

# Literary Analysis

## Going Beyond the Author's Words



A literary analysis is an opinion-based type of essay that makes a point about a work of literature – usually a poem or short story, though longer works and nonfiction can be used too. Typically, a literary analysis makes a point about a literary work, then supports that point by discussing the work's literature elements (e.g. irony, symbolism, and point of view), main themes, and implied ideas that are not necessarily apparent within the literature itself.

### What a Literary Analysis IS

A literary analysis is an **opinion**. You (the writer) are forming an opinion about a literary work, then presenting that opinion (and, more importantly, supporting that opinion) in the form of an essay. Essays about literature should be written in **third-person** point of view, like any other analytical essay. You should come up with your own title for your paper (in other words, don't use the same title as the work you're analyzing), and when discussing the happenings of the literature, always use **present tense**, not past tense.

**WRONG:** *The true irony of this story was when the main character died at the end even though he thought he had escaped.*

**RIGHT:** *The true irony of this story is when the main character dies at the end even though he thinks he has escaped.*

Like any other opinion-based essay, a literary analysis is built around a clear thesis statement. It makes a clear point about the literature, then supports it with lesser points:

*The theme of Ambrose Bierce's story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," is that true freedom is imaginary, and this theme is conveyed through the story's unique point of view and through the heavy use of irony.*

### What a Literary Analysis is NOT

A literary analysis is not a summary. It doesn't go in-depth about the actual events of the story or poem. Instead, it assumes that the reader is already familiar with the literature in question. A summary, on the other hand, discusses the actual story without adding anything to it. Look, for instance, at this example:

**Summary (wrong):** *Farquhar reaches the gate to his home, but then he feels a blow to the back of his neck and sees a white light, and then the author tells the readers that Farquhar is dead.*

The above statement is purely summary; there's no analysis in it. This is because it's just a statement of what happens in the story. In other words, anyone who reads "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" will get the same information contained in the above example simply by reading the story.

An analysis, on the other hand, goes beyond simply what is contained in the literature. It uses the literature as a starting point, using it to support an opinion. In other words, when you write a literary analysis, you must “bring something new to the table.” Usually, this involves discussing the story under the lens of the literary elements. For instance, if we analyze the story events described above, we might get something like this:

**Analysis (right):** *Farquhar’s demise at the end of the story is the perfect example of situational irony, and the author uses this to great effect in shattering the reader’s expectations in an emotional way.*

This statement is much more analytical in nature because it goes beyond what we see just in the story itself. In fact, the above statement doesn’t even mention what happens in the story; it doesn’t need to – the reader is already familiar with the story. Instead, it discusses one of the literary elements (situational irony) and explains how it is used for emotional effect. Those are inferences; they aren’t apparent in the actual text of the story but are instead supplied by the one writing the analysis.

## Elements of Literature

One way to analyze literature is to closely examine its literary elements – that is, the devices and ideas that make a story work. Often, these devices can be used to explain a main point. There are far too many different literary elements to discuss within the scope of a small informational resource, but here are some of the most significant.

### Theme

This refers to the primary undertones of the story. If you learned Aesop’s Fables or some classic fairy tales growing up, you might have learned the “moral of the story.” In the story of the Tortoise and the Hare, for instance, the theme might be that “slow and steady wins the race.” Modern fiction, however, often involves *insights* – on behavior, on the human condition, or on current events – rather than morals, intending to evoke an internal debate for its readers.

### Plot

The plot is essentially the action of the story. This is a difficult element to properly discuss in a literary analysis because it’s very easy to fall into the trap of discussing *what happens* in the story (which would be a summary instead of an analysis). If you’re going to discuss plot in a literary analysis, remember the cardinal rule: don’t spend time discussing things your reader would know just by reading the story. Instead, discuss how the plot supports your main point; perhaps there’s something unusual about the plot (for instance, a climax with no falling action, which the author might use to create some emotional effect). Perhaps the structure of the plot is interesting itself; many short stories, for instance, have non-linear plots – that is, they use flashbacks, or they jump forward in time. In any case, consider the plot itself instead of the story events that make up the plot.

### Characters

Stories are told through characters, and indeed, a character study can be a strong literary analysis in its own right. However, as with the other elements, it’s important not to let a character analysis turn into a summary. If you’re going to write a character analysis, don’t focus on what the characters *do*. Instead, focus on what the characters *are*, or what they represent. Almost any literary character fits into one of three roles:

- **Protagonist:** A leading character, often characterized as the “hero” or the “good guy” (though this *can* be misleading, as the protagonist is not necessarily good or heroic). The protagonist is, simply put, the main character (or group of characters) of the story.
- **Antagonist:** Basically, the opponent or adversary of the protagonist, sometimes called the “villain” or “bad guy” (but as with the protagonist, this can be misleading; the antagonist may not be bad or villainous).
- **Catalyst:** A character who is neither clearly a protagonist nor antagonist, yet still plays an important role in moving the action of the story forward.

Characters often have related roles, too. One of the best examples of this (very useful in a character analysis) is the concept of a **foil**. A foil is a character who acts as a counterpart to another by exhibiting many of the opposite character traits – for example, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s classic detective stories. Holmes is reclusive, hyper-observant, and slightly eccentric, whereas Watson is outgoing and worldly-wise but tends to miss small details.

### Narrative (Point of View)

Every work of fiction has a narrator. When you read a story, you may not be conscious of the narrator’s existence, but **narrative** is what makes a story. The narrative is simply the words of the story. However, a story can be told from many possible perspectives. The **point of view** of the story is simply the perspective from which the narrative is given. There are several common points of view for literature.

- **Third person limited:** In a third-person limited story, the narrative follows a single character at any given time. We (the readers) see the actions of the story from a perspective that is centered on this character, but is told by an unseen narrator (not by the character himself or herself – that is, the pronouns *I* and *me* will not be present except in dialogue). We also are privy to this character’s thoughts and emotions, but *not* the thoughts and emotions of other characters. The focal character may change throughout the story, but there will only be one focal character at any particular time. A good example of this is George R.R. Martin’s popular fantasy story, *A Game of Thrones*; each chapter of this book follows a different focal character, but the entire work is told in this third-person limited point of view.
- **Third person omniscient:** The third-person omniscient narrator is, quite simply, speaking from a god-like perspective – that is, the narrative is told from a point of view that is disconnected from the characters but sees all. The omniscient narrator describes not just the thoughts and emotions of a single character, but of all the characters. This point of view was quite common in the literature of the late 1800s and early 1900s, but has become less popular in modern works. Some good examples of stories in this point of view are Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* and Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*.

- **Third person objective:** This perspective is essentially the opposite of third-person omniscient in that instead of seeing *all* of the characters' thoughts, we don't see *any* thoughts or emotions – only actions. In other words, the narrative is told in much the same way as a reporter might describe the events of a news story. A good example of this perspective can be found in the Bible: the events of the Gospel of Mark (the second book of the New Testament) are told from this point of view.
- **First person:** In first person point of view, the narrator is physically present as one of the characters of the story. Here, we see the story as told by one of its characters (as one might read a journal or memoir), so pronouns like *I* and *me* are present.

Even though these are the most common perspectives in literature, some stories are told from unusual or unconventional points of view. For instance, C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* is written from **second-person** point of view: the narrator tells the story as a series of letters written to another character using second-person pronouns like *you* and *your*.

Sometimes a story may take a common point of view but use an interesting narrative technique. One good example of this is the concept of the **unreliable narrator**, common in the stories of Edgar Allan Poe (perhaps most notably in "The Tell-Tale Heart"), where the first-person narrative has a skewed perspective on reality. Other writers may expose some of the **meta-story** (that is, the technique and motivation behind the narrative) by breaking an invisible barrier known in literature as **the fourth wall** – the barrier between the characters and the audience. A good example of this can be found in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, in which the narrator of the story (written in first-person) directly addresses the reader: "A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play; and when I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy you see a room..."

### Irony

One of the most common plot devices in literature is irony. Quite simply put, irony is anything contrary to expectation. This concept is simple, but because it is often the key element of interest in a short story, it can make for a very comprehensive literary analysis. Irony can appear in many ways and on multiple levels in the telling of a story. The entire story can be an exercise in irony, or it may contain examples of irony throughout the story (or, both things can be true). Most irony can be classified as one of three types:

- **Situational irony:** This is the most common type of irony in literature; situational irony occurs in a story when there is a marked difference between what is expected and what happens. L. Frank Baum's enduring story of *The Wizard of Oz* is, in fact, built around situational irony: the four main characters go on a long, perilous journey to obtain the things they want most, only to discover they have had those things all along.
- **Verbal irony:** This is when a character says one thing but means or does something else. This could refer to sarcasm (for instance, a character who comes in out of a blizzard, rolls his eyes, and mockingly says, "My, what lovely weather we're having!"), but often it simply refers to a character acting in a manner that doesn't match what he or she says. For example, in the classic movie *Casablanca*, Rick

(the protagonist) says multiple times, “I stick my neck out for nobody,” yet throughout the story, he is seen making gestures and taking risks for the sake of others.

- **Dramatic irony:** This refers to a disconnect between a character’s knowledge and the audience’s knowledge. In other words, dramatic irony is when the audience knows something that a character doesn’t know. A good example can be found in William Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*: Juliet has taken a sleeping draught to make herself appear dead to her family. The audience is aware that she is not actually dead, but Romeo (her forbidden lover) finds her before news can reach him, and he commits suicide, thinking that she is truly dead.

### Tone

The tone of a story is created by the attitudes of the narrative, often supported by the words and actions of the story’s characters. Basically, it is the **style** of the story’s voice. This can be used to great effect to create empathy between the reader and the characters. In Mark Twain’s short story, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” we (the readers) are able to feel the frustrations of the main character (who is also the narrator) in the ironic tone that he creates as he relates the events of the story. The main character is asked to inquire after another character’s childhood friend named Leonidas Smiley. He describes, “I have a lurking suspicion that Leonidas W. Smiley is a myth ... and he [the character who made the initial request to the narrator] would go to work and bore me to death with some exasperating reminiscence of him as long and tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was the design, it succeeded.” Through the ironic tone, which in this case is derived primarily from word choice (known as **diction**) and **syntax** (the structure and style of the sentence – a long, unbroken monologue), we can feel the frustration of the narrator as social graces force him to stand and listen to a story that he finds quite boring. In addition to diction and syntax, tone can also be created through **imagery** (the appeal to sight and other senses), **language** (for instance, **figurative** language such as **similes** and **metaphors**), and the author’s selection of **details** (you may have learned this formula for analyzing tone as “DIDLS” – diction, imagery, details, language, and syntax).

### Setting

Every story has some sort of setting. The setting is basically (or even literally, in the case of a play) the stage where the action of the story happens. Setting refers chiefly to *where* and *when* a story’s events take place. For instance, the setting of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories is Victorian England – that is, England during the time when Queen Victoria reigned (the late 1800s). However, it’s important to remember that simply *identifying* the setting isn’t good enough for a literary analysis; there has to be *analysis* of the setting. How does the setting illustrate the theme of the story? How does the author use the setting to control the tone? There are many different ways to analyze the setting.

### Purpose of a Literary Analysis

Ultimately, the literary analysis is a work of opinion. When you write a literary analysis, you’re not writing a summary or even an explanation of the story. Instead, you are “taking the story apart” and looking beyond the text of the story itself. When you write a literary analysis, you should not focus on *what* the story *is*, but instead focus on what makes the story *work*. Look at the elements that make up the story, and see beyond the simple paper and ink that drive it.