What is Literary Analysis?
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What is a professor asking you to do when she asks you to analyze a work of literature? There is not one single answer; however, no matter how you approach analysis, there is one thing that you should keep in mind: *analyzing literature involves intense focus on the text itself.*

There are steps you can take to achieve this level of focus.

- **First**, read the text *generously*—that means, read the text with an open mind, ready to appreciate the pleasures that the text might contain, as well as its complexity. If you read something just to get through it—because it’s required for your class—and immediately assume that you won’t enjoy it, that it won’t “speak to you,” or that it will be dry or boring, then you will already be at a disadvantage when trying to achieve a deeper understanding of the work.
- **Second**, reread the text with specific questions or concerns in mind.

The questions below will help guide you through a more in-depth reading.

**How Does the Text Work?**

One level of literary analysis is to ask *how* the text works. Think of the text as a car; *reading* it for pleasure is like going for a spin, but *analyzing* the text is like opening up the hood and taking the engine apart. What you want to figure out is how the text is put together, how it operates, how it evokes the effects and moods that it does.

Here are some of the questions you might ask at this level of analysis:

1. How is the work structured or organized? How does it begin? How does it end? How is its plot related to its structure?
2. What is the relationship of each part of the work to the work as a whole? How are the parts related to one another?
3. How is the setting related to what we know of the characters and their actions?
4. What kind of language does the author use to describe the world of the text? What images, similes, metaphors, and symbols appear in the work? What is their function?

Being able to answer these kinds of questions will demonstrate your understanding of the form, content, and style of the text.

**What Does the Text Suggest About the World?**

Of course, literary analysis does not only involve discussing how the text works. You may be asked to broaden your analysis, to explain what the text says about the culture in which it was produced, or how the text reflects larger societal trends. In a way, this approach moves from an analysis of "how the text works" to an interpretation of "what the text says" at a *connotative* or cultural level.
Here are some of the questions you might ask at this level of analysis:

1. What social forces and institutions are represented in the work? How are these forces portrayed?
2. To what extent are the lives of the characters influenced or determined by social, political, and economic forces?
3. To what extent does the representation of gender in the work reflect the place and time in which the work was written?
4. What social or occupational roles do characters assume and perform and with what consequences?
5. To what extent can we understand the past as it is reflected in the literary work? To what extent does the work differ from the mainstream ideas and values of its time?

Whether you’re asking questions from the first list or the second, the answer will not be immediately obvious on your first reading of the text. You will have to return to the text with some of these questions in mind to really start a proper analysis.

When you begin writing your essay, remember that you need to make the text present to your reader. The primary way that you do this is by quoting from the text. This does not mean that you should overburden your text with quotation and summary; rather, it means that you should carefully select and include quotations that are pertinent to your argument, and analyze the significance of those quotations.


Further Reading:

http://www.goshen.edu/english/litanalysis-html/
Goshen College – Literary Analysis Guide

http://www.roanestate.edu/owl/elementslit.html
Quick list – elements of literature

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/poetry_close_reading.html
OWL Purdue – Includes close reading of poetry

Terry Eagleton – “What is Literature?” – paraphrase, summary, and adaptation