Critical Analysis

A critical analysis of a piece of literature, as the name implies, analyzes a work of literature by separating it into its main components. Writers ask themselves questions about the different elements of fiction that make up the work to discover the author’s motivation for writing it as well as to set forth an overall controlling theme or major message of the story.

Very often, college writers think a critical analysis is just a summary of the events of a short story or novel. This is not the right approach. To analyze means breaking up into elements. In this case, by looking closely at the elements of fiction present in a story, writers can set forth a theme or major message supported by detailed analysis of two or three of these elements. In essence, critical analysis writing is argumentative and support comes directly from the piece of literature being analyzed.

The Elements of Fiction

- **Theme**: this refers to the major message or “moral” of the story. This is the driving impression an author sets forth for an audience through writing.
- **Setting**: this is the physical and temporal place where the story takes place. It often helps develop character traits, sets the tone/atmosphere for the story and suggests symbolic meaning.
- **Point of view**: this refers to the voice of the narrator in the story, who may or may not be the author.
- **Plot**: the series of actions that happen in the story, starting with establishment of the conflict, the climax, and the resolution.
- **Character(s)**: these are the individuals in the story who carry out the actions in the plot or are engaged in the story’s conflict.
- **Symbolism**: this refers to elements of the story (objects, characters, setting elements) which stand for something else with a particular meaning other than what they represent; for example, a color may stand for death or an animal for another trait or abstract concept (a soul, a feeling, etc.).

Writing a Critical Analysis

The first thing writers must do is read the story and understand its message. Some writers may need to read the story two or three times to fully understand what elements of fiction are the ones that set forth the theme of the story. Once writers identify a theme, they need to state it clearly in a thesis statement along with the elements of fiction that help the writer understand this theme. Each body paragraph will then develop each chosen element of fiction using adequate details and support from the story and any secondary sources (depending on the instructions for the assignment).

A stumbling block for writers is avoiding summarizing the story when discussing the elements of fiction. A good practice to avoid this is to start the paragraph with a clear explanation of the
element of fiction, followed by examples from the story that help prove how this element adds to the theme. If discussing plot, writers must choose only parts of the story that are important and focus on explaining them for the reader to understand how these actions expose the story’s theme. The only summary included in a critical analysis appears in the introduction, where the writer provides a condensed version of the story to familiarize the audience with it.

**Questions to deconstruct/understand the elements of fiction**

**Character**: who is the protagonist of the story? Does the protagonist change throughout the story, or does he/she remain the same? Is there an antagonist? What motivates their actions? What does the main conflict say about the character’s thoughts and actions? How do the other elements of the story help establish and develop character traits?

**Setting**: What time period or time of day does it take place in? What does the setting do to help enhance the theme and the characters? Would the theme be different if the setting changed? Do changes in setting affect the resolution of the conflict, or the characters’ personalities?

**Plot**: what is the main conflict in the story? What events lead up to this conflict? How does the resolution of the conflict add to the overall theme? Which aspects of the plot help shape and develop characters in the story?

**Point of view**: who is narrating the story? What type of narrator is it? What information is revealed through omniscience (this is when the narrator knows everything, even what goes on in the characters’ minds) how would the theme change if the story was narrated by the protagonist, or the antagonist?

**Symbolism**: what are some of the symbols present in the story? What objects, animals or situations present a deeper meaning than simple face value? Is the setting symbolic? Why? What role does symbolism play in establishing character, and the overall message the writer gives in the story?

**Theme**: what is the main message in the story? What does the story expose that can be related to human experience? What elements make it evident that this is the message the author is setting forth in the story?

Some information courtesy of: