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# ***ANALYZING LITERATURE: A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS***

## **LOOKING AT THE GENRE**

Writing about literature is a genre that in many ways resembles an argument: You make a claim about the work and support your claim with evidence from the text, as well as reasoning and analysis. The purpose of a response to literature is to persuade the readers that your analysis and interpretation of the work is valid, reasonable, and logical.

When you write about literature, you participate actively in the construction of knowledge about the text. That is to say, the text alone tells only part of its message. The writer of the work has done his or her part to convey its meaning by using symbols, language, setting, plot, character, foreshadowing and the like to suggest the text's message. Unlike "hard sciences," however, literature cannot be empirically tested in the laboratory; its meaning comes from its readers. In fact, literature begs for *readers* to read, react to, think about, and interpret the text. Having engaged in those steps, the process continues with another step: communicating to others the meaning you, as a reader, have constructed from the text. Your interpretation and analysis, then, adds to the body of meaning about the text.

Most likely, you have been asked to write about literature before: perhaps you've read a book and written a report or review of it for your junior high English class; perhaps you've studied an author and researched his/her life and work; perhaps you've read a piece of literature and answered essay questions about it on an essay exam. Because literature is a focus of many English classes, it is likely that you have had some experience with reading and responding to literature in your past academic life; in the university, you will also read and respond to literature—even if you're not planning to major in English. Since many colleges and universities require their students to take a literature or humanities elective, you will probably continue reading and responding to literature in college.

As a genre, literary analysis differs from other types of writing you may have done about literature, such as an evaluation. For instance, for an assignment for school, you may have read a short story or novel and your teacher assigned you to write a review of it. Perhaps you were a reporter for your high school newspaper, and you wrote a review of the drama department's production of the musical *Oklahoma!* A review calls upon the writer to make an evaluation, to describe and analyze the work in question. The purpose of a review is to persuade the readers that your evaluation, which is based upon criteria, is a sound assessment of the work. ("Don't read this book because it lacks a clear plot." "The leading actress's comic timing is impeccable.") For example, you can find reviews of books and music printed at online bookstores such as Amazon.com or other Web sites. Here people who have read the book (or listened to the CD) provide their evaluation of the work to potential book or music buyers to help them make informed decisions.

With literary analysis, however, the focus is not on offering your opinion about the work; rather, the focus is to interpret and analyze the text. Certainly, you offer your informed opinion of the text's interpretation, but you do not tell readers whether or not you liked the work or whether or not they should read it. Literary analysis, then, tends to be more objective than a review might be. For that reason, literary analyses are typically written using third-person pronouns. Other features of literary analyses include a clearly stated thesis (often called a claim) that is supported by reasons and evidence from the text. (As we will discuss later, a literary analysis is in fact a type of argument, and as such, it should have a claim, a line of reasoning, and evidence to support the claim.) Writers of literary analyses use present tense verbs to discuss a work rather than past tense—even if the work was written centuries ago. For readers and scholars of literature, the work is "alive," still current, which calls for the use of present-tense verbs.

Why do schools put emphasis on literature? First, literature is a way to experience a way of life, a time period, a culture, an emotion, a deed, an event that you are not otherwise able, willing (as say in the case of

murder), or capable of encountering in any other manner. Literature, then, opens doors to new and different life experiences.

Second, the critical reading skills that you bring to reading short stories, poems, novels, plays, as well as nonfiction are the same types of critical reading strategies that serve you well in any other type of reading that you do—whether it be reading a computer manual, a biology text, a legal document or the like. In order to write well about literature, you must be able to read the text closely, looking at its structure, the words the author has chosen, the characters' motivations, the patterns of language and literary devices. Certainly, you don't read a biology text looking for literary devices and uses of language; rather, you read that text searching for an understanding of the structure of the interaction within an organism, how the organism relates to other organisms, the biochemical pathways involved in those interactions. However, in either case—reading a piece of literature or a technical document—you read closely and carefully, looking at not only what the writer is saying, but also looking at why it's being said and how it's being said. Reading literature, then, enhances your critical reading skills. Likewise, being able to write about literature demonstrates your ability to read critically and engage in the higher-level thinking skills of analysis and interpretation.

Often, students are intimidated when it comes to writing about literature because they feel that they do not know enough about literature to write about it or that the author is surely hiding some meaning in the text that they just can't find. Sometimes students feel as if the whole purpose of writing about literature is to be critical of the work—and that's difficult to do if you happen to really like the work. Responding to literature, however, does not have to be intimidating if you read carefully and thoughtfully, keeping your mind set on thinking about and analyzing the text, and if you write about an aspect of the work that sparks your interest, whether positively or negatively.

### **READING A WORK OF LITERATURE**

Like other types of reading assignments, reading literature in an effort to respond to it requires more than just a quick read-through. In other words,

reading literature for a course or for the purpose of responding to it is much different than reading the latest novel by John Grisham or Tom Clancey while on vacation at the beach. Reading with the intent of writing about the work requires multiple readings of the text. When reading the Grisham novel at the beach, we read usually read the text only once and often quickly. The following strategies offer suggestions for reading a story, poem, play, or novel for coursework:

1. When reading through the work for the first time, read as you would at the beach: get the “gist” of the plot (yes, poems often have a plot, too), the characters, and a general idea of the meaning of the piece. Enjoy the work and don’t be stressed out about any upcoming writing assignment!
2. During the second reading, pay particular attention to words that you do not know and look up those words in the dictionary. (See the section “Going Online.”) If a word has multiple meanings listed, consider each of the meanings. Often writers will use antiquated or secondary meanings of words. You may find it helpful to write the meanings of the words in the margin of the text or on a separate note card, so that you can easily refer to them when reading, writing, and thinking about the work.

Paying attention to word choice is especially important when reading poetry. Because poems are often short, every word counts, which means that poets select their words very carefully. Often in poetry, words may have dual meanings, each of which make sense within the poem although offering differing interpretations.

3. Think about the setting of the work and its culture. Is the work set in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? another time? Is it set in the U.S. or another country? In what region of the U.S. or world? What are customs, traditions, and lifestyles like in that particular region and that particular time? What is the socio-economic status of the characters—are they rich, middle class, poor? What is the ethnicity of

the characters? Considering these issues gives valuable insight into the work's meaning and perspective.

4. During subsequent readings, methodically begin to pay attention to how characters interact with one another, how the writer uses words to convey meaning, how the characters speak, who is telling (or narrating) the story, the kinds of images the writer uses, or any other aspect of the text that seems important to you. Ask yourself along the way what you think about each aspect and why you think that way. Many students find it helpful to keep a reading journal as well, when they read through a text. In a reading journal, you can record your thinking about the work. As you continue analyzing the text, add to your notes.
5. Annotating the text (by underlining or circling passages and writing in the margins) is helpful because your annotations can refer you to particular sections of the work later. Since you will need to draw the evidence for your interpretation from the work itself, having already marked sections of the work will aid you in garnering your evidence when writing the paper later.

#### **GOING ONLINE: USING THE *OED***

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (or *OED* for short) is a valuable resource for students of literature. The *OED* contains every English word and gives historical and contemporary meanings of each word. Many university and public libraries have access to the *OED* online, which makes searching for a word faster and easier than ever before. Being able to trace a word's etymology (or history) is very helpful when reading literary works. Check your school library's home page to see if access to the *OED* is available.

#### **Terms for Literary Analysis**

Literary critics and scholars use discipline-specific terms to talk about a work of literature. These terms make it easier for writers of literary

analyses to communicate with each other. By using the same “jargon” or vocabulary, literary critics do not have to define common ideas constantly. The following are a few of the terms (the definitions of which have been simplified) that may help you as you read and write about literature:

- **Character:** A character is a “person” in a literary work. Characters have moral and psychological features that make them human in some way or another. We often think of characters as being either *flat* or *round*. *Flat characters* are one-dimensional; they act stereotypically or expectedly. *Round characters*, on the other hand, are more complex in their make-up; they may act in contradictory or unexpected ways. Characters are also *static* or *dynamic*: Static characters do not change or grow throughout the work, while *dynamic characters* experience personal growth or change.
- **Conflict:** Typically, the plot revolves around characters in conflict. The protagonist (often, though not always, the main character) is in conflict with an antagonist. The antagonist may be another person or some other force. Characters experience one of the following types of conflict:
  - Person vs. person*
  - Person vs. nature*
  - Person vs. society*
  - Person vs. himself*
  - Person vs. supernatural*
- **Dialogue:** The conversational exchange between characters.
- **Drama:** This term actually has several meanings; however, in this unit, drama refers to plays, works of literature than can be read and performed on stage.
- **Fiction:** Work that comes from a writer’s imagination is considered fiction. Types of fiction include short stories, novels, fairy tales, folklore, and fables. Fiction can have as its setting or backdrop some real, factual event, but when the author embellishes the real events or even makes up the characters, etc., the work is considered to be fiction (or perhaps historical fiction). For example, the movie *Titanic* has as its setting the historic sinking of the ship, *Titanic*. While some of the

events and characters depicted in the movie are true, much of the plot and many characters are fictionalized.

- **Foreshadowing:** Foreshadowing uses either action or mood to prepare the reader for something that will happen later in the work of fiction or drama. It is often helpful to think of foreshadowing as clues that a detective might follow when solving a mystery. The writer leaves hints along the way to set the stage for what is to come later.
- **Irony:** When something is not as it is expected to be, it is considered ironic. For example, one would not expect a burly wrestler to be afraid of a tiny mouse. Nor would one expect a police officer to be robbed. If these events happen, they are examples of irony. There are three basic types of irony: verbal, situational, and dramatic. *Verbal irony* is literary device in which what is said is different than what is meant. We often think of sarcasm as a type of verbal irony. *Situational irony* occurs when what actually happens contradicts what is expected to happen. Typically, situational irony is created by forces that are beyond human comprehension or control. For example, a state legislature that provides money to build a new library building but cuts funding to pay for books would be an example of situational irony. When a discrepancy exists between what a character says to be true and what the readers know to be true, it is *dramatic irony*.
- **Narrator:** The narrator of a literary work is the person who tells the story. Sometimes the person who tells the story is a character within the work; we call this person a *first-person narrator*. Other times, the story is told by someone who is not part of the action; this type of narrator is called a *third-person narrator*. A third-person narrator can know everything about the characters—their history, their minds, and their emotions—in which case the narrator is considered an *omniscient narrator* (“all-knowing”). An omniscient narrator can move back and forth between time and space. A third-person narrator who has only limited knowledge of the events and characters, or who knows the minds of some characters but not others, is a *limited-omniscient narrator*. The narrator, however, should not be confused as being the voice of the author; think of the narrator as another character in the story.

- **Personification:** Giving animals or inanimate objects human characteristics is personification.
- **Plot:** The term plot refers to the action or “story line” of the literary work. Drama and fiction have plots, but sometimes poems do also. Plot usually involves conflict (see above). Traditionally, the plot of drama or fiction follows a particular pattern, which includes the *exposition* (where the conflict or action begins), the *rising action* (the events that promote the conflict), the *climax* (the point of greatest tension), and the *resolution* or *denouement* (where the loose ends are wrapped up). However, literary works do not have to follow this pattern.
- **Setting:** Setting is where the action takes place and includes both the physical location, as well as the time period.
- **Symbolism:** Writers use symbolism so that a person, object, or event can create a range of emotional and intellectual responses in the readers. For example, using a flag as a symbol might conjure a patriotic spirit in one person, an anti-national sentiment in another, or perhaps, like a warning flag, a sense of danger. By using symbols, the writer can evoke a wide body of feelings.
- **Theme:** The theme of a literary work is the unifying concept, the central meaning, of the work. All elements of the literary work (plot, characters, symbols, etc.) tie into the theme. The theme is not, however, the subject of the work—a theme is always an abstract concept. For example, the subject of a story might be the murder of a millionaire. The theme for the same story might be the idea that if provoked, all people could be capable of killing another human being.

### FOR PRACTICE

Read the following short story by Mary Robison and practice the reading strategies offered in this section.

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**Mary Robison**

“Yours”

1983

Allison struggled away from her white Renault, limping with the weight of the last of the pumpkins. She found Clark in the twilight on the twig-and-leaf-littered porch behind the house.

He wore a wool shawl. He was moving up and back in a padded glider, pushed by the ball of his slippered foot.

Allison lowered a big pumpkin, let it rest on the wide floorboards.

Clark was much older—seventy-eight to Allison’s thirty-five. They were married. They were both quite tall and looked something alike in their facial features. Allison wore a natural-hair wig. It was a thick blonde hood around her face. She was dressed in bright-dyed denims today. She wore durable clothes, usually, for she volunteered afternoons at a children’s daycare center.

She put one of the smaller pumpkins on Clark’s long lap. “Now, nothing surreal,” she told him. “Carve just a *regular* face. These are for the kids.”

In the foyer, on the Hipplewhite desk, Allison found the maid’s chore list with its cross-offs, which included Clark’s supper. Allison went quickly through the daily mail: a garish coupon packet, a bill from Jamestown Liquors, November’s pay-TV program guide, and the worst thing, the funniest, an already opened, extremely unkind letter from Clark’s relations up North. “You’re an old fool,” Allison read, and, “You’re being cruelly deceived.” There was a gift check for Clark enclosed, but it was uncashable, signed as it was, “Jesus H. Christ.”

Late, late into this night, Allison and Clark gutted and carved the pumpkins together, at an old table set on the back porch, over newspaper after soggy newspaper, with paring knives and with spoons and with a Swiss Army knife Clark used for exact shaping of tooth and eye and

nostril. Clark had been a doctor, an internist, but also a Sunday watercolorist. His four pumpkins were expressive and artful. Their carved features were suited to the sizes and shapes of the pumpkins. Two looked ferocious and jagged. One registered surprise. The last was serene and beaming.

Allison's four faces were less deftly drawn, with slits and areas of distortion. She had cut triangles for noses and eyes. The mouths she had made were just wedges—two turned up and two turned down.

By one in the morning they were finished. Clark, who had bent his long torso forward to work, moved back over to the glider and looked out sleepily at nothing. All the lights were out across the ravine.

Clark stayed. For the season and time, the Virginia night was warm. Most leaves had been blown away already, and the trees stood unbothered. The moon was round above them.

Allison cleaned up the mess.

“Your jack-o-lanterns are much, much better than mine,” Clark said to her.

“Like hell,” Allison said.

“Look at me,” Clark said. Allison did.

She was holding a squishy bundle of newspapers. The papers reeked sweetly with the smell of pumpkin guts.

“Yours are *far* better,” he said.

“You're wrong. You'll see when they're lit,” Allison said.

She went inside and came back with yellow vigil candles. It took her a while to get each candle settled, and then to line up the results in a row on

the porch railing. She went along and lit each candle and fixed the pumpkin lids over the little flames.

“See?” she said.

They sat together a moment and looked at the orange faces.

“We’re exhausted. It’s good night time,” Allison said. “Don’t blow out the candles. I’ll put new in tomorrow.”

That night, in their bedroom, a few weeks earlier than had been predicted, Allison began to die. “Don’t look at me if my wig comes off,” she told Clark. “Please.”

Her pulse cords were fluttering under his fingers. She raised her knees and kicked away the comforter. She said something to Clark about the garage being locked.

At the telephone, Clark had a clear view out back and down to the porch. He wanted to get drunk with his wife once more. He wanted to tell her, from the greater perspective he had, that to own only a little talent, like his, was an awful, plaguing thing; that being only a little special meant you expected too much, most of the time, and liked yourself too little. He wanted to assure her that she had missed nothing.

He was speaking into the phone now. He watched the jack-o-lanterns. The jack-o-lanterns watched him.

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### **FOR CRITICAL INQUIRY**

Although this story shows only one day in the life of this couple, what does the story reveal about their lives? What specific details in the story lead you to this interpretation?

1. Allison and Clark are of different ages. When you first read of their age difference, what did you expect to happen in the story? Why did you think they were together? How does our culture feel about couples with such an age difference? By the end of the story, how do their ages work differently than you perhaps expected?
2. Why does the story begin and end with pumpkins? How are the pumpkins transformed from the beginning of the story to the end? What ideas or feelings do you usually associate with pumpkins? How might your associations work with the theme of the story? What specific details of the story can you use to justify your thinking?
3. Why is the title of the story “Yours”? In what way does the title give clues to the meaning of the story? What evidence from the story backs up your analysis?
4. Why does a narrator and not one of the characters tell the story? How would the story be different if told from the point of view of Clark? of Allison?

### **WORKING TOGETHER**

Working with two or three classmates, discuss your answers to the questions about “Yours.” Compare and contrast your thinking about the story with that of your classmates. Did your group members have different answers to the questions? Are their answers reasonable and valid? Why, or why not?

After discussing and thinking about your different interpretations of the story, think about why three people could read the same story and come up with different, albeit reasonable, answers to the same questions. Together, write a paragraph explaining your thinking.

### **LOOKING AT THE GENRE**

Krista Williams’ essay compares the attitudes toward sexual relationships of the main characters of two novels, *The House on Mango Street* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. She wrote this essay in an Honors English course that focused on American culture. In her essay, Williams compares and

contrasts Esperanza's and Holden's views of sex and relates those views to each characters' upbringing and cultural background.

Krista Williams

December 8, XXXX

Sharon McGee

Essay #5, Final Draft

To Have Sex or Not to Have Sex:

That is the Issue

“A boy once held me so hard, I swear, I felt the grip and weight of his arms, but it was a dream” (Cisneros 73). Esperanza, from The House on Mango Street, dreams about having intimate relationships with men, but she cannot make these relationships real because of legitimate fears about the consequences of sexual relationships. Holden Caulfield of The Catcher in the Rye also has this problem of wanting to have sex while fearing the implications of having meaningless sexual relationships. He can’t even hire a prostitute without feeling bad about having sex: “It made me feel sort of sad when I hung [her dress] up” (Salinger 94,6). Later, he lies to the prostitute and tells her that he can’t sleep with her because of a supposed injury to his “clavichord.” Esperanza and Holden share a similar confusion about whether or not they want to engage in

sexual relationships and this confusion is brought about by exposure to different environments and by unique perceptions of these environments.

Esperanza is a young Hispanic-American girl growing up in a very poor area of Chicago. Most of the women she encounters on Mango Street play very domestic, repressed roles in which their only power comes in the form of sexual appeal. Esperanza is unsure about what she wants her life to be like, because she wants to have the sexual appeal that she sees displayed all around her, but she doesn't want to have to deal with the consequences of a sexual life. She wants to have intimate relationships with men, but she doesn't want to lose her independence and self-respect. For instance, in one part of the novel, Esperanza tells the reader about a boy named Sire who had exchanged deep, "hard" stares with her. She says, "It made your blood freeze to have somebody look at you like that." From this statement, the reader can infer that Esperanza's experience with Sire was frightening. However, this experience also causes her to say, "I want to sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt. Not this way, every evening talking to the trees, leaning out my window, imagining what I can't see" (73). However, Esperanza knows that if she gives into her desires,

she will become a sex object and a possession. Thus, she wants to have a sexually oriented relationship, but she can't allow herself to do this because she doesn't want to become dependent upon men like most of the women she has observed.

Esperanza wants to wield her sexual power without losing her strength and independence. She wants to emulate the image of the "beautiful and cruel" woman portrayed in the media who "drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away" (89). Unfortunately, Esperanza is not able to do this because she isn't confident about her physical appearance, and because men are extremely frightening to her in sexual situations.

Esperanza's beliefs stem directly from her experiences on Mango Street. She is aware of a domestic trap that exists for the women of Mango Street in which women get married to escape from the homes of their parents but are dependent upon their husbands for the rest of their lives. Esperanza recognizes that sexual relationships lead to marriage, and that marriage leads to a long, domestic, dependent life. Because she wants to avoid such a life, Esperanza avoids sexual relationships. She

tries to help her friends avoid this trap as well, but she is unsuccessful because her friends don't recognize the consequences of sexual relationships. At one point in the novel, Esperanza's friend, Sally, agreed to kiss some boys so that they would give her keys back to her. Esperanza was angry at the boys and wanted to defend her friend, so she "ran back down the three flights to the garden where Sally needed to be saved. [She] took three big sticks and a brick and figured this was enough" (Cisneros 97). However, Esperanza was very confused when she arrived to find out that Sally didn't want to be saved. Sally was entering the trap of domesticity, and there was nothing Esperanza could do to stop her. Later, Sally married an abusive marshmallow salesman who never let her out of the house and was trapped for life. This example shows the reader what life might have been like for Esperanza if she had not avoided sexual relationships.

Esperanza was lucky enough not to end up like her friend. Unfortunately, there were some instances when she was unable to avoid sexual encounters, and these experiences were very violent and frightening for her. The first man who ever kissed her passionately was an old man who befriended her at work and then grabbed her when she

agreed to give him a birthday kiss. Later, Esperanza was raped by an older boy when she went to the carnival with Sally. Because of the violence and violation involved in these first sexual encounters, it is reasonable to assume that Esperanza doesn't want to be part of similar experiences. Thus, it is very difficult for Esperanza to come to terms with the kinds of sexual relationships which she wants and the kinds of relationships which she has experienced. She wants to have an intimate relationship but doesn't want to be vulnerable.

Holden Caulfield's confusion with sex in The Catcher in the Rye is very similar to that of Esperanza, but his confusion stems from a different problem. Holden likes women and wants to have sex with them, but he feels bad about his desires because he feels that it's wrong to sleep with women he doesn't care about. At one point, Holden tells the reader, "I think if you don't really like a girl, you shouldn't horse around with her at all" (62). However, most of the women he has sexual relations with give him a "pain in the ass" (63). Thus, he's caught in the confusion wanting to be sexually active but

not wanting to do anything “crumby.” For example, to demonstrate how much he doesn’t understand about sex, he states the following: “I keep making these sex rules for myself, and then breaking them right away. Last year I made a rule that I was going to quit horsing around with girls that, deep down, gave me a pain in the ass. I broke it, though...” (63). Holden really wants sex to be part of an intimate, emotional relationship, but he usually just ends up in relationships with girls that he doesn’t really care about. This confuses and depresses him.

Holden is so caught up in the romantic ideals of sex that he is repulsed by its realities. He wants to exist in a fantasy world with the girls he’s romantically tied to, so he makes up ridiculous plans about running away with his former girlfriend, Sally (who he doesn’t even like), living in the mountains together, and chopping firewood for her. This is also why he thinks about his old friend Jane so much. Jane is the only girl who he has ever respected and felt emotionally attached to, so throughout the book he is preoccupied with thoughts of her. More specifically, Holden repeatedly mentions the fact that Jane “keeps all her kings in the back row” when playing checkers (Salinger 42). This detail is included to

illustrate how much Holden cares about her, since the reader knows that he appreciates her personality quirks and her innocence instead of only appreciating her body.

Holden thinks it's "crummy" to sleep with a girl that he's not particularly attached to because of the social mythology that sex is a part of romantic, caring relationships. Unfortunately, the only girl he actually cares about (Jane) supposedly has sex with Stradlater, Holden's roommate from Pencey Prep. This makes Holden very angry. He feels like his meaningful relationship with Jane has been violated by Stradlater, so he picks a fight with him. Later, Holden looks for sexual relationships with other women, but is unable to follow through with them because he sees himself as violating the principles in which he believes.

Holden's ideas about sex come indirectly from exposure to an environment very different from Esperanza's world on Mango Street. While Esperanza lives in a very poor, low-class neighborhood, Holden Caulfield comes from an affluent part of New York City and has attended several expensive boarding schools on the East Coast. Holden's upper-class environment has severely depressed him because he perceives

himself to be surrounded by “phony” people and inconsistent social conventions. Throughout the novel, he searches for something real that he can admire and emulate. It is this quest for reality that makes Holden unhappy and confused about most areas of his life, including the area of sexual relationships. Holden’s society has projected an image of sex as part of a relationship between people who love each other deeply, and marriage is usually involved in this. However, most of the sexual relationships that he observes are very superficial. This double standard of society depresses Holden just as much as all the other double standards he observes, so he can’t have sexual relations with a girl without becoming unhappy and confused. Perhaps this common confusion of Holden and Esperanza stems from similar struggles that both characters participate in. Holden and Esperanza want to give in to their sexual desires, but neither character wants to become a part of his or her adult world. Because Esperanza is trying to avoid the traditional life and duties of a grown woman, her struggle with her sexual desires can be seen as a fight to retain the innocence of childhood. Similarly, Holden doesn’t want to become a part of the conventional adult life that is filled with double

standards, responsibilities, and uncertainties. Through his frequent admiration of children and their activities, Holden indicates that he wants to remain childlike and innocent. He always seems to be looking for sex, but the reader knows that he remains a virgin throughout the novel. Because virginity is often associated with innocence, perhaps Holden's sexual confusion is a continuation of his struggle to maintain his childlike innocence in a "phony" adult world. Thus, Holden and Esperanza want to keep their innocence and avoid living lives similar to those of the adults around them.

Both Holden and Esperanza are looking for meaningful sexual relationship in their lives, but neither knows how to find one. Esperanza is afraid of becoming a sexual possession, and Holden is afraid of becoming a part of the phony world which disgusts him. However, both characters' ideas about sex have been derived from observations about their respective environments and from the decisions that they have made to differentiate themselves from those environments. Neither character wants to be like the people who they observe in their everyday lives, so they avoid having sex, even though they both have strong sexual

desires. Perhaps when Holden comes to terms with his phony world, he will be able to have a meaningful relationship with a woman without feeling guilty about the implications of sex. Similarly, when Esperanza finally escapes Mango Street, she won't have to view sex and marriage as domestic traps and will be able to find fulfillment in her life.

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## **ANALYSIS**

Krista Williams' essay begins by setting up the contrast between Esperanza and Holden, then proceeds to discuss each character's view of sex separately. She writes her essay in third person, without using "I," and she uses present-tense verbs when talking about the text, which are common features of literary analyses. Although she does not cite from outside sources, Williams uses plenty of evidence from the texts to support her argument about each character's sexual issues, and she connects those views to the characters' cultural perspective. Especially important to note is the fact that Williams does not rely on plot summary to tell us about the complete story of Esperanza and Holden; rather she brings in appropriate background detail only to support the point she is making. She assumes, then, that the essay's readers will have some familiarity with the texts.

## **FOR CRITICAL INQUIRY**

1. Literary analyses make an argument about a text (or texts, as in this case) and support that claim with evidence. In your own words, summarize Williams' argument in this essay. Now consider the evidence that she uses to support her claim. How many times does Williams quote directly from each text? How often does she paraphrase or summarize information from the texts? Why does she choose to quote particular passages and paraphrase or summarize others? How do quotations support her claim differently than summaries?
2. Develop a detailed outline of Williams' essay. How does each paragraph function in the essay? In other words, how do the paragraphs work together to create an argument?
3. You may have noticed how Williams integrates quoted material into her paragraphs. For instance, in paragraph 2 she writes: "However, this experience also causes her to say, 'I want to sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt. Not his way, every evening talking to the trees, leaning out my window, imagining what I can't see.' (73)." Why does Williams connect the quoted material to

the paragraph in such ways? How does this integration of quoted material help the overall flow of the essay?

## **WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE**

### **Writing Assignment**

For this assignment, write about a piece of literature approved by your instructor. Your essay should be an argument that provides your interpretation/analysis of the work and supports that claim with appropriate and sufficient details (evidence) from the work. Unless your instructor specifies otherwise, your interpretation should come from *your own* reading and thinking about the work—not from critical or literary analyses you have read about it. You will write this literary analysis for your classmates and teacher as a way of broadening their understanding of the work you have selected.

## **INVENTION**

### **Exploring Your Topic**

To get ready to write your analysis, it may help you to examine what you already think about the text after your initial reading.

### **Activity 1**

In your reading journal or notebook, write about your initial reaction to the text you've selected. Doing so will give you a place to begin further analysis of the work. When you write, don't worry if your answers seem incomplete or insufficient; however, try to respond to these questions with as much detail as you can at this point. As you review your writing, though, and re-read the text, keep in mind the gaps in this crash-through writing. Those gaps will provide clues to particular points in the text that you will want to analyze further. Consider the following questions as points of departure for your crash-through journal writing:

- What is my “gut reaction” to this text? Do I like the work? What, specifically, do I like or dislike about it?
- Do I like the characters? Why? Are there any characters that I dislike? Why?

- How are the experiences of this character (or these characters) like or unlike my own experiences? Does the difference in our experience make the work more difficult to understand? Does the similarity in our experience make me connect with the character(s) more closely?
- What is the setting of the work? What do I know about this setting? How is it like or unlike my own experience?
- What recurring images or objects did I notice in the work? What might they mean? Do those objects have any cultural significance?
- What is the title of the work, and why did the author choose that title? What alternative titles might the author have chosen and why?
- Who is “telling” the story? Why did the author select this character to tell the story? How would the story be different if told from someone else’s point of view?
- Why might the author have written this work?

### **Activity 2**

After your initial reading, follow the reading strategies outlined previously as you read through the work several more times to prepare for your writing assignment.

### **Cultural and Historical Perspectives**

One way to analyze literature is to think about the cultural and historical perspectives of the piece. With a work that was written either several years, decades, or even centuries ago, it is often easy for us to forget to place that particular piece of literature in a specific historical framework. It is easy to forget that the world was not as advanced as it is today. It’s easy to overlook the fact that cultural and societal mores have changed. For example, if we’re reading Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we might be appalled at the way the townspeople treated African-Americans in their community. We might wonder why the jury consisted of all white men, no women or African-Americans. To understand the novel, though, it is important to investigate the cultural and historical moments of the text. In other words, we might need to research civil rights in the South during the 1950s to begin to understand why this particular text was so important in its time, and why that impact is still felt today. For another example, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, a novel about

horrible working and sanitary conditions in the meat-packing industry in Chicago early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century may seem bizarre to us when we currently have strict government regulations regarding the handling and processing of food products, as well as “labor laws” to protect the worker. However, at the time Sinclair wrote the novel, those regulations were not in place. Workers were not guaranteed any safety or health controls in the workplace. No government regulations existed concerning the processing of food products. However, as a result of the book, many of these issues came into the forefront of American thinking, resulting in change.

#### **GOING ONLINE: RESOURCES ON THE WEB**

The Internet can be a resource for discussing your literary text with others. Perhaps your instructor has arranged a class listserv in which you and your peers can share ideas about your texts. You may also be able to find forums at other universities in which you can discuss your thoughts about the work. For example, using an internet search on *Catcher in the Rye*, you might come across a Web site based at Palo Alto College in which Palo Alto students, as well as other “surfers,” can participate in a forum on the novel. Chatting with other students, either face to face or via the Web, is a great way to share your insights about a work as well as learn other people’s interpretations. It’s also a way to give your claim a “test run,” to see if other readers think that your claim is reasonable. The Palo Alto Web site, which is currently under construction at the time of this publication, also has links to other resources about the novel; in addition, the site plans to post student papers about the novel so that you can see what other students have to say about *Catcher in the Rye*. You can browse this Web site at <http://lonestar.texas.net/~mseifert/salinger.html>.

## PLANNING

### Developing a Claim

A strong literary analysis requires a central, controlling claim—the main argument you plan to support in your essay. Literary critics, academics in the field of literary studies, may or may not state their claim early in the essay; nevertheless, they have a claim in mind when writing. Without a clear claim, the essay goes nowhere: It rambles, making points that seem unrelated.

However, you don't have to be a literary scholar or even an English major to make an argument about a piece of literary work. Careful, astute readers of literature are able to make valid and reasonable claims about a literary work. In fact, the student examples in this book were not written by English majors—just by students taking an honors first-year composition course and an introductory literature course. Each student, though, offered her interpretation of the works by developing a central claim (or argument) and by using sufficient evidence to support that claim. Many times, an instructor does not have to completely agree with your interpretation of a literary work: as long as you can make a strong claim; support the claim with facts; develop the argument logically and reasonably; and present your argument in a well-written essay, you can earn a good grade.

What is a reasonable claim? A reasonable claim is one in which other readers would accept your interpretation as plausible. Although different readers of a literary work might have varying interpretations of piece, they can reasonably entertain other interpretations. This is not say, however, that *all* interpretations are reasonable or valid. For example, recall the short story “Yours” that appears earlier in this text. Several students who decided to write an essay about this story might make several different claims. Which claims are valid or reasonable? Which, if any, claims are unreasonable interpretations of the story?

- **Claim 1:** Author Mary Robinson uses situational irony to create a story in which the character Allison, who is young and beautiful, is also physically weak and dying.
- **Claim 2:** In the short story “Yours,” the jack-o-lantern faces are an important image, conveying the emotional states of the main characters, Allison and Clark.
- **Claim 3:** In the short story “Yours,” pumpkins are a symbol of the evil that exists between Clark and Allison.
- **Claim 4:** In the short story “Yours,” pumpkins symbolize the autumn of Allison’s life.

Certainly, Claim 1 is reasonable because the story uses situational irony. Likewise, Claim 2 is valid because a writer could make a sound argument that the jack-o-lantern faces reveal the inner emotions of the characters. Claim 4 is also rational because pumpkins are closely associated with the literal autumnal season, and autumn is also part of the metaphorical life cycle, the time before winter (death). However, Claim 3 states that the pumpkins are a symbol of the evil that exists between Clark and Allison. In order for this claim to be substantiated, evidence from the text must support it. What sections of the story discuss evil or show the evil that might be present in the characters’ relationship or in their home? Frankly, there is no such reasonable evidence. Clearly there is evidence that Clark is older than Allison is and that his relatives think that Allison is a gold-digger, but does the story give any indication that Clark feels this way about Allison? Is there a suggestion that Allison has evil intentions? That Clark does? Because there is not much—if any—evidence to support such a claim and in fact there is much evidence to the contrary, most readers would reject this claim as being unreasonable.

### **Activity 3**

Review the notes that you have taken while reading the text you’ve chosen. As you reflect on these notes, what strikes you as an interesting issue about the text? What idea do you keep thinking about or coming

back to in your notes? Most likely, what interests you will interest your audience as well. *Write your claim as a complete sentence*, keeping in mind that you should state it in third person. If you come up with two or three possible claims, write them all.

Once you've written a claim (or claims), test it out. Working in a group of three or four people who have also read the same literary piece as you, each person should take turns reading his/her claim. Stop after each group member presents his/her claims. The other group members should provide feedback, including:

1. Is the claim reasonable?
2. Would this claim make an interesting argument for an essay?
3. Is there sufficient evidence in the text to support this claim?

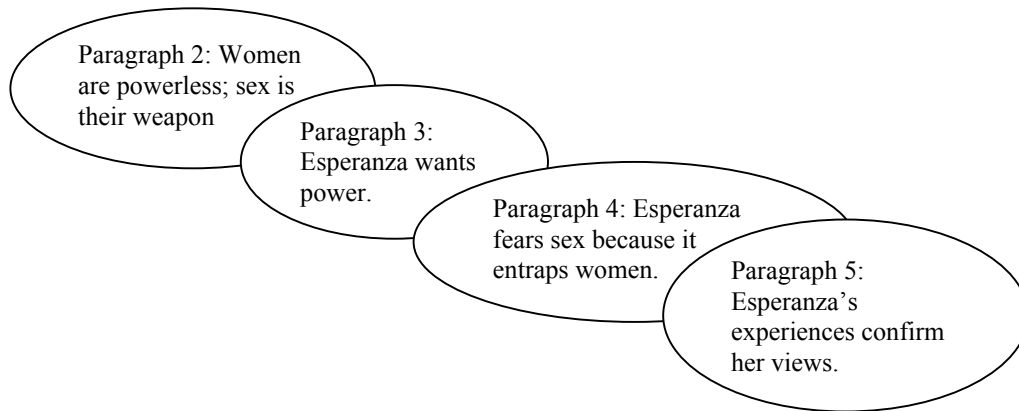
### **Arranging Your Material**

To build your argument you need to garner effective and appropriate evidence from the text to support your claim. Linking that evidence together as a chain is also important. A chain of evidence often relies upon “mini-claims,” or smaller ideas that build upon one another to create a solid wall of argument. Notice how Krista Williams builds her mini-claims in the first part of her essay:

- Paragraph 2: Esperanza sees women in her neighborhood playing subservient roles to men; she sees them as powerless. They use sex as a weapon.
- Paragraph 3: Esperanza wants power, strength, and independence.
- Paragraph 4: Esperanza fears sex because she sees sex as a way women become entrapped in dependent relationships with men.
- Paragraph 5: Esperanza encounters sexual relationships with men that leave her vulnerable. These experiences reinforce her views of sex and power.

We can also think about the connection between each of these claims; each one is connected to the idea before and after it—much like each link of a chain is connected to the links before and after it. That is why writers

often refer to making a “chain of evidence” or a line of reasoning. Visually, we can represent Williams’ argument this way:



Each paragraph takes one aspect of the total argument, supports it with details/evidence from the text, and offers the writer’s analysis of the point. Together, the paragraphs create a unified argument: each point building on the previous one.

#### **Activity 4**

Above you see the first part of an outline for Williams’ paper. Continue developing an outline for the remaining part of the paper, particularly on her discussion of Holden. Write the mini-claims she uses to build her chain of reasoning.

#### **Activity 5**

To begin, write the mini-claims you will need to make in each paragraph in order to build your argument. Then, consider the evidence from the text that you can use to support each mini-claim. Do you have any gaps without evidence? If so, review your notes and search the text for anecdotes that bolster your claim.

### **Strategies for Organizing a Literary Analysis Essay**

Writers of literary analyses often use one of two types of arrangement: comparison/contrast or least important to most important. Typically, your claim (thesis) will give you a clue as to which type of arrangement will work best for your essay.

If the thesis sets up two or more elements, you may find the comparison/contrast arrangement useful. Krista Williams' essay, for example, discusses two main characters' views of sex: Holden Caulfield from The Catcher in the Rye and Esperanza from The House on Mango Street. Given her thesis, it makes sense that she would choose to use a comparison and contrast organizational strategy. There are basically two ways to organize an essay using comparison and contrast: block (or chunking) and alternating.

When using the *block* method of organizing a comparison/contrast paper, the writer will discuss one element, bringing up all relevant points in multiple paragraphs, then another. Williams uses the block method in her essay because she spends the first half of the paper discussing Esperanza's views of sex, then moves on to discuss Holden's views of sex. If she were making several closely related comparisons between Esperanza and Holden, she might alternate between each character, and organize her essay around each of the comparisons rather than the characters. In this way, she would be using the *alternating* method of arrangement.

If the thesis is not comparing and/or contrasting to elements, then you may find the most important to least important idea a good method for arranging your paper. In this way, the essay brings out its strongest arguments early in the essay, convincing the readers of the relevancy of the claim, engaging them in your argument. By doing so, you make the reader want to read more or you may have already given the reader something new to think about, so he/she will approach the rest of the essay with interest. When using this method of organization, you as the writer must inventory the mini-claims that you are making. Which of these mini-claims has the most evidence to support it? Which of the claims is the

strongest? This mini-claim should be the first major point of your essay. Continue inventorying your mini-claims until you have organized the paper in such a way that the least important idea will come last in your essay.

Occasionally, you may find more useful to reverse this organizational strategy depending upon your thesis and your audience. For example, if you think your audience may be very resistant to your interpretation, you might begin by offering the weaker mini-claims early on, so that as your essay continues, your arguments are “gaining steam” and becoming stronger. In this way, you are not leaving the weaker arguments last in your readers’ minds.

### **Activity 6**

Review your major claim (thesis) and your mini-claims. Decide on the best method of organizing your essay and create a working outline.

### **GOING ONLINE: CAREFULLY CHOOSING AND USING INFORMATION**

As you know, there is a great deal of information on thousands of topics available with the click of a mouse. However, be aware that there are also sites on the internet with unreliable information. Be sure to ask your instructor about how to determine the validity of internet information.

You should also be aware that downloading or copying someone else's work from the internet—or from any source—and submitting it as your own is a form of academic dishonesty. Many colleges and universities have academic honesty policies with severe consequences for those who violate the policy. Be sure to have a discussion with your instructor about how to attribute information properly. You can also check your school's web site where you will likely find a link to its academic honesty policy.

### **WORKING DRAFT**

Using the working outline you have developed, write a draft of your literary analysis. While you are writing, you may want to consider the issues in Paragraph Development and Citing from Literary Texts.

#### **Paragraph Development: Sandwiching Information**

One technique for developing paragraphs in a literary analysis paper is to link your mini-claim to solid textual evidence. Since a strong literary analysis relies on evidence from the text itself, this is a helpful strategy to follow. In addition, though, you must be sure to connect your evidence in your own words to the point that you are making. You cannot assume that your reader will see the connection between the evidence that you cite and the claim that you are making. Notice in Krista Williams' essay how she states her mini-claim, explains it, supports it with information that is either quoted directly or paraphrased from the text, explains the paraphrase or

quote, then brings in more evidence. This explanation of material is sometimes called the “sandwich effect”: You tell the reader what the quote or paraphrase means to the overall argument. The sandwich effect does not imply that your readers are stupid. However, since we all read material in different ways and since you are taking the paraphrase or quote out of the entire context of the work, your explanation helps the readers understand how you are interpreting the citation. Think of the sandwich effect as the mortar between the bricks in a wall: It fills in any gaps that the reader may have and makes for a solid argument.

Along with the paraphrases and quotes, you may want to summarize sections of the text for the readers; however, you want to avoid a plot summary in which you summarize the entire story line for the reader. When you use a summary in a literary analysis, you will want to summarize only a section of the text, picking out the main idea and relating it to your purpose or claim. Another way to use a summary in a literary analysis is to summarize events leading up to a particular quote that you want to use. In this case, your summary will be very brief, perhaps only one or two sentences, and simply set the stage for the quote.

### **Citing from Literary Texts**

When quoting from literature, it is important to keep in mind MLA conventions. (Most literary analyses use the MLA documentation system instead of APA.) The following sections address particular concerns for citing from literary works.

#### Citing from Novels or Short Stories

When quoting from novels or short stories, if the quote is four typed lines or less, you can integrate the quote into the paragraph by placing it in quotation marks. If it is necessary to include a parenthetical page number, put the page number in parentheses followed by a period.

“In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits,” begins John

Updike’s short story “A & P.”

Sometimes you may just want to quote words or a phrase, not a complete sentence, from a text. In this case, you simply put the word or phrase in quotation marks.

In order to execute his revenge on the King and his court, Poe's disabled character Hop Frog "encased [them] in tight-fitting stockinet shirts and drawers. They were then saturated with tar." Later, Hop Frog sets them ablaze.

Notice, also, in this example that it was necessary to add the pronoun "them" in brackets in order for the sentence to make sense. At times, you find it necessary to add a pronoun, insert a missing word, or even change the tense of a verb. When you do so, place the added word or amended parts of a word in brackets.

If you are quoting material that is more than four typed lines long, you begin the quote on a new line, indented one inch from the margin. Each line of the quote is also indented one inch. Do not use quotation marks with an indented quote. You can either use a colon to introduce the quote or no punctuation. Double space throughout the quote. Unlike quotes that occur within the text, with an indented quote, the parenthetical reference occurs after the period at the end of the quote; it is not followed by a period.

In Toni Cade Bambara's short story "The Lesson," the main character begins contemplating the consequences of the expensive toys she saw while on a field trip to FAO Schwartz. She thinks

Thirty-five dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen's boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Granddaddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars would pay the rent and the piano bill too. Who are these

people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1000 for toy sailboats? What kind of work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it? We are is who we are, Miss Moore always pointin out. But it don't necessarily have to be that way, she always adds then waits for somebody to say that poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie and don't none of us know what kind of pie she talking about in the first place. (4)

Although she begins to contemplate the social and economic plight of her family, in the end, she brushes off this realization.

(Notice the use of the sandwich effect in this example. The writer does not leave the long quote to explain itself; rather, he provides his own commentary following the quoted material.)

### Citing from Poetry

You may quote one to three lines of poetry by placing the line(s) in quotation marks within the text of your paper. Separate lines of poetry using a slash mark (/). Leave a space on each side of the slash. In parentheses place the line numbers of verse you've quoted.

Emily Dickinson begins her poem "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—" with her characteristic use of punctuation and capitalization: "The Brain—is wider than the Sky-- / For—put them side-- / The one the other will contain" (1-3).

When citing more than three lines of poetry, begin the verse on a new line, indented one inch. Double-space the indented quote. As with novels and

short stories, do not use quotation marks and place the parenthetical reference with line numbers after the period or other mark of punctuation. Reproduce the lines as they appear in the poem, breaking for a new line as the poem does even if there is more space left on your line. If the line of poetry is too long to fit, you continue on the next line, but indent an additional three spaces. When beginning the following line, come back to your original one-inch indentation. If you begin your quote somewhere in the line other than the beginning, indent the first line the approximate number of spaces to replicate where in the line you are beginning.

Poet Langston Hughes broke with African-American poetic tradition by writing about jazz and racial issues and by using the language of the common person instead of lofty literary language. These lines from his work "Lenox Avenue: Midnight" reflect both his choice of topic and his use of language:

The rhythm of life

Is a jazz rhythm,

Honey.

The gods are laughing at us. (1-4)

If the poem uses unusual spacing, try to replicate that spacing as close as possible in your indented quotation.

Poet Nazik Al-Mala'ika uses unusual spacing to structure his poem "I Am."

The night asks me who I am

Its impenetrable black, its unquiet secret

I am

Its lull rebellious. (1-4)

### Citing from Drama

If you quote from a play, you will most likely be quoting dialogue from two or more characters. After indenting one inch, you must include each character's name in all capital letters followed by a period. Start the speech on the same line. Begin each subsequent line of the character's speech indented an additional three spaces. When a new character begins speaking, return your indentation to the original one-inch indentation mark and follow the same process as before, indenting subsequent lines three spaces. Other formatting follows those outlined in short stories and poetry.

Willy Loman, the protagonist of Arthur Miller's *Death of Salesman*, loses his travelling salesman job, beginning his downward spiral:

WILLY. Howard, are you firing me?

HOWARD. I think you need a good long rest, Willy.

WILLY. Howard—

HOWARD. And when you feel better, come back, and we'll see if we can work something out.

WILLY. But I gotta earn money, Howard. I'm in no position to--

### **PEER COMMENTARY**

Exchange the working draft of your paper with a classmate or with a peer group. Respond to these questions fully in writing.

1. Read through the draft once for a first impression. What is your overall impression of this draft after your initial reading?
2. Now read through the text again slower. In your own words, summarize the author's main claim. Does the author "prove" his/her point by the end of the essay? Is this claim reasonable and logical

- given your understanding of the original literary text? Explain. Does the claim seem outrageous or completely off base? If so, why?
3. Does the writer use effective evidence from the story to support his/her claim? Are there places where more evidence is needed to support the claim? If so, note those places. Has the writer used the evidence appropriately? In other words, has the writer accurately reflected the text author's intent? Have any quotes been taken out of context? Does the writer provide sufficient context for the quoted material to make sense?
  4. Is the paper organized logically? Do the points lead smoothly from one to the next? Are there any big leaps of logic that the writer makes? If so, where are they?
  5. Has the writer integrated quotes into the text appropriately? If not, note spots where the writer needs to do more.
  6. Did the writer strike an effective balance between providing context for the evidence and plot summary? (Remember, that an effective literary analysis does not rely on plot summary.)
  7. Has the writer followed MLA documentation appropriately?
  8. What suggestions do you have for this writer to improve the literary analysis?

## **REVISING**

Before revising your literary analysis, read through the peer commentary carefully. Do you agree with the critique your peer responder provided? What areas do you think need the most revision? Do you disagree with your peer responder on any points? Why?

Consider the following points as you revise:

- Is your claim clearly understood by the readers? How can you make your claim clearer?
- Is your essay organized logically? Are your points connected with strong transitions to help the reader follow your argument?
- Do you use sufficient evidence to support your claim? Do you need more evidence?

- Have you integrated your quoted material smoothly into the text?
- Did you follow proper MLA format?
- Read your essay aloud. Are there any sentences that seem difficult to get through or confusing?

## **CONNECTIONS AND COHERENCE**

As you revise your essay, you'll want to pay particular attention to the coherence of your argument: Does the argument "hang together"? One technique for examining the coherency of your literary analysis essay is to write down the first and last sentence of each paragraph on a piece of paper. Now look at each "paragraph." Do the first and last lines of each paragraph relate in some way to one another? Does the last sentence of one paragraph advance or lead into the idea of a following paragraph? If there are gaps at any point along the way, you'll want to examine that particular paragraph in more detail. Perhaps you'll need to revise the ending sentence of the paragraph, or perhaps the paragraph is out of order and should be moved elsewhere in the essay. You can also use this technique to look for connections or transitions between paragraphs.

When examining the coherency of your essay, remember that there are three levels of coherency: the global (or entire essay) level, the paragraph level, and the sentence level. You want to make sure that your essay hangs together in all of these spots. If each major section of the paper connects to another, then you likely have global coherency. If each paragraph is connected to the next paragraph, you likely have paragraph level coherency. If the sentences within each paragraph are connected to one another, then your essay is probably has achieved sentence-level coherency.

To enhance the coherency of your essay, you may find it helpful to use one of several strategies:

1. Use repetition of words or phrases between paragraphs or sentences to carry one idea forward and connect it with the next idea.

2. Use transitional words such as “furthermore,” “however,” “likewise,” “also” and “for instance” to connect one sentence to another or one paragraph to another. There are many transitional words and phrases to employ in your writing; therefore, you may find it beneficial to review a stylebook in order to add transitional words to your writing.
3. Use headings (if appropriate and acceptable to your instructor) to provide a transition from one major section to another.

## **WRITING INVENTORY**

This assignment has asked you to take on the role of literary critic as you offer your own interpretation and analysis of a literary text. Before submitting the final version of your essay, reflect back on your reading journal or notes. What ideas seem to creep up time and again about the work that you have chosen? Why did this idea or point interest you in the first place? What did you find particularly engaging about this literary work? Did you focus your essay around this idea? Why, or why not? How might you weave this interest into your paper, if you haven’t already?

## **WRITING A LITERARY ANALYSIS PAPER AS AN IN-CLASS ASSIGNMENT**

So far this chapter has talked about how to write an out-of-class literary analysis, one on which you will work for several days, planning, drafting, and revising. However, sometimes you will be asked to write a literary analysis paper under pressure, either in-class or as part of an essay exam. Many of the strategies discussed in this chapter apply to writing an in-class literary analysis: You will still need a strong claim supported by evidence from the text, effectively organized and presented. If you are writing an in-class paper, though, you most likely will not have access to the literary text about which you are writing. How do you incorporate specific evidence from the text into your analysis? How do you write an effective paper in such a short period of time? This section will offer strategies for writing an in-class literary analysis.

### **Preparing to Write**

In order to write a strong in-class literary analysis, you will still need to engage in the reading strategies discussed earlier in this chapter. Just as for any exam or pressure situation, you must be prepared. If you have read carefully, taken notes, and thought about the text ahead of time, you should be familiar with and prepared for any question that your instructor may provide you. It is also important that you read the exam carefully and answer the question “prompt” that you have been given. In other words, be sure that you address the elements asked for in the question prompt, rather than giving unrelated information.

### **Writing Exam Answers**

If you are taking an examination over literature, you may be asked to write both short and long answers to essay questions. The purpose of an essay exam is different from the purpose of an out-of-class literary analysis paper. In an essay exam, the instructor is assessing your learning of concepts (such as literary terms) and your ability to read material closely and carefully and to recall that material. Therefore, as an essay exam taker, you need to convey your knowledge to the instructor. Provide answers to the questions asked without rambling or including extraneous information. When taking any exam, it is important to read the exam’s directions carefully since the directions usually specify how long each answer should be. Short-answer questions typically require a two- to four-sentence response.

One common type of short answer-question posed on a literature exam asks students to identify a quote or element from a literary work and provide a brief discussion of why it is significant. When responding to this kind of question, be sure to read the exam to see if you are to also identify the author as well as the title of the work. Next, verify how long typical responses should be. In your answer, be succinct but clear. One of the reasons students often lose points on essay exams is because they fail to write their answers in *complete sentences*! Clearly written sentences provide the instructor with a better sense of what you know.

### Activity 7

Let's take a look at a short-answer identification question example that one might find on an exam.

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Directions: Identify each quote by providing the title of the work and the author, as well as a brief discussion of the quote's significance. Your answers should be no more than four sentences long.

1. "He wore a wool shawl. He was moving up and back in a padded glider, pushed by the ball of his slippers foot."

---

This quote, of course, comes from "Yours," the short story that appears earlier in this text. Even if you could not recall this quote, you should be able to identify it by its context: an old man on a porch swing.

A. Write your answer to this question on a sheet of paper. Be prepared to submit your answer to your instructor upon his/her request.

B. Now read this answer to the question:

This quote comes from "Yours" by Mary Robinson, and it sets up the situational irony that is significant to the story. We would expect Clark, who is in his 70's, to be feeble, especially given the description of him wrapped in wool shawl and wearing slippers because often old people who are in declining health are cold and pad around the house in slippers. However, we learn that Clark is healthy, and it is his younger wife, Allison, who is near ill. This is situational irony.

Notice how the writer discusses his knowledge of situational irony and how this particular quote is one example of that. His answers are written in complete sentences and explain both the concept of situational irony and how the quote illustrates that literary device. He also demonstrates that he has read the story because he is able to provide relevant details such as Clark's age and Allison's name.

### **Writing a Good In-Class Literary Analysis**

You should approach the in-class literary analysis much as you would prepare for an exam. You need to review the texts, noting important images, themes, symbols, and other literary devices. Look for connections between works such as similar themes or different authors' use of a particular literary device (such as irony). Perhaps the instructor has given you the topic of the essay in advance. If this is the case, then you should be especially prepared by focusing your review reading on the important features related to that question.

When writing an in-class literary analysis or longer essay question, the most important points to keep in mind are

- Get to your thesis quickly and efficiently.
- Repeat words from the essay question in your thesis statement.
- Provide plenty of specific details from the text to support your claim.
- Write a conclusion—even a brief one—to tie your main points together.

Carolyn Chipperfield, a student in an introductory literature class, wrote the following student sample. The question she was given, which she was not given ahead of time, was to compare/contrast the theme of death in three poems that had been read in class. This essay was written as part of a longer exam. In total, she had 75 minutes to complete the entire exam. Since the essay portion counted 50 points (out of 100 total), she budgeted her time so that she spent approximately 35 minutes on the essay portion. This was a closed-book exam, which meant that she could not use her book or notes.

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Everyone seems to have a different interpretation of death. Some think it is a depressing time due to the loss, and others feel it is a joyous time because of heaven and life after death. These many different perspectives on death are discussed very well in Frost's "After Apple Picking," Keats's "To Autumn," and Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." Through images, diction, symbolism and other literary devices, these poets show death in different views.

Frost conveys one of his themes, being the fragility of life, in his poem, "After Apple Picking." In this poem, he shows a person who has "tired feet" from apple-picking. He is ready to quit. This symbolizes that he is accepting death and is ready to go on to better things. It talks about how he has picked "thousands and thousands of apples," thus showing the many things that he has done throughout his lifetime. However, there are yet a few things that he needs to do, "and there may be two or three apples left to pick," before he dies. The poem also mentions how there is one bucket left to fill. However, the narrator doesn't seem too concerned to get that bucket filled; he is ready to quit. The narrator also mentions about the cellars full of cider stored up for winter. I think that this is symbolizing that the narrator has done many things in his lifetime to lay up treasures in heaven. He is ready to go on to better, more restful things. In the winter, there is no apple picking that has to be done. Similarly, in the winter, or death time of the narrator's life, he doesn't have to do anything, because he has already lived and done "thousands and thousands" of things. The image of the apples is a very good image in the poem also. Apples symbolize opportunity or knowledge, which the narrator has.

"To Autumn" by Keats is also a poem that shows a person who is very accepting of death and old age. Autumn is the maturing or old age time of life, which is personified in this poem as a beautiful and friendly old man. The narrator is talking about the beauty of autumn and old age. "The plump gourds and blooming hazelnuts" are some of the images that are used to show this. The narrator says how he loves to watch the cider oozing from the trees. Overall he is saying how old age is a glorious time of life that everyone should enjoy. It is a relaxing time. There are many people who don't see the beauty in the "green leaves falling off the trees," but the narrator here is living this time of his life to the fullest.

There is also a feeling of acceptance in Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." In the beginning of the poem, Dickinson portrays death as kind gentleman who is picking her up in a carriage to go for a nice ride. Along with personifying death, she also personifies Immortality, which is reading along with them. "Death" and "Immortality" are both capitalized to imply these human-like characteristics. She talks about how Death took her past the "school children" and the "gazing grain" and the "setting sun." This shows a very peaceful and enjoyable ride through the different stages of life. However, Dickinson switches her view about death towards the end of the poem. All of a sudden, she realizes that he is taking her with him to the grave, "the house in the ground." This causes her to start fearing Death. Images that convey this tone that Dickinson uses in her poem are "for only Gossamer my gown" and "only Tippet my Tulle." She realizes that her gown is very thin and she probably feels naked and helpless. At the end of the poem she says that it was a long time ago that death

nearly took her, but it feels like only a day. I believe this shows again that it was a very memorable experience that she couldn't forget very easily. It was both wonderful and frightening for her.

It is very evident in these three poems that the speakers had their own individual perspectives on death and old age. Through images and symbolism, these aspects are revealed to us. Both Keats and Frost show an acceptance of death, while Dickinson shows both acceptance and fear of it. Death is a very inevitable thing that everyone must face at sometime in their life. Therefore, I believe that the acceptance of death is a wonderful and needed viewpoint.

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Now read the three poems on which she based her exam.

**Robert Frost**

“After Apple-Picking”

c. 1914

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree  
Toward heaven still  
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill  
Beside it, and there may be two or three  
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.  
But I am done with apple-picking now.  
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,  
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.  
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight  
I got from looking through a pane of glass  
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough  
And held against the world of hoary grass.  
It melted, and I let it fall and break.  
But I was well  
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,  
And I could tell  
What form my dreaming was about to take.  
Magnified apples appear and disappear,  
Stem end and blossom end,

And every fleck of russet showing clear.  
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,  
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.  
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.  
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin  
The rumbling sound  
Of load upon load of apples coming in.  
For I have had too much  
Of apple-picking: I am overtired  
Of the great harvest I myself desired.  
There were ten thousand fruit to touch,  
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.  
For all  
That struck the earth,  
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,  
Went surely to the cider-apple heap  
As of no worth.  
One can see what will trouble  
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.  
Were he not gone,  
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his  
Long sleep, as I describe it coming on,  
Or just some human sleep.

**John Keats**

“To Autumn”

c. 1819

I  
Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruits the vines that round the thatch-eves run;  
To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;

To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

II

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;  
Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,  
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers:  
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cider-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last ooziings hours by hours.

III

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou has music too—  
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
And touch the stubble-plains rosy hue;  
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
Among the river swallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives and dies;  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft  
The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft,  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

**Emily Dickinson**

“Because I could not stop for Death—”

c. 1863

Because I could not stop for Death—  
He kindly stopped for me—  
The Carriage held but just ourselves—  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For his Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess—in the Ring—  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—  
We passed the setting sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—  
The Dews drew quivering and chill—  
For only Gossamer, my Gown—  
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a house that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground—  
The Roof was scarcely visible—  
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—‘tis Centuries—and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads  
Were Toward Eternity—

### **Activity 8**

Read through Chipperfield's essay again. This time underline specific references to each poem that she used. How do the references (either paraphrases, quotes, or summaries) support her argument?

### **Looking at the Genre of In-Class Literary Analysis**

Because she didn't have the text in front of her when she wrote the paper, Chipperfield had to rely on her memory to provide the specific support for the essay. However, she does use many details from each poem to add support to her claim. It makes sense that she didn't directly quote entire lines from the poems because that would be hard to do with the text.

Likewise, she did not have to cite line numbers for the poems. As you can see, though, she did refer specifically to the poems in many places. For instance, in the second paragraph, she mentions the speaker's "'tired feet' from apple picking," and how he is "ready to quit," because he "has picked 'thousands and thousands of apples.'" She mentions the bucket left to fill before the speaker stops apple-picking. These are specific details because they come directly from the poem itself.

Look at the following re-write of the first part of Chipperfield's second paragraph:

Frost conveys one of his themes, being the fragility of life, in his poem "After Apple Picking." In this poem, he shows a speaker who is tired from the job that he is doing. He is ready to quit. This symbolizes that he is accepting of death and is ready to go on to better things. He has harvested much, which shows what he has done in his lifetime. However, there may be a few things that he needs to do before he dies.

How does this re-write differ from the original? It is certainly much less specific; all of the references from the text have been omitted or barely mentioned. As a reader, do you get a sense that the writer has read and thought about the poems? Do you accept the claim that is being made? It is much more difficult to buy into the claim since the writer is not using

any specific details from the poem to show that her position is valid and reasonable. It is for this reason that it is important to have specific details in your in-class paper; otherwise, you have not proved your claim. Remember that an in-class or essay exam is to demonstrate your mastery of the material. In order to show that you have a grasp of the material, you must refer to it in your writing.

### **A CLOSING NOTE**

Certainly, it is not fair to say that your literary analysis is of the same level as a literary critic who has spent years studying texts, their production, and interpretation. However as a novice literary critic, your voice is still important to the ongoing conversation about the text. After all, literature requires readers. Together with your class, consider posting your essays to a Web site or beginning your own chat room to discuss the work(s) you've read. These are two accessible forums for adding your interpretations to the conversation.