12.10: Essay Type- Literary Analysis

The Literary Analysis Essay

The literary analysis essay is the study of literature's meat and potatoes. Like the response essay, a literary analysis essay prompt asks students to examine one or more works of literature closely. The difference is that while a response essay is informal, a literary analysis essay is more formal. By more formal, I mean it abides by the following structural requirements:

- Clear, debatable thesis statement
- Clear introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion
- Quotations as evidence from the text to support the thesis

Let's take a deeper look into the literary analysis process, which focuses on the form of the text, also called New Criticism.

New Criticism Practice

John Donne (1572–1631), the great metaphysical poet, provides a metaphor that is useful for close reading. In “The Canonization” (1633) he writes:

We'll build sonnets pretty rooms;

As well a well-wrought urn becomes

The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns, all shall approve
Us canonized for Love.


Another poet returns to the same metaphor 118 years later. Thomas Gray, in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), writes:

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?


Both Donne and Gray use the image of the urn in their poetry. An urn, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), is “an earthenware or metal vessel or vase of a rounded or ovaloid form and with a circular base, used by various peoples especially in former times… to preserve the ashes of the dead. Hence vaguely used (esp. poet.) for ‘a tomb or sepulchre, the grave.” Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “urn.” Donne and Gray use the urn poetically, or metaphorically, for the urn is an image, a container to hold poetic meaning. To Donne, the poet can “build sonnets pretty rooms; / As well a well-wrought urn becomes”; to Gray, the urn becomes “storied” or an “animated bust” capable of containing stories and meaning. As an image, then, the urn becomes symbolic: poets argue that a poem is like an urn, a container for artistic meaning.

Let’s add one final component to our urn image. Jump ahead another sixty-nine years from Gray’s poem and read John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820). At the end of this poem, Keats writes:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’


In all likelihood, you have already practiced **New Criticism**, the close reading of a poem, short story, or longer narrative that focuses on the unity of that work (or even in your daily lives through text messages, tweets, song lyrics, etc.). When you examine a short story for its character development, a drama for its plot construction, or a poem for its imagery, you are reading as a New Critic, looking at the literary work through the lens of close reading. In a sense, New Critical close reading is at the heart of every form of literary analysis you do, regardless of the theoretical approach taken. Thus it becomes essential that you become proficient in close readings of texts, for this skill is the foundation of all forms of literary criticism. If you cannot read a text closely and analyze it, you will have difficulty reading from any critical perspective. But fear not! If you have ever read and reread emails/text messages/tweets/instagram posts from a friend or family member or whomever (trying to decipher the underlying meaning), if you've ever explored song lyrics and discovered a deeper meaning or interpretation, you have these skills. And these skills are like any other, you need to practice and hone them.

**Your Process**

1. List the papers, if any, you have written in high school or college using the close reading approach.
2. Describe your experience writing such papers.
3. What challenges or questions do you remember having as you were working on these papers?
4. On which literary work have you decided to write your paper?
5. What are the fundamental questions you have about this work?

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**Focus on New Critical Strategies**

The New Critics, as we discussed, regard a literary work as an *urn*—a well-wrought, storied urn, or a Grecian urn. As Keats writes, this urn contains not only beauty but also truth: a work of literature has some objective meaning that is integral to its artistic design. In other words, literature is the art of conveying truth about the world. Thus the New Critics view the study of literature as an inherently valuable enterprise; literary criticism, it follows, is fruitful because it clarifies art by assigning a truth value to this art. To quote the nineteenth-century poet and critic Matthew Arnold, as he writes in *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1865), literature reflects “the best that is known and thought in the world” (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010). To the New Critics, as you can see, literature—in particular, the analysis of it—is a profound activity.

A central concern of the New Critics is to understand how meaning and form interweave into a total artistic effect, the well-wrought urn. A New Critical reading assumes that the literary work has an organic structure that leads to unity or harmony in the work. An important concern for New Critics, consequently, is to show how meaning is achieved or dependent on the organic structure—the form—of the work. A New Critical reading, then, focuses on the various elements of literature that complement and create the theme. Consider the way you might pick apart, almost unconsciously, the elements of a song to determine its themes: beat, melody, tone, lyrics, rhythm, speed, key, etc. All these elements help a listener determine the themes of a song and there are countless varieties of combinations to express any number of ideas/feelings/stories (love song, breakup song, celebratory song, sad song, etc.). Have you ever wondered why a song might sound happy, but when you listen to the words, you realize it’s a sad song? Why did the artist choose to create this dichotomy? What is accomplished by creating this tension between happy and sad? How does this add to the experience of the piece? These are the things New Critics explore. These are some of the tools
Basic Philosophy of Close Reading

A New Critic's toolbox will hold those elements of literature that allow for the discussion of form and technique as it applies to meaning. Since New Critics perform a close reading of the text to illustrate how structure (form/organization/etc.) and theme (idea/subject/etc.) are inseparable, they are eager to tell us both how to read and how not to read. They identify various fallacies of reading that must be avoided:

The Intentional Fallacy

The intentional fallacy occurs when readers claim to understand an author’s intended meaning for a work of literature. The New Critics believed that a literary work belongs to the readers, to the public, which suggests that we should read the work isolated from what the author may have said about the work. In other words, the critic never knows specifically what the author intended. Indeed, an author may have conveyed meanings he or she did not intend at all, but those meanings are still present in their work (what the author intended doesn't really matter). The literary critic, then, must concentrate solely on the extrinsic formal qualities of the poem, play, short story, or novel.

The Biographical Fallacy

Related to the intentional fallacy is the biographical fallacy, which, as you might suspect, is committed when you use an author's life as a frame of reference to interpret a work of art. The New Critics took painstaking measures to keep the focus on the work of art itself (separate the art from the artist).

The Affective Fallacy

The affective fallacy is produced when the critic brings in his or her personal feelings about how a literary work moves them. While New Critics were aware that many readers found meaning in the emotional impact of literature, they were careful to distinguish between subjective emotional responses ("I hate this!") and objective, critical statements ("This isn't effective because of reasons X, Y, and Z") about a literary work. Critics, then, should stick closely to the work of art, eliminating the author’s intention from consideration, and they should also eliminate their emotional involvement in the reading experience. We discover later in our study that many critical theories—psychoanalytic and reader-response theories, in particular—are diametrically opposed to New Criticism: both psychoanalytic and reader-response theories highlight the way a literary work affects a reader’s emotional and intellectual responses.

The Heresy of Paraphrase

Finally, the New Critics warned against the heresy of paraphrase, which happens when readers artificially separate meaning from structure or form. You have probably fallen into this trap once or twice when you concentrated on summarizing a work’s plot rather than analyzing its meaning. New Criticism teaches us not to assign a meaning to a literary work unless that meaning can be supported by a close examination of the artistic elements of the text. To say
that Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is about the death of a migrant worker fails to acknowledge that the poem does not support such a reading. Humpty Dumpty, in fact, could be accused of the heresy of paraphrase, as Amy Chisnell explores in her student paper later in the chapter.

In review, a close reading, as defined by the New Critics, focuses narrowly on the literary work as a well-wrought urn. All we need for our interpretation is the literary work itself, where we examine how the artistry of the work leads to a larger theme that reflects the true value of the work. Easy to state, more difficult to do! So let’s now turn to see how a close reading can be connected to the writing process itself.

Your Process

1. How do you react to such rules that define the philosophy of New Critical close reading?
2. What do you see as the strengths of such an approach?
3. What do you see as some of the limits to this approach?

The Writing Process and the Protocols of Close Reading

If New Critics provide us with so many strategies on how not to read a text, they should present us with strategies for reading texts. And they do. They suggest protocols of reading that are the heart of traditional close readings of texts. In a nutshell, a close reading exposes a problem or issue that needs further examination to bring unity to the work; a close reading demonstrates how a literary work’s meaning is unified, balanced, and harmonized by its aesthetic—or literary—structure. Your close reading, then, often identifies a tension or ambiguity—the issue or problem—that can be resolved by showing that the literary work achieves unity even in the apparent tension or ambiguity. Consequently, the critic can often examine how language creates tension through paradox or irony. Paradox (when something appears contradictory or discordant, but finally proves to be actually true) and irony (when a perceived meaning or intention is eventually found not to be accurate) are a result of a writer’s use of language in a metaphorical way.

Your Process

2. Examine the last two lines of the poem (49–50).
3. Do you think the urn is speaking the lines at the end? Does it matter?
4. Read Cleanth Brooks’s interpretation of the ending lines (www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html).
5. Then read the following overview.

Brooks’s reading of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” begins by disagreeing with T. S. Eliot, who believed the concluding lines of the poem—“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”—constituted a major flaw in the poem, for, as Brooks relates, “the troubling assertion is apparently an intrusion upon the poem—does not grow out of it—is not dramatically accommodated to it.” Cleanth Brooks, “Keats’s Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes,” Mr. Bauld’s English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html. Eliot feels the urn’s speech doesn’t make much sense—and that the statement simply isn’t true. Brooks sets out to counter Eliot and prove that the poem is unified around the central paradox of the poem: “What is the relation of the beauty (the goodness, the perfection) of a poem to the truth or falsity of what it seems to assert?”

Brooks contends that the poem is “a parable on the nature of poetry, and of art in general,” and that the concluding lines must be taken in the “total context of the poem.” Cleanth Brooks, “Keats’s Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes,” Mr. Bauld’s English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html. When read in this manner, the urn’s speech was “in character, was dramatically appropriate, [and] was properly prepared for.” Cleanth Brooks, “Keats’s Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes,” Mr. Bauld’s English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html. To support his contention, Brooks provides a stanza-by-stanza close reading in which he suggests that the paradox of the speaking urn is naturally part of each stanza and related to a key thematic concept: the poem highlights the tension between bustling life depicted on the urn and the frozen vignettes of the “Cold Pastoral.” Brooks concludes, “If the urn has been properly dramatized, if we have followed the development of the metaphors, if we have been alive to the paradoxes which work throughout the poem, perhaps then, we shall be prepared for the enigmatic, final paradox which the ‘silent form’ utters.” Cleanth Brooks, “Keats’s Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes,” Mr. Bauld’s English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html. In concluding his essay, Brooks warns readers not to fall into the trap of paraphrase, for we must ultimately focus on “the world-view, or ‘philosophy,’ or ‘truth’ of the poem as a whole in terms of its dramatic wholeness” (Brooks’s emphasis). Cleanth Brooks, “Keats’s Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes,” Mr. Bauld’s English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html.

Brooks’s reading of Keats’s ode is an exemplar of New Critical reading. Remember, a close reading will examine a literary work and find some objective meaning (a theme) that is harmonized with structure, thus balancing theme and form.

Implementing the Reading Protocols: A Strategy

To perform a close reading, use the following strategy:

1. Identify a tension or ambiguity in the literary work, the “problem” that needs to be solved by a close reading. In other words, your interpretation will highlight a theme or meaning that resides in the work.

2. Demonstrate how the work sustains or achieves this meaning through its artistic “principle of composition,” which might include an examination of the following:
   - imagery
   - character
   - plot
   - symbol
   - setting
   - point of view

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language use (i.e., denotation, connotation, metaphor, simile, personification, rhythm)

Of course, the principle of composition is determined by the literary genre you are analyzing (i.e., short story, poetry, drama, novel). By showing that #1 is dependent on #2, you present a New Critical interpretation reflecting how meaning is integral to theme.

Example Literary Analysis Assignment

Contributors: Adapted from material in "The Foundations of New Criticism: An Overview" by Ryan Cordell and John Pennington.