

HINTS FOR AN EFFECTIVE LITERARY ANALYSIS



*My soul roams with the sea, the whales'
Home, wandering to the widest corners
Of the world, returning ravenous with desire,
Flying solitary, screaming, exciting me
To the open ocean, breaking oaths*

*On the curve
Of a wave,*

Anonymous,

_____ The origins 700 B.C. – 1066 A.D.



The Seafarer

“TO BE OR NOT TO BE...”

The essential questions in literature

To understand literature, it is necessary that you ask yourself certain questions such as:

- “What is the theme of this story?”
- “Why does the author use this particular type of imagery?”

You are not necessarily reading for pleasure - although it is sincerely hoped you will derive pleasure from your assignments-but for the development of critical analysis skills, so observe the author's **STYLE** and **INTENT** carefully!

1. SHORT STORIES/ NOVEL

THEME

CHARACTER

PLOT

STRUCTURE

SETTING

POINT OF VIEW

LANGUAGE AND STYLE



THEME

The idea or point of a story formulated as a generalization. In American literature, several themes are evident which reflect and define our society. The dominant ones might be:

innocence/experience

life/death

free will/fate

appearance/reality

madness/sanity

love/hate

society/individual

known/unknown

Themes may have a single, instead of a dual nature as well. The theme of a story may be a mid-life crisis or imagination or the duality of humankind (*contradictions*).

CHARACTER

Imaginary people created by the writer

- **protagonist:** Major character at the centre of the story.
- **antagonist:** A character or force that opposes the protagonist.
- **minor character:** Often provides support and illuminates the protagonist.
- **static character:** A character who remains the same.
- **dynamic character:** A character who changes in some important way.
- **characterization:** The means by which writers reveal character.
- **explicit judgment:** Narrator gives facts and interpretive comment.
- **implied judgment:** Narrator gives description; reader make the judgment.

PLOT

The arrangement of ideas and/or incidents that make up a story.

- **Causality:** One event occurs because of another event.
- **Foreshadowing:** A suggestion of what is going to happen.
- **Suspense:** A sense of worry established by the author.
- **Conflict:** Struggle between opposing forces.
- **Exposition:** Background information regarding the setting, characters, plot.
- **Complication or Rising Action:** Intensification of conflict.
- **Crisis:** Turning point; moment of great tension that fixes the action.
- **Resolution/Denouement:** The way the story turns out.

CHARACTER

Imaginary people created by the writer

Analysing the characters means:

- Look for connections, links, and clues between and about characters.
- Ask yourself what the function and significance of each character is
- Make this determination based upon the character's history, what the reader is told (and not told), and what other characters say about themselves and others.

STRUCTURE

The design or form of the completed action

It often provides clues to character and action and can even philosophically mirror the author's intentions, especially if it is unusual.

Analysing the structure means:

- Look for repeated elements in action, gesture, dialogue, description, as well as shifts in direction, focus, time, place, etc.

SETTING

The place or location of the action, the setting provides the historical and cultural context for characters.

It often can symbolize the emotional state of characters.

POINT OF VIEW

Again, the point of view can sometimes indirectly establish the author's intentions. Point of view pertains to who tells the story and how it is told.

- **Narrator**: the person telling the story.
- **First-person**: narrator participates in action but sometimes has limited knowledge/vision.
- **Objective**: narrator is unnamed/unidentified (a detached observer), does not assume character's perspective and is not a character in the story. The narrator reports on events and lets the reader supply the meaning.
- **Omniscient**: all-knowing narrator (multiple perspectives). The narrator takes us into the character and can evaluate a character for the reader (**editorial omniscience**). When a narrator allows the reader to make his or her own judgments from the action of the characters themselves, it is called **neutral omniscience**.
- **Limited omniscient**: all-knowing narrator about one or two characters, but not all.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Style is the verbal identity of a writer, oftentimes based on the author's use of diction (word choice) and syntax (the order of words in a sentence).

A writer's use of language reveals his or her **tone**, or the attitude toward the subject matter.

- **Irony**: a contrast or discrepancy between one thing and another.
- **Verbal irony**: we understand the opposite of what the speaker says.
- **Irony of Circumstance or Situational Irony**: when one event is expected to occur but the opposite happens. A discrepancy between what seems to be and what is.
- **Dramatic Irony**: discrepancy between what characters know and what readers know.
- **Ironic Vision**: an overall tone of irony that pervades a work, suggesting how the writer views the characters.

2. POETRY



TERMS OF POETRY

- **Allegory**: A form of narrative in which people, places, and events seem to have hidden meanings. Often a retelling of an older story.
- **Connotation**: The implied meaning of a word.
- **Denotation**--The dictionary definition of a word.
- **Diction**--Word choice and usage (for example, formal vs. informal), as determined by considerations of audience and purpose.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

The use of words to suggest meanings beyond the literal. There are a number of *figures of speech*. Some of the more common ones are:

♪ **Metaphor**

Making a comparison between unlike things without the use of a verbal clue (such as "like" or "as").

♪ **Simile**

Making a comparison between unlike things, using "like" or "as".

♪ **Hyperbole**

Exaggeration

♪ **Personification**

Endowing inanimate objects with human characteristics

IMAGERY

A concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea which appeals to one or more of our senses. Look for a pattern of imagery.

- ❖ **Tactile** imagery--sense of touch.
- ❖ **Aural** imagery--sense of hearing.
- ❖ **Olfactory** imagery--sense of smell.
- ❖ **Visual** imagery--sense of sight.
- ❖ **Gustatory** imagery--sense of taste.

RHYTHM AND METER

- *rhythm* is the pulse or beat in a line of poetry, the regular recurrence of an accent or stress
- *meter* is the measure or patterned count of a poetry line (a count of the stresses we feel in a poem's rhythm).

The unit of poetic meter in English is called a "foot," a unit of measure consisting of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Ask yourself how the rhythm and meter affects the tone and meaning.

SOUND

- Do the words rhyme? Is there alliteration (repetition of consonants) or assonance (repetition of vowels)? How does this affect the tone?

STRUCTURE

The pattern of organization of a poem.

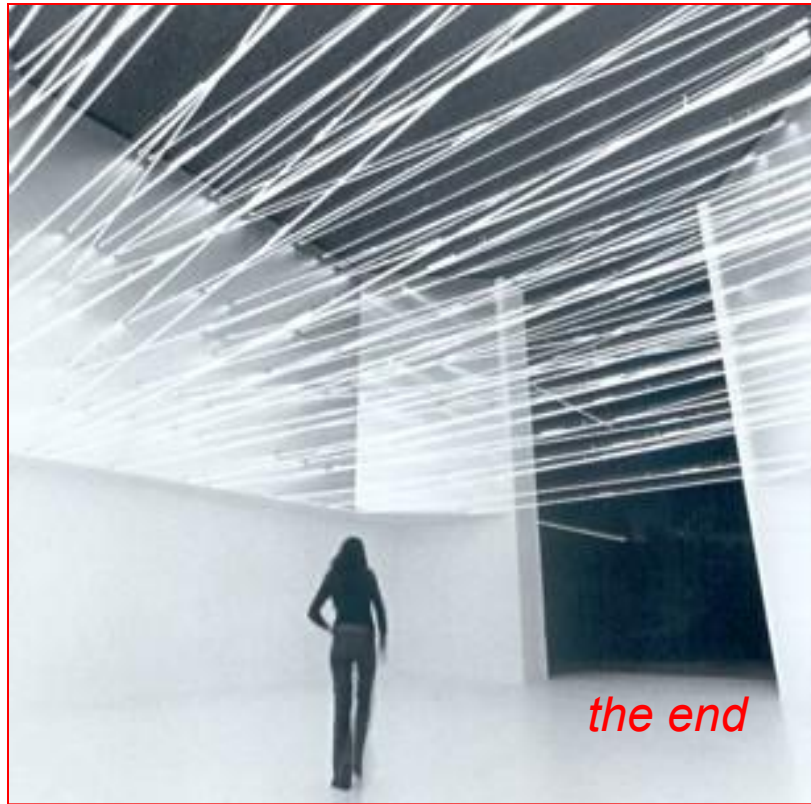
*For example, a **sonnet** is a 14-line poem usually written in iambic pentameter. Because the sonnet is strictly constrained, it is considered a closed or fixed form.*

*An **open or free form** is a poem in which the author uses a looser form, or perhaps one of his or her own invention. It is not necessarily formless.*

Symbolism: When objects or actions mean more than themselves.

Syntax: Sentence structure and word order.

Voice: Speaker and Tone: The voice that conveys the poem's tone; its implied attitude toward its subject.



the end