Writing a Literary Analysis

A routine assignment for students in literature and composition classes is to write a literary analysis. In writing such an analysis, students discuss a work of fiction or poetry in terms of one or more elements of the work. For example, a story may be analyzed in terms of the importance that setting plays to the story; in terms of a particular problem it presents to the reader; in terms of specific symbolism in the work; or in terms of a character’s or an event’s role in the story.

A common approach is to analyze a work’s main idea or one of its main ideas. In doing this sort of analysis, one should keep in mind that the main ideas in poems, short stories, plays and novels are rarely stated. Instead, the reader has to infer from the work itself what the idea or ideas are. The reader must ask, "What is this story about?" "What is the author trying to say?" "What point is the author making about society or the individual or war or love or freedom or religion or whatever?"

If you were analyzing a story for its main idea, you would first assume that the writer does indeed have a point to make or something to communicate to the reader. Ask yourself what that point is, and the answer can serve as the basis for an analysis of the main idea. For example, in "Little Red Riding Hood," the main point might be that it is dangerous to be inexperienced since Red gets into a deadly situation as a result of her inexperience with forest travel. The main idea could just as easily be that one should trust one's first impressions since Red is at first frightened and wary of the wolf but later is fooled into complacency.

Once you have revealed what you believe to be the main idea of the work (your thesis), you must assemble evidence to support your assertion. That is, you must tell your reader what passages or words or events in the story or poem have led you to the main idea. As you reveal evidence for your thesis, you will probably find the need to quote passages from the work. When you do, make sure that the quotes are thoroughly explained and smoothly integrated into your paper. The attached example paper shows how this is done.
Some General Considerations

- Avoid the use of the second person (the pronoun you) in making your point. Although we do this all the time when speaking, it makes for a sloppy sounding argument in writing—except in cases such as this handout, in which the analysis is of a process which is being taught to the reader. The first person (the pronoun I) is also taboo unless you are supporting your argument with personal experience: Do not say, "I will present the reasons why . . ." or "I feel* that the author is saying . . ."

- Also stay away from writing that focuses on the writing process ("This paper will attempt to explain the symbolism in The Scarlet Letter . . .") instead of the topic at hand ("The Scarlet Letter is rife with symbolism . . ."). Talking about your paper weakens your argument and is considered lazy writing.

- It is practically cheating to use such contrivances as "In conclusion" and "Secondly†." A proper conclusion is an unambiguous closing and should sound like one even without a label. Similarly, the order of your argument should make sense and follow some kind of pattern, such as least to most important; it should be clear why a particular support area is second or third, not merely that it is second or third.

- The connection and relationship between support areas in your paper should be signaled by transition sentences that guide the reader from one point to the next. There are innumerable ways to do this. Don’t limit yourself to old standbys such as Furthermore, Moreover, Next and In addition.

- A literary analysis (as well as a review of any book, film or play) is written in the present tense, as if you are the narrator.

* A special note on feel. Feel should be reserved for feeling or emotions, and cannot adequately express beliefs or even strong convictions. It is a conversational device we have developed to avoid disagreement in our culture. One cannot, after all, argue against a feeling. If you are expressing an opinion, "I think" or "I believe" is appropriate, but often you’ll find that even these can be eliminated. "I feel" goes with sad, confident, sorry, rotten, pretty, good, pretty good and other abstractions, not with " . . . that a tax increase is unnecessary."

†The "adverb" secondly, though we hear it all the time, should, of course, be the ordinal second. The incorrectness of the adverbal -ly becomes obvious when we imagine such transitions as fifthly and eighthly.
Short Story Summary and Analysis by Joshua Smart

Example: Summary of "Revelations"

A warm fall morning in America's Bible belt during the Depression finds Mrs. Turpin sitting in a doctor's waiting room passing out her judgments upon everyone there. Occasionally she receives nods of agreement from the "courtesy lady," and intermittently an old "white trash" woman philosophizes on their rulings while Mrs. Turpin's skinny, submissive husband, Claud, sits in the corner and waits for the doctor. Finally a fat girl fights back with accusations and by throwing a book at Mrs. Turpin.

This action results in the clearing of the office and the shattering of Mrs. Turpin’s illusory empire. Mr. and Mrs. Turpin go home and lie on the bed, pensively staring at the ceiling till early sunset. Mrs. Turpin goes out to her pig parlor, and, while contemplating the sunset and her day, she receives the revelation that we’re all in life together and that no one is really above anyone else.

Example: Analysis of "Revelations"

In the short story "Revelations," Flannery O'Connor shows that self-discovery is a painful but ultimately rewarding process. Mrs. Turpin, the main character, is a corpulent, egotistical woman who physically resembles a trunkless elephant perched on black pumps waiting for the opportunity to verbally pounce on those who might venture too close. She is so big that an average office chair "held her tight as a corset" (139). Her self-image, meanwhile, is of a person who is blessed above all others by God, and who can do no wrong.

Often "Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people" (195). She uses this pastime to reassure herself that no one is more chosen in God's eyes than she. Mrs. Turpin thinks that anyone who defies her classification or might possibly be above her deserves to die; she imagines them "all crammed in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven" (196). O'Connor uses this powerful image to demonstrate Mrs. Turpin’s ignorance of herself: She doesn't think of herself as evil, yet to express herself she borrows an idea that was responsible for millions of deaths.

Mrs. Turpin's self-discovery begins with a rebuke from a fat girl in a doctor's office waiting room. She is reading a thick, hard cover book on human development (an allusion to the imminent change in Mrs. Turpin's ethos). In response to Mrs. Turpin's self-satisfied comments on her excess weight, the girl throws the book at Mrs. Turpin, striking her "directly over the left eye" (206). Such a trauma leaves her "entirely hollow except her heart which swung from side to side as if it were agitated in a great drum of
flesh" (206); she is emptied of her self-image. The girl who has thrown the book raises her head and says, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (207). This insult, combined with the shock of being hit with a book, acts as the catalyst to Mrs. Turpin's self-discovery.

Returning home, Mrs. Turpin continues along the path of self-understanding. She pulls the shades and lies on her bed, mentally wrestling with the day's events, occasionally raising her fist and, in an attempt to protect herself from the anguish of self-knowledge, making a "small stabbing motion over her chest as if she was defending her innocence" (210).

O'Connor emphasizes the pain of the self-discovery process when Mrs. Turpin has a personal talk with God out back by the pig parlor. "What do you send me a message like that for?" the distraught woman says. "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" (215). Her pain is evident when with hurt and anger Mrs. Turpin roars out, "Who do you think you are?" (216), venting her torment. At this point, O'Connor specifically points to both the negative and positive aspects of self-discovery when she describes the knowledge-gaining process as both "abysmal" and "life-giving" (217).

The ultimate value of this experience is revealed when Mrs. Turpin is consumed by a revelation in the form of a colorful procession of everyone she knows ascending a road formed by the ribbon of hues projected by the setting sun; Mrs. Turpin brings up the rear, her material life and illusions of righteousness stripped away. Her journey of self-discovery has brought her from the image of humanity in cattle cars to the image of humanity rising to heaven on a rainbow staircase. With the healing of revelation, accompanied by a chorus of crickets, Mrs. Turpin makes her way back to the house, fulfilled. Having gone through the flames of self-refinement, Mrs. Turpin sees her true self and her place in God's plan. She has learned to see the beauty in life and graciously accepts it. As she walks back to the house, she hears "the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah" (218).