

PART III

# ANALYZING WRITING

# A MODERNIST TEACHES ANALYSIS

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## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this chapter, we focus on analyzing literature. Here, you will learn what analysis is, both as a way of approaching literature and as a practice you can adopt in your argumentative essays. You will learn the steps towards literary analysis, which will serve as guidelines to get you started with literary analysis and some strategies for analyzing writing beyond just interpretation. By the end of this chapter, you will have a better understanding of what proper literary analysis looks like and how to conduct analysis yourself.

## Key Terms

Below are some key terms from the field of literary criticism that should help you when conducting your own analysis:

- Meaning
- Function
- Interpretation

When I was studying literature in college, my professors would often write on my papers in bright red ink: *Needs More Analysis*. Teachers had explained to me that to prove an idea I had to (1) make a claim, (2) provide evidence, (3) and analyze. This confused me, since I thought I had proven my points fine enough with evidence alone—after all, offering evidence is how we show our ideas are correct. If I want to prove that it’s raining outside, all I need to do is draw the curtain and show you; surely, I don’t need to “analyze” the way the drops are falling on the pavement outside, do I?

What I later learned is that even though this is true for a lot of scenarios, it isn’t always true when we’re dealing with language. Language isn’t concrete—it’s mutable, contingent, ever-changing, and ever-evolving. Language is contextual and changes based on who is speaking, who is listening, and what, where, when, why, and how words are spoken. For this reason, language needs investigation, it needs unpacking, it needs thoughtful consideration—in other words: it needs analysis.

Throughout this chapter, we’ll look at some examples of successful analysis as well as occasions where analysis falls a bit short of its goal. And by focusing on literary writing, we’ll see language in some of its most creative forms. As you’ll shortly see, creative works can sometimes trick us into thinking we’ve analyzed when all we’ve really done is interpret. Interpreting in order to understand writing is immensely important, but when we then properly analyze it, we get an even richer array of interesting insight and meaning from the literature we read.

## Defining Literary Analysis

Analysis is the process of breaking down something complex into its most basic parts to better understand it in its entirety. In other words, analysis is the act of dissecting, scrutinizing closely, and then building back up—but this time, with the new knowledge we have about that thing. If I handed you a Rubik’s cube, for instance, and asked you to tell me how it works, you might say something like, “the sides rotate and spin in different ways to allow you to line up the color-coded squares.” This is technically true, but it answers *what* a Rubik’s cube does, not *how* it works. To see *how* it works, you’d be better off opening it up and seeing the internal mechanisms. Break it down, scrutinize it, and then build it back up.

When we analyze literature, we’re really asking the same question: *how does this work?* As we’ll see later in this chapter, sometimes we get caught up in what a work of literature *is*—or what it *means*—and neglect to consider how it functions, which is the ultimate goal of literary analysis. Let’s take a book a lot of us have read, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and consider one of its most memorable images, the green light across the water. A perennial question that plagues readers of *The Great Gatsby* is “what does the green light mean?” to which perhaps the most common answer is “the American Dream.” This is certainly true, but when we expand our inquiry to ask “and how does it function in the novel?” we get much more interesting answers. Here, we might say something like, “the light’s distance and Gatsby’s longing for it serve to critique the illusion of social mobility and the rhetoric of the American Dream. Gatsby can always see the light, but it is always out of reach.” This insight is far richer and more interesting than merely pointing out the symbolic meaning of the light, and it represents an example of great literary analysis.

Analysis is also, of course, a thing. In its noun form, *an analysis* can be your argument, your ideas, your essay, your paragraph, etc. In your own writing, you will likely have sections that you consider “analysis” sections—passages of your own writing dedicated to the work of unpacking and scrutinizing the literature you’re exploring. These pieces supplement and complement the other pieces of your writing, like your thesis statements, summaries, evidentiary support, and such.

Like many things, there is no right or wrong way to get to an analysis of writing. In fact, sometimes the most unique approaches can result in the sharpest analysis. That said, a few steps to keep in mind will help when approaching and conducting your analysis.

To conduct analysis and present it in your own work, you should:

1. Describe or summarize what you see.
2. Locate and point out important details (evidence).
3. Discuss those details and show valuable insights.

The most effective thing you can do in a literary analysis is point out how one element of the work has the potential to change our overall understanding of it as a whole. In literary scholarship, we call this close reading, and it’s the process of rigorous, tightly-focused analysis—sometimes of just a phrase or a few lines—that newly shapes our understanding of the piece of literature. A great section of analysis in an essay will summarize or gesture towards specific passages or moments from the text. Then, the writer will narrow in on specific details that they think have the potential to contribute to their insight. Finally, those details will be carefully scrutinized for how they contribute to the text’s larger purpose.

For instance, in the *Great Gatsby* example from above, we might say that our analysis of the green light as an indictment of the illusion of social mobility changes our overall understanding of the novel and its characters. Now, every time we see Gatsby staring at the green light, we know not only is he longing for what it represents, but the scene is now tinged with a cruel irony, as we know the larger function of the light. We don’t just see a man longing for success, we see a man longing for success within the context of a society in the throes of economic crisis.

## The Problem of “Meaning”

A lot of the time, we are told that the point of analyzing literature is to “find the meaning.” The search for meaning in literature and

art has long been a part of how people approach them when they encounter a text with a critical or scholarly eye. This search for meaning tends to come when literature seems foreign to us, when something about the writing we encounter feels opaque or almost impenetrable. For example, when reading the works from the distant past, contemporary readers like ourselves can often feel alienated by the language. On top of that, throw in poetic and highly stylized writing and the first problem we encounter with literature is quite simply an inability to comprehend what is going on. So, we search for understanding and for meaning.

In literature from the modernist period (roughly 1890-1945), in particular, writers were really interested in how the mundane could also be thought of as hugely consequential (T. S. Eliot famously wrote “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons”). Because of this, some of the greatest literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are impenetrable precisely because they are so mundane. Take Ernest Hemingway’s famous short story, “Hills Like White Elephants,” which is about four pages long and almost entirely dialogue. In this story, we readers are like strangers eavesdropping a conversation two people are having with no context and very few clues to the topic of their veiled discussion. In this story, we readers search for meaning simply because Hemingway seemingly withholds all of it from us on purpose.

But where is the meaning? Is it in the text itself? Is what a story or a poem “means” always already inside the words on the page? If so, then our job is to uncover it, to draw it out, mine it from the difficult passages of the text at hand. But what if meaning is elsewhere? What if, rather than being always already in the pages, meaning is created while we read—or, to be more precise, while we interpret and analyze?

When my copy of *Mrs. Dalloway* sits on my bookshelf, for instance, the shapes made of ink on the pages made of paper are no more “meaningful” than the wood the shelf is made from or the screws holding it together. But when I pick that book up and read it, suddenly I’m bringing to life opportunities for meaning and insight. I’m the one who interprets and analyzes when I interact with a work of literature; but it isn’t a passive practice of opening up and absorbing the work, it’s an active and dynamic relationship between your critical eye and the raw material of the book you’re reading.

There’s nothing wrong with searching for meaning in literature; it’s a wonderful and productive practice. The problem comes only when we stop short of fully-fledged analysis. If we try so hard to figure out what a piece of fiction *means*, we might be reticent to continue our investigation into how it *works*. Here, we need to keep our energy going and move from interpretation into analysis.

## Analysis vs. Interpretation

When we analyze writing—especially poetic, literary works—we run the risk of merely “translating” the writing into something more intelligible or familiar. This is useful, especially when the literature seems foreign to us. Sometimes it seems like we need to take a deeply analytical approach just to break down the language just to better understand what’s going on. This is all well and good, but when we do this, we don’t actually draw any unique meaning from the piece of writing, we just translate it into a different set of terms that are more familiar to us.

In these moments, we confuse analysis with *interpretation*. Though related, and useful when utilized in conjunction with one another, these concepts are distinct. Failing to recognize the differences can lead to an “analysis” that really isn’t. Here, we ought to focus not on the *what*, but on the *how* and *why*.

Sometimes, it’s useful to strip the allure of interpretation away almost entirely to better focus on analysis. This is why modernist literature in particular is a useful field to study for this purpose. Modernist writers wanted to “Make It New,” as Ezra Pound once declared, and so they often experimented with *how* they wrote, even when they often wrote about universal human experiences like love, loss, personal growth and art. Because they focused so much on the *form* of their work, it allows us to more closely analyze its *function*. A useful example here is the very experimental poetry of Gertrude Stein. Here’s a segment from one of her more famously experimental poems, “If I Told Him.”

If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.      Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon  
would would he like it.

If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would

he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him would he like it would he like it if I told him.

In this opening section to her poem, Stein uses words with meanings attached to them, sure—but in her experimental play, we are encouraged to think about things like the poem’s incessant repetition, the musicality of the poem, and the sensation that the formal aspects of the poem evoke in us. This passage is easier to analyze, in a way, because we can more clearly see what Stein is *trying to do* than what she might be *trying to say*. So, in this case, analysis comes more easily. For example, we might say that the repetition of the “if” and the way it’s associated with an action “told him” serves to show the speaker’s anxiety about committing to something. Asking “would he like it” evokes a fear that what the speaker is going to “tell” Napoleon is precarious, that he may like it or he may not. If we replaced all the “Napoleon” references with another name, it might change the meaning of the poem slightly, but the *way* these words are working within the poem wouldn’t change that much. Remember, *how* and *why*, not always only *what*.

## Putting Analysis into Practice

Let’s turn now to another famous work of modernist writing. Take the following lines from T. S. Eliot’s famous poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as example:

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker

One way of analyzing this passage would be to determine what Eliot means by “the eternal Footman.” A quick bit of research informs us that this is a classic—if a bit opaque—reference to death, personified. Because we now know that death is often referred to as “the eternal Footman,” we can conclude our analysis by stating the following:

In this passage, the speaker in Eliot’s poem reveals he is afraid of death. His “greatness flicker[s],” which recalls a candle at risk of blowing out, symbolizing the end of light, or darkness. Additionally, by referencing “the eternal Footman,” which is a euphemism for death itself, the speaker further shows his anxieties about dying.

This is perfectly satisfactory prose, and it serves as great background for analysis in an essay. But let’s take some time to critique it as well. Are there moments here where we get any new insight into the speaker of the poem? Or does the analysis merely reframe and repeat the content of the poem itself? The analysis draws interesting insight from Eliot’s choice to use the word “flicker.” Here, the analysis is sharp, since it contributes new ideas to the poem that Eliot hints at or gestures to, but doesn’t say outright. But the second part, as you might have guessed, is merely translation disguised as analysis. It tells me what a word or phrase means, and then moves on.

Let’s try to analyze this passage again, this time employing more analytical skills while trying to avoid the trap of translation. For this, we’ll think more seriously about the context of the passage and see if there is something more important to latch onto. Throughout “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the speaker is constantly bombarded with his anxiety, self-doubt, confusion, procrastination, and insecurity—and he masks his insecurities with nice clothes. So, knowing at least one aspect of the greater context of the poem, what else in this passage strikes you as potentially important?

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker

As scholars of literature, we tend to fixate on big-picture human issues—love, death, memory, etc. But in this instance, it might be the more mundane elements that are the most significant. In this passage, let’s analyze closely not what “the eternal Footman” represents (death personified), but what he does and his role in this passage. Here’s another example analysis:

In this passage, the speaker of Eliot’s poem relates his insecurities and self-conscious nature to a sense of finality and death. Relating his “greatness” to the “flicker” of a candle suggests he is aware it can be extinguished at any moment. When “the eternal Footman,” or the figure of death, holds him by the coat and “snickers,” Eliot argues that even death can penetrate the speaker’s most prized armor—the clothing he puts on to protect his ego. Here, death mocks his paltry attempts to defend himself from the cruel and judgmental eyes of the world.

In this analysis, we've taken the material Eliot gives us and drawn some greater meaning from it. Rather than merely communicating what the passage "means," we observed and identified details, summarized their appearance in the text, and discussed their significance to the writer's greater artistic project.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what everyday scenarios are we interpreting a situation versus scenarios where we analyze a situation?
2. What formal properties in the Gertrude Stein poem, "If I Told Him," can we highlight and begin to investigate? How do they change our understanding of the poem? And what does it contribute?
3. What questions can we ask ourselves when analyzing literature to help us go beyond interpretation and into the realm of analysis? (For example: "what does this mean?" can become "how does this change our understanding of the work?") What other questions can help us arrive at analysis?

## About the Author



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