A literary analysis poses an interpretive question about a literary text and then uses that question to explain the text, its author, or the historical context in which it was written. Your aim in a literary analysis is to provide your readers with new and interesting insights into the work by examining it closely.

~ Literary analyses explain the meaning of a text, analyze its structure and features, and examine it through the lenses of historical, cultural, social, biographical, and other contexts. An effective literary analysis helps readers understand what makes a literary work thought-provoking, revealing, or enjoyable. Literary analyses also contribute to the larger scholarly conversation about the meaning and purpose of literature.

When writing a literary analysis, you shouldn’t feel like you need to prove that you have the “correct” or “right” interpretation. Instead, your literary analysis should invite your readers to consider the work from new and interesting angles, while showing them how a particular angle can lead to fresh insights.

The literary analysis genre overlaps in many ways with the rhetorical analysis genre, which is discussed in Chapter 9. Both genres study texts closely to understand why they have particular effects on readers. Rhetorical analyses, however, tend to study all forms of texts, while literary analyses usually examine fictional or poetic texts, often using them as ways to understand humanity and culture.

Literary analyses are used in a variety of courses, not just English courses. For example, a history class studying the Progressive Era in America might read Upton Sinclair’s novel The Jungle. A class examining the sociology of poverty might read a short story by Edwidge Danticat (one of which is included in this chapter). Professors across the disciplines assign literary works that provide insights into the subjects they want to explore with their students.
Literary Analyses

These diagrams show two possible basic organizations for a literary analysis, but other arrangements will work, too. You should adjust these organizational patterns to fit your topic, angle, purpose, readers, and context.

Introduction

Targeted summary or description of the text

Analysis: First point

Analysis: Second point

Analysis: Third point

Summary and analysis of first part of text

Summary and analysis of second part of text

Summary and analysis of third part of text

Conclusion

Overview

Literal analyses...

- An introduction should ground the analysis and drive the analysis forward.
- Targeted summary features that are useful for your readers.
- Quoted material reinforces interpretation.
- Support for your interpretation must be taken from the text.
- A conclusion should reinforce the significance of the analysis.

(Decide to page 141)

ONE STUDY

Literary analysis of a couple of useful purpose, readers and context.

(Turn to page 141)

Doing...
Overview

Literary analyses have these features:

• An introduction that identifies the literary work you are analyzing and its background. The introduction should also identify an interpretive question that will drive the analysis and provide an angle you will follow as you interpret the story for your readers.

• Targeted summaries or descriptions of the text that focus only on the events or features that play a key role in your interpretation. These summaries and descriptions are usually brief.

• Quoted material taken directly from the text that helps to move your interpretation forward and illustrate your points.

• Support for your interpretation that uses solid reasoning to show how your interpretation makes sense and offers insights into the interpretive question. Evidence is taken from the work itself (and sometimes other places) to support your interpretation.

• A conclusion that helps readers understand the big picture by describing the significance of the interpretation or by pointing out the additional questions that need to be addressed.

Literary analyses are written in a variety of ways. The diagram on page 132 shows a couple of useful organizations that you can alter to fit the needs of your topic, angle, purpose, readers, and context.

ONE STUDENT’S WORK

Literary Analyses

(Turn to page 148 to read “A Wall of Fire Rising”)

Doing the Right Thing in Edwidge Danticat’s “A Wall of Fire Rising”

Nick Baca

Edwidge Danticat’s “A Wall of Fire Rising” is on the surface a fairly simple story, but it concludes mysteriously as a powerful and disturbing meditation about love, memory, and doing what’s right. The story includes just three main characters. Guy and Lili are the dreadfully poor but happy, loving, and responsible parents of Little Guy. The parents’ greatest hope is to protect...
Little Guy from the meanness of their world and to provide him with the possibility of a bright future. The action is also quite simple, most of it occurring among just the three of them. However, in the final climactic scene, both the characters and action become complex, strange, and very disturbing. In fact, Guy's actions—stealing the factory owner's balloon and jumping to his death as his family looks on—seem completely out of character. He is clearly a loving and responsible father and husband, but his final deed seems perverse, selfish, and horribly irresponsible.

Why does Guy do this crazy, horrible final deed, depriving his family of a father and husband, just for a few self-indulgent moments on a joy ride? Strangely enough, seen from the perspective of Haitian poverty and Guy's desire to leave something important for his son, Guy's final deed, perhaps, makes terribly perfect sense. It could be that Little Guy's memorized speeches bring Guy to a new understanding about his desires for the “true freedom” of Boukman's speeches. Guy wants more for his son than food and shelter; he wants Little Guy to have a lasting memory of Guy that provides him with the courage to pursue true freedom. Guy also wants to pursue true freedom for the sake of his own father's memory, breaking the intergenerational chain of oppression and poverty. Guy's final deed is described best, perhaps, by one of the market women's shouts—"Beautiful."

Guy's final deed could be interpreted as merely a cowardly escape from a hopeless life of crushing poverty and meanness, but that interpretation does not match up with what we learn about Guy and about his relationship to Lili and Little Guy. It's true that hunger and despair are always close at hand. For instance, the narrator spends several paragraphs describing Lili's methods for "kill[ing] the vermin in the stomach that made poor children hungry" (58). We learn also that Lili spends much of her effort each day to trying "to scrape together that night's meal" (70). Their home is small and dark; Guy has never even seen his wife unclothed "in broad daylight" (69). The outside world is described always as menacing. For instance, the sounds outside their shack are described this way: "Lilly could hear the whispers of the market women, their hisses and swearing as their sandals dug into the sharp-edged rocks on the road" (69). It's true, such a world might drive a person to despair and suicide.

However, while Guy's life is certainly full of despair, it is also full of love and hope. That hope is energized powerfully by his son's memorized speeches from the Haitian revolutionary, Boukman. The Boukman of Little Guy's speeches, like Guy, looks forward to creating a better world, and not for himself but for those living now and those from the past: "Not only those..."
people whose dark hollow faces I see daily in the fields, but all those souls who have gone ahead to haunt my dreams.” Boukman, like Guy, struggles not just for himself but also for the memories of “a loving father, a valiant love, a beloved friend” (79). Similarly, Guy is no self-centered father, as all his actions show. For instance, his son “never goes to bed hungry” (74), and Guy does “not want to set a bad example for his son by indulging in very small pleasures” (70). Furthermore, Guy has a soul mate in Lili. Although they have their disagreements, Lili understands Guy’s deepest longings, and Guy knows that very well, as he explains the night before he steals the balloon:

“Sometimes I know you want to believe in me,” he said. “I know you’re wishing things for me. You want me to work at the mill. You want me to get a pretty house for us. I know you want these things too, but mostly you want me to feel like a man. That’s why you’re not one to worry about, Lili, I know you can take things as they come.” (73)

Although Guy’s life is difficult, he is neither selfish nor irresponsible. On the contrary, the meaning of his life seems to come from his hopes for his Lili and especially for Little Guy.

The final scene of this short story is horrible and sad, but it could also be seen, strangely, as beautiful and even uplifting. Actually, both sets of emotions are present, and the tension between them is what gives the conclusion so much power. It seems pretty clear that Guy waits until Lili and Little Guy have arrived at the market before “climbing over the side of the basket” and then, apparently, letting go, “hurting down towards the crowd” so that he “crash[es] not far from where Lili and the boy were standing, his blood immediately soaking the landing spot” (77). How strange and awful. What kind of person commits suicide in front of his loved ones? Isn’t that the deed of the “disgruntled” family member who wants to take the ultimate revenge on his family? But that is not the case here, and both Little Guy and Lili seem to understand that immediately. Lili claims him, proudly it seems: “‘He is mine,’ she said to young Assad. ‘He is my family. He belongs to me’” (78). Over his corpse, Little Guy once again recites his lines from Boukman, this time not in the character of Boukman but perhaps in the character of his own father, this time not as a boy in a play but with “his voice rising to a man’s grieving roar” (79). Lili too seems to understand perfectly. When the foreman asks her “Do you want to close the eyes?” she responds with a knowing “No, leave them open. . . . My husband, he likes to look at the sky” (80).
Danticat's story is so disturbing because it just doesn't make sense that Guy's suicide could result merely from despair and self-indulgence, as both Lili and Little Guy seem to understand immediately. And yet Guy's horrible final deed, his horrible suicide carried out in the sight of his family, actually makes a kind of perfect sense in the context of Guy's world. It is still hard to accept that suicide is ever "doing the right thing," but there is much more to Guy's action, at least in his mind and perhaps in actuality. Stealing the balloon is a symbolic gesture toward freedom, not an actual attempt to gain freedom. (If Guy had wanted to actually pursue freedom, he would have remained in the balloon to try and land in a place where freedom is possible.) Little Guy's Boukman says, "I call on everyone and anyone so that we shall all let out one piercing cry that we may either live freely or we should die" (71). Perhaps Guy has answered Boukman's call with his own "piercing cry" to "live freely or die." His cry looks both to the future, to inspire his own son, and to the past, as a son in memory of his "loving father." In this way, this horrible, mysterious, and tragic tale is actually uplifting and beautiful.

Works Cited

Inventing Your Literary Analysis's Content
The first challenge in writing a literary analysis is finding an interesting interpretive question about the work you are studying. As you read and research the text, look for signs and evidence that might offer insights that go beyond the obvious.

Read, Reread, Explore
If the literary work is a short story or novel, read it at least twice. If it is a poem, read it again and again, silently and aloud, to get a feel for how the language works and how the poem makes you feel. As you read the text, mark or underline anything that intrigues or puzzles you. Write observations and questions in the margins.

Inquiring: What's Interesting Here?
As you are reading and exploring the text, try to come up with an interesting question that focuses on the work's genre, plot, characters, or use of language. The goal here is to find your interpretive question, which will serve as your angle into the text.
Inventing Your Literary Analysis’s Content

Explore the Genre. In your literature classes, your professors will use the term genre somewhat differently than it is used in this book. Literary works fall into four major genres: fiction, poetry, drama, and literary nonfiction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literary Genre</th>
<th>Subgenres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>short stories, novellas, novels, detective novels, science fiction, romance, mysteries, horror, fantasy, historical fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>limericks, sonnets, ballads, epic poems, odes, villanelle, reggae, sestinas, open verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>plays, closet dramas, comedies, tragedies, romances, musicals, operas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literary nonfiction</td>
<td>memoirs, profiles (of people, places, events), biographies, histories, essays, nature writing, religion, politics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While examining the text, ask yourself why the author chose this genre or sub-genre of literature and not another one. Why a poem rather than a story? Why a short story rather than a novel?

Also, look for places where the author follows the genre or strays from it. How does the genre constrain what the author can do? How does the author bend the genre to fit the story that he or she wants to tell? How does the author use this genre in a unique or interesting way?

Explore the Plot. Plot refers not just to the sequence of events but also to how the events arise from the main conflict in the story. How do the events in the story unfold? Which events are surprising or puzzling? What is the complication or conflict on which the narrative is based? How do the characters react to it? And how is this conflict resolved?

Keep in mind that conflict often arises from characters’ values and beliefs and from the setting in which the characters reside. What conflicts do you sense in the story as you read? Are there conflicts between characters, between characters and their surroundings, between characters’ aspirations, or between competing values and beliefs?

Finally, pay special attention to the critical moment in the story, called the climax. What happens and why is this moment so crucial? How is the conflict resolved, for better or worse?

Explore the Characters. The characters are the people who inhabit the story or poem. Who are they? What kinds of people are they? Why do they act as they do? What are their values, beliefs, and desires? How do they interact with each other, or with their environment and setting? You might explore the psychology or motives of the characters, trying to figure out the meaning behind their decisions and actions.
Explore the Setting. What is the time and place of the story? What is the broader setting—culture, social sphere, historic period? What is the narrow setting—the details about the particular time and place? How does the setting constrain the characters by establishing their beliefs, values, and actions? How does the setting become a symbol that colors the way readers interpret the work? Is the setting realistic, fantastical, ironic, or magical?

Explore the Language and Tone. How does the author’s tone or choices of words color your attitude toward the characters, setting, or theme? What feeling or mood does the work’s tone evoke, and how does that tone evolve as the story or poem moves forward?

Also, pay attention to the author’s use of metaphors, similes, and analogies. How does the author use these devices to deepen the meaning of the text or bring new ideas to light? What images are used to describe the characters, events, objects, or setting? Do those images become metaphors or symbols that color the way readers understand the work, or the way the characters see their world?

Literary works usually cannot be broken down into simple tidy messages or lessons, but authors want their work to affect readers in some way. They want their words to influence the way readers view the world and what they believe. So as you are exploring the text from different angles, try to figure out what message or theme the author is trying to convey.

Researching: What Background Do You Need?

While most literary analyses focus primarily on the literary text itself, you should also research the historical background of a work or author. Depending on the assignment and where you want to take it, you can use Internet or print sources to find resources that provide insights into the work, its impact, and the author’s intentions.

Research the Author. Learning about the author can often lead to interpretive insights. The author’s life experiences may help you understand his or her intentions. You might study the events that were happening in the author’s time, because the work itself might directly or indirectly respond to them.

Research the Historical Setting. You could also do research about the text’s historical setting. If the story takes place in a real setting, you can read about the historical, cultural, social, and political forces that were in play at that time and in that place.

Research the Science. Human and physical sciences can often give insights into human behavior, social interactions, or natural phenomena. Sometimes additional research into psychology, sociology, biology, and other sciences can give you interesting insights into characters and events.
Organizing and Drafting Your Literary Analysis

So far, you have read the literary work carefully, taken notes, done some research, and perhaps written some informal responses. Now, how should you dive in and begin drafting? Here are some ideas for getting your ideas down on the page.

The Introduction

Introductions in literary analyses usually include a few common features:

Include Background Information That Leads to Your Interpretive Question. Draw your reader into your analysis by starting with a question or information that your reader is already familiar with, and then move steadily toward your interpretive question and your claim. Show your reader why this is an interesting question that will lead to new insights about the work or other broader concerns.

State Your Interpretive Question Prominently and Clearly. Make sure your reader understands the question that your analysis will investigate. If necessary, make it obvious by saying something like, “This analysis will explore why...” That way, your readers will clearly understand your purpose.

State Your Claim at or Near the End of the Introduction. State your main claim about the literary work. Your main claim should answer your interpretive question. Figure 8.1 on page 140 shows how a few interpretive questions might be answered by some possible claims.

The Body of Your Analysis

In the body paragraphs, you should take your reader point by point through your analysis, showing them that your interpretation makes sense and leads to interesting new insights.

Summarize and Describe Key Aspects of the Work. You can assume that your readers will be familiar with the literary work, so you don’t need to provide a complete summary or fully explain who characters are. But there may be aspects of the work that are crucial to your analysis and that need to be brought to your readers’ attention. You may wish to focus on a particular scene, or on certain features, such as a character, interactions between characters, language, symbols, plot features, and so forth. Discuss only those aspects of the work that are crucial to understanding your analysis.

Build Your Case, Step by Step. Keep in mind that the goal of a literary analysis is not to prove that your interpretation is correct but to show that it is plausible and leads to interesting insights into the text and related matters. Take your readers through your analysis point by point. Back up each key point with reasoning and evidence, and make connections to your main claim.
### Interpretive Questions and Interpretive Claims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretive Questions</th>
<th>Interpretive Claims</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why does Guy (who seems to be a loving and responsible parent and husband) steal the</td>
<td>Guy has been deeply affected by Boukman’s words, believing that the ultimate gift he can give to his family is to follow Boukman’s rallying words that “we shall all let out one piercing cry that we may either live freely or we should die.” Stealing the balloon is such a “piercing cry.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>balloon and jump to his death?</td>
<td>Little Guy’s recitation of Boukman’s great speeches about living freely inspires Guy to break the cycle of despair that has devastated his father’s life and his own life, and that will likely devastate Little Guy’s life. It is the ultimate gift both for his father (justifying his struggles) and for his son (inspiring him to live freely).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The psychic damage of pervasive poverty is so strong that even a loving and responsible father and husband like Guy can be driven to horrible deeds.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| What does the balloon represent for Guy?                                                | Representing the possibility of escape and freedom, the balloon provides Guy with the opportunity to prove himself as a capable man (not just a man whose only worth is as a latrine cleaner), one who deserves to pursue his freedom. |
|                                                                                         | By moving back and forth between Guy’s and Lili’s loving shanty and the inhospitable shantytown, the story paints a stark contrast between the two worlds and shows how love and responsibility are perhaps impossible in a world of such dreadful poverty. |

| How and why does the narrator contrast the home setting with the public settings of the  | The environment in which Guy lives is all-important, as it drives his character toward feeling deep sadness about the past and keen anxiety about the future. Hence, the setting drives the characters, and the characters drive the plot. By showing the reader how powerful such an environment can be, Danticat creates a story that makes an emotional and very effective argument against poverty. |
| Haitian shantytown?                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                    |
| How does the setting drive the character and plot?                                      |                                                                                                                                                    |

Cite and Quote the Text to Back Up and Illustrate Your Points. The evidence for your interpretation should come mostly from the text itself. Show your readers what the text says by quoting and citing it.

Include Outside Support, Where Appropriate. Although you can bring in concepts and ideas from outside the text, make sure your ideas are anchored by what is actually written in the text you are studying. Don’t just use the text as a springboard to dive off into some other topic. Stay focused on what happens in the literary work.
The Conclusion

Your conclusion should bring your readers around to the main point that you expressed in the introduction. Your conclusion should also point the reader in new directions. Up to this point in the literary analysis, your readers will expect you to closely follow the text. In the conclusion, though, they will allow more leeway. In a sense, you’ve earned the right to speculate and consider other ideas.

So, if you want, take on the larger issues that were dealt with in this literary work. What conclusions or questions does your analysis suggest? What challenges does the author believe we face? What is the author really trying to say about people, events, and the world we live in?

Choosing an Appropriate Style

Literary analyses invite readers into a conversation about a literary work. Therefore, the style should be straightforward but also inviting and encouraging.

Use the “Literary Present” Tense

The literary present tense involves talking about the work and the characters as though they live in the present day. For example, you might say,

- Little Guy is excited about his role in the play, and while his mother is happy for Little Guy, his father's reactions suggest he is troubled by the speech.

- Many of Langston Hughes's poems recount the struggles of African Americans but are often tinged with definite optimism and hope.

When discussing the author historically, however, use the past tense.

- Langston Hughes was well-known in his time as a Harlem Renaissance poet. He often touched on themes of equality and expressed a guarded optimism about equality of treatment for all races.

Integrate Quoted Text

Weave words and ideas from the literary text into your words and ideas, and avoid quotations that are detached from your ideas. For example, you can include a quotation at the end of your own sentence:

- The outside world is described always as menacing. For instance, the sounds outside their shack are described this way: “Lilly could hear the whispers of the market women, their hisses and swearing as their sandals dug into the sharp-edged rocks on the road” (69).

You could also take the same sentence from the story and weave a “tissue” of quotations into your words:
CHAPTER 8  Literary Analyses

The world outside their home is described as menacing. Even “the whispers of the market women” are just “hisses and swearing,” and even the road, with its sharp-edged rocks” seems hostile (69).

Make sure any sentences that include quotations remain grammatically correct. When you omit words from your quotation, use ellipses.

**When You Quote, Tell Readers What You Want Them to Notice.** Whenever you take a quote from the text, explain how the quotation supports your point and your overall claim. Don’t leave your readers hanging with a quotation and no commentary. Tell them what the quote means.

**Move Beyond Personal Response**

Literary analyses are always partly personal, but they are not merely personal. While your professor may encourage you to delve into your personal reactions in your response papers, in your literary analysis you will need to move beyond that personal response to a discussion of the literary work itself. In other words, describe what the text does, not just what it does to you.

**Cast Interpretations as Speculative.** Literary analyses are interpretive, not absolute and final. When you want your readers to understand that you are interpreting, use words and phrases such as “perhaps,” “it could be,” “may,” “it seems clear that,” “seems,” and “probably.”

Little Guy and Lili seem to immediately understand that Guy has been motivated by something more noble than just a joy ride in a balloon. For instance, Lili expresses no sense of shame about her husband’s actions, as she claims his body proudly: “He is mine; she said to young Assad. ‘He is my family. He belongs to me’” (78).

**Designing Your Literary Analysis**

Typically, literary analyses use a simple and traditional design, following the MLA format for manuscripts: double-spaced, easy-to-read font, one-inch margins, MLA documentation style (see Chapter 27). Always consult with your professor about which format he or she wants you to use.

Headings and graphics are becoming more common in literary analyses. If you want to use headings or graphics, ask your professor if they are allowed. Headings will help you organize your analysis and make transitions between larger sections. In some cases, you may want to add graphics, especially if the literary work you are analyzing uses illustrations or if you have a graphic that would illustrate or help explain a key element in your analysis.

Design features like headers and page numbers are usually welcome, because they help professors and your classmates keep the pages in order. Also, if you discuss your work in class, page numbers help your readers easily find what is being discussed.
Revising and Editing Your Literary Analysis

Once you have drafted your literary analysis, take the time to make sure that you have created a piece that will engage readers and lead them to new and interesting insights about the literary work you are analyzing. Here are some issues to consider as you revise and edit your draft:

**Make Sure the Interpretive Question and Its Importance Are Clearly Stated.** If your readers are to engage with you in a conversation about the literary work, they first need to understand your interpretive question and the angle you are exploring. They also need to understand why your interpretive question is important or interesting and how it will lead to insights about the work that go beyond a surface reading.

**Check Your Main Claim, or What Your Interpretation Reveals About the Work.** Your reader will also want to completely understand what your interpretation reveals about the work. State your main claim clearly, prominently, and completely near the end of your introduction. You may have already written a main claim (working thesis) early in the drafting process, but as you fill out your analysis, you will get a better and better sense of exactly what your interpretation is about and why it is interesting and important. Return to your claim again and again to adjust and refine it.

**Check Whether Your Analysis Remains Focused on Your Interpretive Question and Main Claim.** Every paragraph should further develop your interpretation. Examine your topic sentences and make sure each paragraph moves your interpretation further along. If you find yourself going off on a tangent, revise or eliminate that part of the analysis.

**Make Sure You Cite, Quote, and Explain Specific Parts of the Literary Text.** Use the text as evidence to support your claims. Although you may wish to bring in ideas and sources from outside the text, make sure your reader understands exactly how the material in the literary text itself leads you to your interpretation.

**Verify That You Have Cited the Text Appropriately.** When you quote the text or describe a specific part of it, your readers will want to know exactly where in the text they can find that material. So use MLA documentation style to cite any quotes or sources. Also, include a “Works Cited” page that identifies the edition of your literary text and any other sources you consulted.

Make sure you spend ample time revising and editing your work. The real reader of your literary analysis is probably a professor, perhaps an English professor. That kind of reader is more sensitive than most to good (and bad) organization and style. So the extra time spent revising and editing will greatly improve his or her impression of your work.