

Analyzing Poetry and Fiction

Theme is the central idea in the work. For example, possible themes are marriage in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, revenge in Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and multiculturalism in Richard Rodriguez's "The Chinese in All of Us." While there will most likely be more specific sub-themes, it is important to identify the overall theme.

Questions to ask yourself about theme:

1. How do the characters relate to society?
2. What social issues are prevalent?
3. What inner issues are the characters dealing with?
4. What kind of control, if any, do the characters have over their situations?
5. What inner and outer forces affect the characters' choices?

Imagery is the visual description within the text, often used in conjunction with **similes**, **metaphors**, and **personification**. For example: She stomped her feet like a toddler (simile). Her eyes were verdant pools (metaphor). The wind sang out a chilling tune, splitting the quiet of the night (personification).

Imagery can also be used to associate a certain emotion with a person, place, or thing, to further the purpose of the text. For example, when describing a city: *The smog-choked sky hung low and oppressive over the city, and the sound of every passing car added to the collective wheezing of the earth.*

Questions to ask yourself about imagery:

1. What types of images are in the text? Are they light, happy, dark, or a mix of them all?
2. What patterns continue to arise in the images?
3. What could these images represent?
4. Is there symbolism in the work? How could the symbols add to the overall meaning?
5. How does the author use figurative language (metaphors, similes, personification)?

Setting is the time and location of the work. For example, one possible setting is a diner in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the year 1950.

Questions to ask yourself about setting:

1. How does the external setting compare to the internal thoughts of the characters or the main conflict?
2. Why did the author choose this specific setting?
3. How does the description of the setting alter the reader's opinion of it?
4. Is there symbolism in the setting?
5. Does the main character "fit" in the setting, or does he/she seem out of place there?

Conflict is the struggle within the work. For example, one possible conflict is a veteran trying to live a normal life while dealing with PTSD (man versus himself). Another possible conflict is a woman's fight for survival in the wilderness of a foreign country (man versus nature).

Questions to ask yourself about the conflict:

1. What is the main conflict?
2. What types of conflict are in the work (man vs. man, man vs himself, man vs. nature, man vs. God, man vs. society)?
3. Is the conflict resolved? If so, how?
4. Does the conflict draw out traits in the characters?
5. What lesson, if any, does the main character learn?

Additional things to consider:

- **Voice** – the one who tells the story; in poetry, the **speaker**
- **Characters** – protagonist/antagonist who aid in moving the plot
- **Plot** – the arrangement of events, including the climax (turning point) and resolution

Tips for Writing about Literature:

1. Introduce the author and the work title within the first two sentences.
2. Make certain that your thesis is **arguable** and **defensible**; do not simply state the obvious.
3. Italicize the titles of novels or plays, and enclose the titles of short stories and poems in quotation marks.
4. Use an active voice.

INCORRECT: Hamlet is watched closely by the guards.

CORRECT: The guards watch Hamlet closely.

5. Do not use 2nd person.

INCORRECT: You can see the irony in Hamlet's soliloquy.

CORRECT: The irony in Hamlet's soliloquy is apparent.

6. Use present tense.
7. Avoid simply summarizing the plot; assume readers have read the work you're discussing. Instead, focus on interpreting the text.

INCORRECT: Hamlet sees his father's ghost in Act I.

CORRECT: After seeing his father's ghost in Act I, Hamlet begins to doubt himself for the first time. This doubt marks the beginning of his downfall as the tragic hero.

8. Cite outside sources, even if it is a theory or idea. If you're unsure if you should cite it, cite it anyway.