



Writing a Literary Analysis

To **analyze**, by definition, is to examine, in detail, the structure/makeup of something with the purpose of explaining or interpreting how its parts work together. A literary analysis is a paper on one, or many, of the key elements in a text and how they support a main idea or purpose. When writing a literary analysis, you are **not just identifying elements** in a text, but **analyzing** those specific elements.

Step 1: Identify the Author's Purpose

Identifying the author's purpose will serve as the thesis/backbone of your paper. There will be many purposes uncovered as you read, but choose the one that speaks most to you. This is also defined as a theme of the text. A **theme** is an abstract concept that portrays a message, claim, or life lesson.

Examples of Purpose:

- In the text 'Romeo and Juliet' by William Shakespeare, a main theme is forbidden love.
- In the text 'The Fault in our Stars' by John Green, a main theme is death and coming to terms with morality in the face of illness.

Helpful Questions for Identifying Purpose:

- What main idea did the author want the reader to understand or take away from the text?
- What idea do you, as a reader, feel is most prevalent?

Step 2: Analyze Key Elements

After a purpose is identified, the next step is to figure out how the author portrays this theme and why you came to the conclusion that this theme is both important and prevalent. The elements to be analyzed are **plot, setting, characters, point of view, figurative language, and style**. This will serve as the evidence/support throughout your paper.

Plot

- What main conflicts occurred throughout the story?
- What are the main events of the story? What is the order of these events? Does the order have significance to the purpose?



**Setting:**

- Is there anything to note about the role that time of day plays in the story?
- Is the location or changing of location significant to the purpose of the overall piece?
- Does the author intentionally bring forth any social or cultural contexts to aid their purpose?

Characters:

- How do the characters change throughout the story?
What caused or provoked this change?
- Who is the protagonist? Antagonist?

**Point of View:**

- What is the point of view?
- Why do you think the author chose to write in this perspective?

Style:

- How does the format of the text affect the overall piece?
- Does the word choice play a role in the understanding/interpretation of the text? Are simple, plain words used, or does the writer use higher, more elevated language?

Figurative Language:

- Where and how are metaphors, similes, symbols, etc. used in the story? What are their purposes in the overall functionality of the text?
- Why did the author choose to use these specific examples of figurative language?



Step 3: Connect Ideas

After you have identified a purpose and the key elements in the story, you need to connect the two together. In order to do this, you need to be sure to keep the purpose in mind at all times and remember that every element analysis should be geared towards its role in explaining or emphasizing the purpose you have chose to focus on.

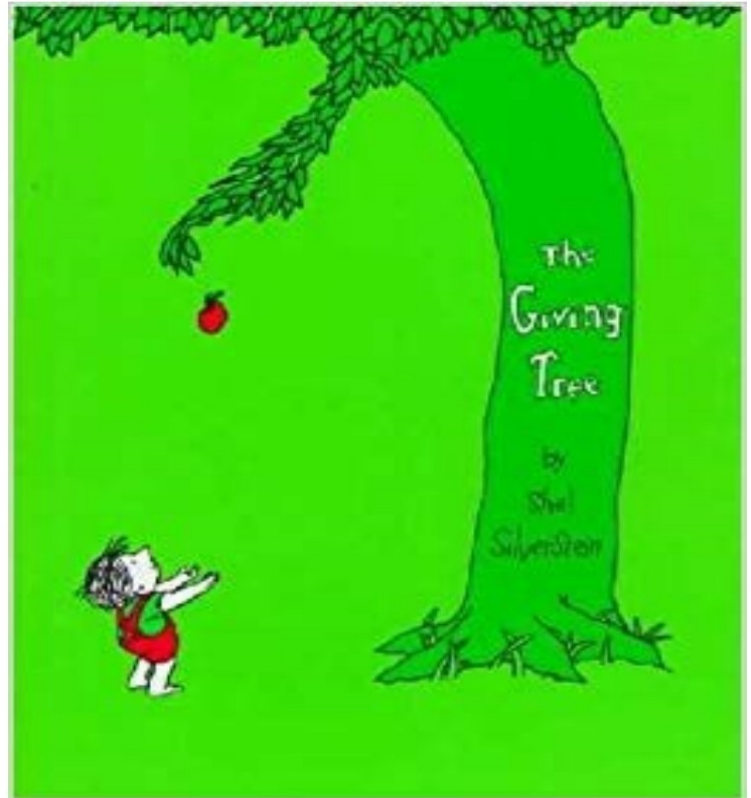
Example

The below example demonstrates the steps taken before beginning to write a literary analysis paper. Our example is taken from Shel Silverstein’s “The Giving Tree”. The author’s purpose is identified before moving on to pulling out and analyzing the key elements in the book: plot, setting, characters, point of view, style, and figurative language.

- **Purpose:** Shel Silverstein portrays the theme of a mother’s love and the extent to which they will go to make their children happy.
- **Plot:** “The Giving Tree” is about the relationship between a young boy and a tree and how their relationship changes over time as the boy grows up, becomes more demanding, and has less time to visit and interact with the tree. The tree sacrifices all she can to make the boy happy, no matter how harmful it is for the tree.
- **Setting:** With the passage of time, the boy ages and his and the tree’s relationship becomes more and more distressed. The tree is only happy when the boy is there with her, yet he is able to spend less and less time with her as he grows older, resulting in her frequent sadness.
- **Characters:** The boy changes a lot throughout the story. As he grows older, his happiness wanes and he has less and less time for the tree. Furthermore, he experiences a shift in priorities from those juvenile concerns of a place to play to more serious issues, such as needing a home for him and his family.
- **Point of View:** The story is told from a third person omniscient perspective so that the audience is able to get insight into each character’s mind and know what each character is doing and feeling.



- **Style:** The simple, straightforward diction of this piece allows for an enjoyable read for the audience, as well as a relatable interpretation of the overall theme. There is quite a bit of repetition in this story in regards to the mention of being happy and time which emphasized what Shel Silverstein wanted his audience to be drawn to.
- **Figurative Language:** The female tree serves as a symbol for a mother, or motherly figure. The increasingly sporadic visits to the tree by the boy symbolize a child's decreasing dependency on their mother as they grow up.



- **Connect Ideas:** After you have identified a purpose and the key elements in the story, you need to create a thesis that shows how these two connect. In other words, you need to show how these key elements play a role in the argument that the text is making about a specific theme. It is important to keep this thesis in mind while analyzing the text because your analysis of the element(s) should **always tie back to the author's purpose.**
 - ⇒ **Example:** Through his use of figurative language, particularly symbols and metaphors, Shel Silverstein portrays the sacrificial nature of a mother's love.

Additional Resources

- [Writing Effectively about Literature](#)
- [Narrative Elements](#)
- [Defining Figurative Language](#)

Further Assistance: For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library or call 815-836-5427.

Sources Consulted: Roane State Owl "Types of Papers: Literary Analysis", "Fiction and Drama" by Jackie White