, balances, and so forth
- d. Use of punctuation, and how it makes the sentences flow

C. Imagery and setting: use of figurative language:

- a. metaphors, similes and analogies
- b. motifs: recurring images

- c. setting: sense of realism? mood? states of mind or feelings?
- D. Characterization** ideas, feelings, values, attitudes, social status, sensibilities, irony, wit, good or evil, optimistic or pessimistic, romantic or not romantic
- E. Genre & Tradition** a satire, a comedy, a tragedy, a romance, social comment, an exploration of an idea? Is it in a certain sub-genre like a detective novel, science fiction, etc.? Is it an allegory or a satire, is it realistic or more symbolic? How does this genre, sub-genre or tradition tend to use setting, characters, language, mood or tone? Does this one fit in?