



Tips for Analyzing and Understanding Literature

How to Begin: Gaining Context

- Gain historical and personal context on the author
 - Literature is an extension of the authors thoughts, feelings, and morals. Context can help describe why an author would feel a certain way about topics, and may provide key insight into the reasoning behind a piece of literature

Example: The poet Amy Lowell wrote the poem “September, 1918.” Understanding that Lowell lived through World War I, and had seen immense suffering is crucial in understanding that “September, 1918” is a war-time poem, and holds many metaphors about the brutality of war.

Setting

- The setting of a piece of literature sets the parameters of the story, and gives it a box it can either fit into, or break out of
 - Pay attention to the setting to gain context to the plot, actions, and characters

Example: In John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums," the story takes place in California during the early 20th century. This is important to note because during this time, California was labeled the "promise land of America" – where citizens were promised rewards for their hard work. However, the main characters in the story struggle tremendously. In this case, the setting helps show the irony in the fallacy of the American dream.

****Note the importance of historical context as well**

Identify the Characters

- Notice how characters are described, their word choice, interactions with other characters, location, gender, and time period
 - Characters can give key insight into thematic and moralistic ideas – especially about humanity

Example: Sui Sin Far's short story "Mrs. Spring Fragrance" tells of a Chinese-American couple who struggle with how to define their marriage; either in the traditional Chinese sense, or with a more Americanized flare. Understanding the characters and their identities, is key to understanding Far's overall theme of the pressures of assimilation, and its effects on immigrants.



Notice the Abnormal

- Whether it be capitalizing “random words” or unique word choice, every detail in literature is important
 - Unfamiliar tendencies are often an author's way to indicate that something is particularly important

Example: In Emily Dickinson’s poem 260, she writes, “I’m Nobody! Who are you? / Are you Nobody too?” The capitalization of “Nobody” may seem random, but upon further investigation, it is revealed the word “Nobody” is the name by which Dickinson’s speaker is identifying. Understanding this is crucial to understanding the overall message of the poem.

Motifs and Repetition

- Pay attention to the repeated references authors may incorporate into their works
 - The repetition of a word or idea is not because the author is lazy! It's indicative of an author trying to relay something important

Example: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Clothes" constantly references colors and what they mean to the main character. Making note of this repetition is important in understanding the symbolism of both Indian and American ideals, and the formation of a transcultural identity.

Annotating



As you go through any text, highlight, underline, and make notes on anything that stands out to you



Make notes and leave comments in the margins of texts– it helps jog your memory when you reread a passage

Even if you think it's insignificant, if it stands out to you – it's probably important

Final Thoughts

01

Every detail in literature – no matter how small, is incredibly important to the overall “take-away” of the piece

02

All words, ideas, phrases, and punctuation are deliberate in literature, otherwise, why would the author include it!

03

Take your time when reading any piece of literature. Make sure you soak in and think about everything you’re reading and think about what the author is trying to tell you.