

Literature Analysis Brainstorm Questions

An analysis of literature examines selected elements of fiction or poetry to uncover relationships and meanings that may not be obvious on a first reading. Elements of literary analysis may include theme, characterization, point of view, tone, symbolism, figurative language structure or plot, or language and style. Usually a paper focuses on only one of these elements. Use the following questions to brainstorm:

Consider...	Answer questions like these...	For example...
Themes/ideas Ideas about life, society, human nature	What is the pervasive idea(s) about life, society, or human nature? How is the theme (or themes) implied? Is there a character (or narrator) who expresses important ideas? 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?	<i>The theme of the possibility of redemption is suggested by Hugo's third-person narrator: "Those are rare who fall without becoming degraded."</i> <i>It's the mathematician Ian Malcolm who expresses one of the central ideas of Jurassic Park: Life finds a way.</i>
Characterization Round or flat? Dynamic or static? Protagonist, antagonist, other?	Are the characters fully developed, believable, personable, or not? Do the characters learn, change, and evolve over time, or not? Which is the principal character? Does a character oppose or support the principal character? Does a character seem to embody a central theme or idea? To what extent does the setting act like another character?	<i>"The Celestine Prophecy" 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.</i> <i>The storms in "King Lear" mirror the growing inner turmoil of the characters.</i>
Point of view 1 st person, 3 rd person, omniscient, limited omniscient? Reliable or unreliable?	Is the narrator a character in the story, or a detached observer? Does the narrator know everything, or is his/her knowledge limited? Is the narrator reliable, or is his/her judgment questionable? If the story is in 1 st person, is that I educated or uneducated? High status or low? Prejudiced or unprejudiced? Informed or uninformed? If the story is in 1 st (or 2 nd) person, what effect does this have?	<i>A crazed first person narrator contributes to the growing sense of agitation and claustrophobia in "The Telltale Heart."</i> <i>Tan's "ghost narrator," Bibi, evinces godlike omniscience as well as the foibles and prejudices of the once-living Bibi.</i>
Tone Author's attitude toward the subject	How would you describe the author's attitude toward his subject—critical? ironic? serious? hopeful? lighthearted? mysterious? What words and passages lead you to think that?	<i>The characters' dialogue reveals Steinbeck's affection for them and for humanity with all its flaws, even though he seems aware the ending may be tragic.</i>
Symbolism Recurring, representative images	Is there a recurring image that seems to represent something else? How does the theme support this symbolism? How does the symbol support the theme? How do the characters respond to the symbol?	<i>The empty cup symbolizes the failure of southern society to recover its former faith, confidence and vitality after the war, a central theme in the work.</i> <i>The One Ring symbolizes the ultimate entrapment: domination, hubris, addiction, and slavery; the principal characters are simultaneously attracted and repelled.</i>

<p>Figurative language Similes, metaphors, personification?</p>	<p>Does the author make comparisons between states of mind and natural things? What is the effect? Does the author compare characters' personal traits to natural events? What is the effect? Are natural settings referred to as if they were people or animals? What is the effect? Are objects referred to as if they were alive or capable of life? What is the effect? Are objects compared to other objects? What is the effect?</p>	<p><i>"Mutiny, it was plain, hung over us like a thundercloud," he writes, reinforcing the sense of looming, electric disaster.</i></p> <p><i>Lear elevates the storm to the level of another character when he cries, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!"</i></p> <p><i>Jim describes the ship's canvas " crackling like cannon," emphasizing the sense of open warfare between the pirates and the owner of the Hispaniola.</i></p>
<p>Structure How parts are combined: sequence, rising & falling action, conflict, foreshadowing, climax, resolution,</p>	<p>Is the storytelling sequential, or does the author use flashbacks or stream-of-consciousness? What is the primary conflict? What is the effect on the characters? Does the climax occur nearer the beginning, the middle, or the end? What effect does this have? Is the climax foreshadowed in some way? How? What is the effect? Is there a falling action, or denouement? What effect does this have?</p>	<p><i>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.</i></p> <p><i>The shooting of the rabid dog in To Kill a Mockingbird foreshadows the eventual shooting of the innocent Tom Robinson later.</i></p>
<p>Language & Style Word choice, sentence length, grammar, poetic devices</p>	<p>Does the author use words that are familiar and homely? What is the effect? Does the author use unusual words? What is the effect? Do certain words have a positive (or negative) connotation? Which ones? What is the effect? Does the author seem to favor shorter (or longer) sentences? What is the effect? Does the author use simple sentence patterns, or more complex ones? Does the author use rhythm, rhyme, alliteration or other poetic devices? What is the effect?</p>	<p><i>Steinbeck uses short, simple clauses alone or in strings of run-ons and adds Spanish endearments to suggest the rhythms of Spanish and the naiveté of the characters in Tortilla Flat.</i></p> <p><i>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.</i></p>

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