UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS DARTMOUTH WRITNG & READING CENTER

**ANALYZING LITERATURE: Focus Questions**

Analyses are the most popular form of papers written about literature. Whether an analytic paper is just a few pages or many, it cannot attempt to discuss everything about a literary work. That is why it is important to narrow down a topic so that it is manageable. Below is a list of questions that may be helpful when trying to find a focus for your paper. Not all of these questions will apply to all works.

**Formalist Questions**

Formal elements of a work concentrate on the structure of the work. Since the most important element of an analysis is grounding your interpretation in the text, this is a good place to start.

1. Separate the various elements of the work:

Plot Is the story told chronologically, episodically, through flashbacks, or through some

other method?

Does the work have one main plot line or many smaller subplots?

What, if any, is the major conflict?

What is the resolution? Is it believable?

Character Who are the major characters?

Which characters are meant to be dynamic/round (fully developed, believable, changing) characters?

Which characters are meant to be static/flat (their character does not change throughout the story)?

What is the purpose of the round or flat characters? How does their presence affect the story and its meaning?

Do they have a particular dialect/ way of speaking? What does that say about them?

Point of View Who is narrating? Is the story told from one character's point of view or many?

How do(es) he/she/they tell the story? Is there a particular way of thinking/speaking?

Does knowing the narrator alter your understanding of events?

(Is the narrator trustworthy?)

*(Often you can discover the tone of a piece by comparing the speaker and his/her motives with the author's motives.)*

Setting Where does the story take place?

When does it take place? During a particular time period?

How does the time/place affect the plot or meaning?

What kind of images does the author use?

*(For example, if all the images are of night, then the writer might be creating a dark or foreboding atmosphere.)*

Symbol Are there any reccurring objects, descriptions, or ideas throughout the work?

*(Look for colors, descriptive names, objects regularly mentioned)*

How do the symbols relate to the plot(s) or character? How do they add to the reader's understanding?

Irony Is there *verbal irony* present? (When the speaker/writer say the opposite of what s/he means)

Is there *dramatic irony* present? (When there's a difference between what the character says/thinks and what the reader knows is true)

Is there any *irony of situation*? (When a situation turns out to be quite different from what would have been expected)

If so, how does irony change the meaning of the text?

2. Next, consider: how are all these elements related as a whole?

3. How is the work organized?

4. What issues does the work raise? How does the work's structure resolve those issues?

**Biographical Questions**

Biographical questions focus on the experiences in the author's life. Use these questions to help you understand the relationship between the author's life and his/her work.

1. Are there facts about the writer's life relevant to your understanding of the work?

Ex. What is his/her social status? Race?

2. Are the characters and incidents in the work versions of the writer's own experiences?

Ex. Does s/he write about the small town in which s/he grew up? Are any characters in

the text based on people the author knew in life?

3. How do you think the writer's values are reflected in the work?

**Psychological Questions**

A psychological approach to literature draws upon characters' behaviors to better understand the text.

1. How do the characters' behaviors reflect the author's personal psychology?

2. What do the characters' emotions and behavior reveal about their psychological states? What

personality types are they?

3. Are psychological matters such as repression, dreams, or desire presented through the

characters consciously or unconsciously by the author?

**Historical Questions**

1. How does the work reflect the period in which is it/was written?

2. How does the work reflect the period it represents?

3. What literary or historical influences helped to shape the form and content of the work?

4. How important is the historical context (both the work's and your own) to interpreting the

work?

**Theme**

Finally, after the work is taken apart into its many pieces, you must decide how to put it back together. In doing so you'll hopefully discover a *theme*, or the author's message for the reader. Often a theme is a general, universal message. Start by asking yourself:

1. What is the meaning of the story?

2. What bit of insight does it present to the reader?

Remember, always RELY ON THE TEXT. Often one work can have multiple themes, so be sure to support your final analysis (the theme you've discovered) with the different literary elements and material from the text. This will give you the authority you need to present your argument convincingly and will also prevent you from going too far into left field.

(adapted from Lindquist, Alexa Ann. "Applying Bloom's Taxonomy in Writing Reading Guides for Literature." Journal of Reading. (1982): 768-76. Print)

Compiled by UMD Writing/Reading Center Tutor, 2003

Revised by WRC Tutor Kelsey Jacobsen, 2010