

# CHAPTER 50

## Reading and Writing About Literature

By Sylvan Barnet

Why read literature? Let's approach this question indirectly by asking why people *write* literature. A thousand years ago a Japanese writer, Lady Murasaki, offered an answer. Here is one of her characters talking about what motivates a writer:

Again and again something in one's own life or in the life around one will seem so important that one cannot bear to let it pass into oblivion. There must never come a time, the writer feels, when people do not know about this.

When we read certain works—Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji* is one of them—we share this feeling; we are caught up in the writer's world, whether it is the Denmark of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or the America of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. We read literature because it gives us an experience that seems important, usually an experience that is both new and familiar. A common way of putting this is to say that reading broadens us and helps us understand our own experience.

### 50a Using the methods and evidence of literary analysis

When we read nonliterary writings, it may be enough to get the gist of the argument; in fact, we may have to peer through a good deal of wordiness to find the heart of the matter—say, three claims on behalf of capital punishment. But when we read a story, a poem, or a play, we must pay extremely close attention to what might be called the feel of the words. For instance, the word *woods* in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has a rural, folksy quality that *forest* doesn't have, and many such small distinctions contribute to the poem's effect.

Literary authors are concerned with presenting human experience concretely, with *showing* rather than *telling*. Consider the following proverb and an unmemorable paraphrase of it:

A rolling stone gathers no moss.

If a rock is always moving around, vegetation won't have a chance to grow on it.

The familiar original offers a small but complete world: hard (stone) and soft (moss), inorganic and organic, at rest and in motion. The original is also shapely: each noun (*stone*, *moss*) has one syllable, and each word of motion (*rolling*, *gathers*) has two syllables, with the accent on the first of the two. Such relationships unify the proverb into a pleasing whole that stays in our minds.

#### 1 Reading a work of literature

Reading literature critically involves interacting with a text. The techniques complement those for critically reading any text, so if you haven't read Chapter 8 on such reading, you should do so. Responding critically is a matter not of making negative judgments but of analyzing the parts, interpreting their meanings, seeing how the parts relate, and evaluating significance or quality.

##### v Previewing and responding

You can preview a literary text somewhat as you can preview any other text. You may gauge the length of the text to determine whether you can read it in one sitting, and you may read a

biographical note to learn about the author. In a literary text, however, you won't find aids such as section headings or summaries that can make previewing other texts especially informative. You have to dive into the words themselves.

*Do write while reading.* If you own the book you are reading, don't hesitate to underline or highlight passages that especially interest you for one reason or another. Don't hesitate to annotate the margins, indicating your pleasures, displeasures, and uncertainties with remarks such as *Nice detail* or *Do we need this long description?* or *Not believable*. If you don't own the book, make these notes on separate sheets or on your computer.

An effective way to interact with a text is to keep a **reading journal**. A journal is not a diary in which you record your doings; instead, it is a place to develop and store your reflections on what you read, such as an answer to a question you may have posed in the margin of the text. You could make an entry in the form of a letter to the author or from one character to another. In many literature courses, students collaborate to develop their understanding of a literary work. In such a case, you may want to use your journal to reflect on what other students have said—for instance, why your opinion differs so much from someone else's.

You can keep a reading journal in a notebook or on your computer. Some readers prefer a two-column format like that illustrated on page 154, with summaries, paraphrases, and quotations from the text on the left and with their own responses to these passages on the right. Or you may prefer a less structured format like that illustrated on page 740.

#### v Reading a sample story

Here is a very short story by Kate Chopin (1851–1904). (The last name is pronounced in the French way, something like “show pan.”) Following the story are a student's annotations and journal entry on the story.

*Kate Chopin*

#### **The Story of an Hour**

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences, veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of “killed.” He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: “Free, free, free!” The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending her in the blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being.

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. “Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven’s sake open the door.”

“Go away. I am not making myself ill.” No; she was drinking in the very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister’s importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister’s waist and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine’s piercing cry; at Richards’ quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.

#### v Following a student’s work

In this chapter we’ll follow the analysis and writing of a student, Janet Vong, to see one approach to Chopin’s story. Vong first annotated the story while reading it. The opening five paragraphs, with her notes, appear below:

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences, veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband’s friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard’s name leading the list of “killed.” He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message. She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once with sudden, wild abandon, in her sister’s arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a

physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

Writing in her journal, Vong posed questions about the story—critical points, curiosities about characters, possible implications:

Title nothing special. What might be a better title?  
 Could a woman who loved her husband be so heartless? Is she heartless? Did she love him?  
 What are (were) Louise's feelings about her husband?  
 Did she want too much? What did she want?  
 Could this story happen today? Feminist interpretation?  
 Sister (Josephine)—a busybody?  
 Tricky ending—but maybe it could be true.  
 "And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not." Why does one love someone "sometimes"?  
 Irony: plot has reversal. Are characters ironic too?

Vong's journal entry illustrates brainstorming—the discovery technique of listing ideas (or questions) however they occur, without editing (see pp. 21–22). Another productive journal technique is focused freewriting—concentrating on a single issue (such as one of Vong's questions) and writing nonstop for a set amount of time, again without editing (p. 20).

## 2 Analyzing a work of literature

Like any discipline, the study of literature involves particular frameworks of analysis—particular ways of seeing literary works that help determine what parts the critical reader identifies and how he or she interprets them. For instance, some critics look at a literary work mainly as an artifact of the particular time and culture in which it was created, while other critics emphasize the work's effect on its readers.

This chapter emphasizes so-called formalist criticism, which focuses on a literary work primarily as something to be understood in itself. This critical framework engages the reader immediately in the work of literature, without requiring extensive historical or cultural background, and introduces the conventional elements of literature that all critical approaches discuss, even though they view the elements differently. The box on the next two pages lists these elements—plot, characters, setting, and so on—and offers questions about each one that can help you think constructively and imaginatively about what you read.

One significant attribute of a literary work is its *meaning*, or what we can interpret to be its meaning. Readers may well disagree over the persuasiveness of someone's argument, but they will rarely disagree over its meaning. With literature, however, disagreements over meaning occur all the time because (as we have seen) literature *shows* rather than *tells*: it gives us concrete images of imagined human experiences, but it usually does not say how we ought to understand the images.

Further, readers bring to their reading not only different critical views, as noted earlier, but also different personal experiences. A woman who has recently lost her husband may interpret "The Story of an Hour" differently from most other readers. Or a story that bores a reader at age fifteen may deeply move him at twenty-five. The words on the page remain the same, but their meaning changes.

In writing about literature, then, we can offer only our *interpretation* of meaning rather than *the* meaning. Still, most people agree that there are limits to interpretation: it must be supported by evidence that a reasonable reader finds at least plausible if not totally convincing. For instance, the student who says that in "The Story of an Hour" Mrs. Mallard does not die but merely falls into a deathlike trance goes beyond the permissible limits because the story offers no evidence for such an interpretation.

### 3 Using evidence in writing about literature

The evidence for a literary analysis always comes from at least one primary source (the work or works being discussed) and may come from secondary sources (critical and historical works). (See

p. 733 for more on primary and secondary sources.) For example, if you were writing about Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," the primary material would be the story itself, and the secondary material (if you used it) might be critical studies of Chopin.

The bulk of your evidence in writing about literature will usually be quotations from the work, although you will occasionally summarize or paraphrase as well (see pp. 617–20). When using quotations, keep in mind the criteria in the box on page 747.

Your instructor will probably tell you if you are expected to consult secondary sources for an assignment. They can help you understand a writer's work, but your primary concern should always be the work itself, not what critics A, B, and C say about it. In general, then, quote or summarize secondary material sparingly. And always cite your sources.

## 50b Understanding writing assignments in literature

A literature instructor may ask you to write one or more of the following types of papers. The first two are the most common.

- ▼ **A literary analysis paper:** Give your ideas about a work of literature—your interpretation of its meaning, context, or representations based on specific words, characters, and events.
- ▼ **A literary research paper:** Combine analysis of a literary work with research about the work and perhaps its author. A literary research paper draws on both primary and secondary sources. For example, you might respond to what scholars have written about the symbolism in a play by Tennessee Williams, or you might research medieval England as a way to understand the context of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.
- ▼ **A personal response or reaction paper:** Give your thoughts and feelings about a work of literature. For example, you might compare a novel's description of a city with your experience of the same city.
- ▼ **A book review:** Give a summary of a book and a judgment about the book's value. In a review of a novel, for example, you might discuss whether the plot is interesting, the characters are believable, and the writing style is enjoyable. You might also compare the work to other works by the author.
- ▼ **A theater review:** Give your reactions to and opinions about a theatrical performance. You might summarize the plot of the play, describe the characters, identify the prominent themes, evaluate the other elements (writing, performances, direction, stage setting), and make a recommendation to potential viewers.

## 50c Using the tools and language of literary analysis

### 1 Writing tools

The fundamental tool for writing about literature is reading critically. Asking analytical questions such as those on pages 741–42 can help you focus your ideas. In addition, keeping a reading journal can help you develop your thoughts. Keep careful, well-organized notes on any research materials. Finally, discuss the work with others who have read it. They may offer reactions and insights that will help you shape your own ideas.

### 2 Language considerations

Use the present tense of verbs to describe both the action in a literary work (*Brently Mallard suddenly appears*) and the writing

of an author (*Chopin briefly describes the view or In his essay he comments that . . .*). Use the past tense to describe events that actually occurred in the past (*Chopin was born in 1851*).

Some instructors discourage students from using the first-person *I* (as in *I felt sorry for the character*) in writing about literature. At least use *I* sparingly to avoid sounding egotistical. Rephrase sentences to avoid using *I* unnecessarily—for instance, *The character evokes the reader's sympathy*.

### 3 Research sources

In addition to these resources on literature, you may also want to consult some on other humanities (pp. 761–64).

#### v Specialized encyclopedias, dictionaries, and bibliographies

*Bibliographical Guide to the Study of the Literature of the USA*  
*Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*  
*Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*  
*Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*  
*Dictionary of Literary Biography*  
*Handbook to Literature*  
*Literary Criticism Index*  
*McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama*  
*MLA International Bibliography of Books and Articles on the Modern Languages and Literatures*  
*New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*  
*Oxford Companion to American Literature*  
*Oxford Companion to the Theatre*  
*Schomburg Center Guide to Black Literature from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*

#### v Indexes

*Abstracts of Folklore Studies*  
*Dissertation Abstracts International* (doctoral dissertations)  
*Humanities Index*  
*Literary Criticism Index*  
*MLA International Bibliography of Books and Articles on the Modern Languages and Literatures*

#### v Book reviews

*Book Review Digest*  
*Book Review Index*  
*Index to Book Reviews in the Humanities*

#### v Web sources

For updates of these sources and URLs, visit [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown).

*Alex Catalog of Electronic Texts* ([infomotions.com/alex](http://infomotions.com/alex))  
*EServer* ([eserver.org](http://eserver.org))  
*Internet Public Library: Online Literary Criticism* ([ipl.org/div/litcrit](http://ipl.org/div/litcrit))  
*Key Sites on American Literature* ([usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/oal/amlitweb.htm](http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/oal/amlitweb.htm))  
*Literary Index* ([www.galenet.com/servlet/LitIndex](http://www.galenet.com/servlet/LitIndex))  
*Literary Resources on the Net* ([andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit](http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit))  
*Online Books Page* ([online.books.library.upenn.edu](http://online.books.library.upenn.edu))  
*Voice of the Shuttle: Drama, Theater, and Performance Art Studies*  
 ([vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=782](http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=782))  
*Voice of the Shuttle: Literature (in English)* ([vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=3](http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=3))  
*Voice of the Shuttle: Literatures (Other than English)* ([vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=2719](http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=2719))

## 50d Citing sources and formatting documents in writing about literature

Unless your instructor specifies otherwise, use the style of the Modern Language Association (MLA), detailed in Chapter 47. In this style, parenthetical citations in the text of the paper refer to a

list of works cited at the end. Sample papers illustrating this style appear in Chapter 48 as well as in this chapter.

Use MLA format for headings, margins, and other elements, as detailed on pages 687–89.

## 50e Drafting and revising a literary analysis

The process for writing a literary analysis is similar to that for any other kind of essay: once you've done the reading and thought about it, you need to focus your ideas, gather evidence, draft, and revise.

### 1 Conceiving a thesis

After reading, rereading, and making notes, you probably will be able to formulate a tentative thesis statement—an assertion of your main point, your argument. (For more on thesis statements, see pp. 27–31.) Clear the air by glancing over your notes and by jotting down a few especially promising ideas—brief statements of what you think your key points may be and their main support. One approach is to seek patterns in the work, such as recurring words, phrases, images, events, symbols, or other elements. (Go back to the work, if necessary, to expand the patterns your notes reveal.) Such patterns can help you see themes both in the work itself and in your ideas about it.

Considering Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," Janet Vong at first explored the idea that Mrs. Mallard, the main character, was unrealistic and thus unconvincing. (See Vong's journal entry on p. 740.) But the more Vong examined the story and her notes, the more she was impressed by a pattern of ironies, or reversals, that actually helped to make Mrs. Mallard believable. In her journal Vong explored the idea that the many small reversals paved the way for Mrs. Mallard's own reversal from grief to joy:

title? "Ironies in an Hour" (?) "An Hour of Irony" (?) "Kate Chopin's Irony" (?)  
 thesis: irony at end is prepared for  
 chief irony: Mrs. M. dies just as she is beginning to enjoy life  
 smaller ironies:  
 1. "sad message" brings her joy  
 2. Richards is "too late" at end  
 3. Richards is too early at start  
 4. "joy that kills"  
 5. death brings joy and life

From these notes Vong developed her thesis statement:

The irony of the ending is believable partly because it is consistent with earlier ironies in the story.

This thesis statement asserts a specific idea that can be developed and convincingly argued with evidence from Chopin's story. A good thesis statement will neither assert a fact (*Mrs. Mallard dies soon after hearing that her husband has died*) nor overgeneralize (*The story is an insult to women*).

### 2 Gathering evidence

In writing about literature, you use mainly evidence gathered from the work itself: quotations and sometimes paraphrases that support your ideas about the work. You can see examples of such quoting and paraphrasing in Janet Vong's final draft on pages 750–51. The box below offers guidelines for using quotations in literary analysis.

You may wonder how much you should summarize the plot of the work. A brief plot summary can be helpful to readers who are unfamiliar with the work. Sometimes plot elements place your ideas in the context of the work or remind readers where your quotations come from. Plot elements may even be used as evidence, as Vong uses the ironic ending of the Chopin story. But plot summary is not literary analysis, and summary alone is not sufficient evidence to support a thesis. Keep any plot summaries brief and to the point.

For a literary research paper, evidence will come from the work itself and from secondary sources such as scholarly works and critical appraisals. The thesis and principal ideas of the paper must still be your own, but you may supplement your reading of the work with the views of respected scholars or critics. Sometimes you may choose to build your own argument in part by disputing others' views. However you draw on secondary sources, remember that they must be clearly identified and documented, even when you use your own words.

**Note** You can find student essays on the Web that may lead you to other sources or may suggest ideas you hadn't considered. If you want to use another student's paper as a secondary source, you must evaluate it with special care because it will not have passed through a reviewing process, as an article in a scholarly journal does. (See pp. 602–09 on evaluating online sources.) You must also, of course, clearly identify and document the source: borrowing other students' ideas or words without credit is plagiarism. (See pp. 629–37.)

### 3 Writing a draft

Drafting your essay is your opportunity to develop your thesis or to discover it if you haven't already. The draft below was actually Janet Vong's second: she deleted some digressions from her first draft and added more evidence for her points. The numbers in parentheses refer to the pages from which she drew the quotations. (See pp. 648–56 on this form of documentation.) Ask your instructor whether you should always give such citations, especially for a short poem or story like Chopin's.

#### Ironies in an Hour

After we know how the story turns out, if we reread it we find irony at the very start, as is true of many other stories. Mrs. Mallard's friends assume, mistakenly, that Mrs. Mallard was deeply in love with her husband, Brently Mallard. They take great care to tell her gently of his death. The friends mean well, and in fact they

do well. They bring her an hour of life, an hour of freedom. They think their news is sad. Mrs. Mallard at first expresses grief when she hears the news, but soon she finds joy in it. So Richards's "sad message" (23), though sad in Richards's eyes, is in fact a happy message.

Among the ironic details is the statement that when Mallard entered the house, Richards tried to conceal him from Mrs. Mallard, but "Richards was too late" (24). This is ironic because earlier Richards "hastened" (23) to bring his sad message; if he had been too late at the start, Brently Mallard would have arrived at home first, and Mrs. Mallard's life would not have ended an hour later but would simply have gone on as it had been. Yet another irony at the end of the story is the diagnosis of the doctors. The doctors say she died of "heart disease—of joy that kills" (24). In one sense the doctors are right: Mrs. Mallard has experienced a great joy. But of course the doctors totally misunderstand the joy that kills her.

The central irony resides not in the well-intentioned but ironic actions of Richards, or in the unconsciously ironic words of the doctors, but in her own life. She "sometimes" (24) loved her husband, but in a way she has been dead. Now, his apparent death brings her new life. This new life comes to her at the season of the year when "the tops of trees . . . were all aquiver with the new spring life" (23). But, ironically, her new life will last only an hour. She looks forward to "summer days" (24), but she will not see even the end of this spring day. Her years of marriage were ironic. They brought her a sort of living death instead of joy. Her new life is ironic, too. It grows out of her moment of grief for her supposedly dead husband, and her vision of a new life is cut short.

### 4 Revising and editing

As in other writing, use at least two drafts to revise and edit, so that you can attend separately to the big structural issues and the smaller surface problems. See pages 51 and 58–59 for general revision and editing checklists. The additional checklist below can help you with a literary analysis.

Janet Vong's final draft appears below with annotations that highlight some of its features.

#### v An essay on fiction (no secondary sources)

Janet Vong



Mr. Romano  
English 102  
20 February 2006

Ironies of Life in Kate Chopin's  
"The Story of an Hour"

Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour"—which takes only a few minutes to read—has an ironic ending: Mrs. Mallard dies just when she is beginning to live. On first reading, the ending seems almost too ironic for belief. On rereading the story, however, one sees that the ending is believable partly because it is consistent with other ironies in the story.

Irony appears at the very start of the story. Because Mrs. Mallard's friends and her sister assume, mistakenly, that she was deeply in love with her husband, Brently Mallard, they take great care to tell her gently of his death. They mean well, and in fact they do well, bringing her an hour of life, an hour of joyous freedom, but it is ironic that they think their news is sad. True, Mrs. Mallard at first expresses grief when she hears the news, but soon (unknown to the others) she finds joy. So Richards's "sad message" (23), though sad in Richards's eyes, is in fact a happy message.

Among the small but significant ironic details is the statement near the end of the story that when Mallard entered the house, Richards tried to conceal him from Mrs. Mallard, but "Richards was too late" (24). Almost at the start of the story, in the second paragraph, Richards "hastened" (23) to bring his sad news. But if Richards had arrived too late at the start, Brently Mallard would have arrived at home first, and Mrs. Mallard's life would not have ended an hour later but would simply have gone on as it had been. Yet another irony at the end of the story is the diagnosis of the doctors. They say she died of "heart disease—of joy that kills" (24). In one sense they are right: Mrs. Mallard has for the last hour experienced a great joy. But of course the doctors totally misunderstand the joy that kills her. It is not joy at seeing her husband alive, but her realization that the great joy she experienced during the last hour is over.

All of these ironic details add richness to the story, but the central irony resides not in the well-intentioned but ironic actions of Richards, or in the unconsciously ironic words of the doctors, but in Mrs. Mallard's own life. She "sometimes" (24) loved her husband, but in a way she has been dead, a body subjected to her husband's will. Now, his apparent death brings her new life. Appropriately, this new life comes to her at the season of the year when "the tops of trees . . . were all aquiver with the new spring life" (23). But, ironically, her new life will last only an hour. She is "Free, free, free" (24)—but only until her husband walks through the doorway. She looks forward to "summer days" (24), but she will not see even the end of this spring day. If her years of marriage were ironic, bringing her a sort of living death instead of joy, her new life is ironic, too, not only because it grows out of her moment of grief for her supposedly dead husband, but also because her vision of "a long procession of years" (24) is cut short within an hour on a spring day.

[New page.]

Work Cited

Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour." An Introduction to Literature: Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. Ed. Sylvan Barnet, William Burto, and William E. Cain. 13th ed. New York: Longman, 2004. 23-24.

## 50f Writing about fiction, poetry, and drama

A work of literature falls into a category, or **genre**—fiction, poetry, or drama—depending on how it is structured. The different genres of literature require different approaches in writing.

### 1 Writing about fiction

The "Questions for a literary analysis" on pages 741–42 will help you think about any work of literature, including a story or novel, and find a topic to write on. The following questions provide additional prompts for thinking about fiction. For an example of writing about fiction, see Janet Vong's essay opposite and above.

### 2 Writing about poetry

Two types of essays on poetry are especially common. One is an analysis of some aspect of the poem in relation to the whole—for instance, the changes in the speaker's tone or the functions of meter and rhyme. The second is an **explication**, a line-by-line (sometimes almost word-by-word) reading that seeks to make explicit everything that is implicit in the poem. Thus an explication of the first line of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (the line goes "Whose woods these are I think I know") might call attention to the tentativeness of the line ("I think I know") and to the fact that the words are not in the normal order ("I think I know whose woods these are"). These features might support the explanation that the poet is introducing—very quietly—a note of the *unusual*, in preparation for the experience that follows. Although one might

conceivably explicate a long poem, the method is so detailed that in practice writers usually confine it to short poems or to short passages from long poems.

The “Questions for a literary analysis” on pages 741–42 will help you think about any work of literature, including a poem, and find a topic to write on. The questions on the facing page provide additional ways to think about poetry.

▼ **An essay on poetry with secondary sources**

The following sample paper on a short poem by Gwendolyn Brooks illustrates a literary analysis that draws not only on the poem itself but also on secondary sources—that is, critical works *about* the poem. In the opening paragraph, for instance, the writer uses brief quotations from two secondary sources to establish the problem, the topic that he will address. These quotations, like the two later quotations from secondary material, are used to make points, not to pad the essay.

**Note** In the paper, the parenthetical citations for Brooks’s poem give line numbers of the poem, whereas the citations for the secondary sources give page numbers of the sources. See pages 648 and 652, respectively, for these two forms of citation.

*Gwendolyn Brooks*

**The Bean Eaters**

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.  
 Dinner is a casual affair.  
 Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,  
 Tin flatware.  
 Two who are Mostly Good.  
 Two who have lived their day,  
 But keep on putting on their clothes  
 And putting things away.  
 And remembering . . .  
 Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,  
 As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that  
 is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths,  
 tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

Kenneth Scheff  
 Professor MacGregor  
 English 101A  
 7 February 2006

Marking Time Versus Enduring in  
 Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Bean Eaters”

Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem “The Bean Eaters” runs only eleven lines. It is written in plain language about very plain people. Yet its meaning is ambiguous. One critic, George E. Kent, says the old couple who eat beans “have had their day and exist now as time-markers” (141). However, another reader, D. H. Melhem, perceives not so much time marking as “endurance” in the old couple (123). Is this poem a despairing picture of old age or a more positive portrait?

“The Bean Eaters” describes an “old yellow pair” who “eat beans mostly” (line 1) off “Plain chipware” (3) with “Tin flatware” (4) in “their rented back room” (11). Clearly, they are poor. Their existence is accompanied not by friends or relatives—children or grandchildren are not mentioned—but by memories and a few possessions (9-11). They are “Mostly Good” (5), words Brooks capitalizes at the end of a line, perhaps to stress the old people’s adherence to traditional values as well as their lack of saintliness. They are unexceptional, whatever message they have for readers.

The isolated routine of the couple’s life is something Brooks draws attention to with a separate stanza:

Two who are Mostly Good.  
 Two who have lived their day,  
 But keep on putting on their clothes  
 And putting things away. (5-8)

Brooks emphasizes how isolated the couple is by repeating “Two who.” Then she emphasizes how routine their life is by repeating “putting.”

A pessimistic reading of this poem seems justified. The critic Harry B. Shaw reads the lines just quoted as perhaps despairing: “they are putting things away as if winding down an operation and readying for withdrawal from activity” (80). However, Shaw observes, the word “But” also indicates that the couple resist slipping away, that they intend to hold on (80). This dual meaning is at the heart of Brooks’s poem: the old people live a meager existence, yes, but their will, their self-control, and their connection with another person—their essential humanity—are unharmed.

The truly positive nature of the poem is revealed in the last stanza. In Brooks’s words, the old couple remember with some “twinges” perhaps, but also with “twinklings” (10), a cheerful image. As Melhem says, these people are “strong in mutual affection and shared memories” (123). And the final line, which is much longer than all the rest and which catalogs the evidence of the couple’s long life together, is almost musically affirmative: “As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes” (11).

What these people have is not much, but it is something.

[New page.]

#### Works Cited

- Brooks, Gwendolyn. “The Bean Eaters.” *An Introduction to Literature: Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. Ed. Sylvan Barnet, William Burto, and William E. Cain. 13th ed. New York: Longman, 2004. 807.  
 Kent, George E. *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1990.  
 Melhem, D. H. *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1987.  
 Shaw, Harry B. *Gwendolyn Brooks*. Twayne’s United States Authors Ser. 395. Boston: Twayne, 1980.

### 3 Writing about drama

Because plays—even some one-act plays—are relatively long, analytic essays on drama usually focus on only one aspect of the play, such as the structure of the play, the function of a single scene, or a character’s responsibility for his or her fate. The essay’s introduction indicates what the topic is and why it is of some importance, and the introduction may also state the thesis. The conclusion often extends the analysis, showing how a study of the apparently small topic helps to illuminate the play as a whole.

The “Questions for a literary analysis” on pages 741–42 will help you think about any work of literature, including a play, and find a topic to write on. The questions below provide additional prompts for thinking about drama.

#### v An essay on drama (no secondary sources)

The following essay on William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* focuses on the title character, examining the extent to which he is and is not a tragic hero. Although the writer bases the essay on his personal response to the play, he does not simply state a preference, as if saying he likes vanilla more than chocolate; instead, he argues a case and offers evidence from the play to support his claims.

The writer delays stating his thesis fully until the final paragraph: Macbeth is a hero even though he is a villain. But this thesis is nonetheless evident throughout the essay, from the title through the opening three paragraphs (which establish a context and the case the writer will oppose) through each of the five body paragraphs (which offer five kinds of evidence for the thesis).

**Note** The parenthetical citations in this essay include act, scene, and line numbers—MLA style for citations of verse plays (see p. 653).

Michael Spinter  
 Professor Nelson  
 English 211, sec. 4  
 6 May 2005

#### Macbeth as Hero

When we think of a tragic hero, we probably think of a fundamentally sympathetic person who is entangled in terrifying circumstances and who ultimately dies, leaving us with a sense that the world has suffered a loss. For instance, Hamlet must avenge his father’s murder, and in doing so he performs certain actions that verge on the wrongful, such as behaving cruelly to his beloved Ophelia and his mother and killing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; but we believe that Hamlet is fundamentally a decent man and that Denmark is the poorer for his death.

Macbeth, however, is different. He kills King Duncan and Duncan’s grooms, kills Banquo, attempts to kill Banquo’s son, and finally kills Lady Macduff and her children and her servants. True, the only people whom he kills with his own hands are Duncan and the grooms—the other victims are destroyed by hired

murderers—but clearly Macbeth is responsible for all of the deaths. He could seem an utterly unscrupulous, sneaking crook rather than a tragic hero for whom a reader can feel sympathy.

Certainly most of the other characters in the play feel no sympathy for Macbeth. Macduff calls him a “hell-kite,” or a hellish bird of prey (4.3.217), a “tyrant” (5.7.14), a “hell-hound” (5.8.3), and a “coward” (5.8.23). To Malcolm he is a “tyrant” (4.3.12), “devilish Macbeth” (4.3.117), and a “butcher” (5.8.69). Readers and spectators can hardly deny the truth of these characterizations. And yet Macbeth does not seem merely villainous. It would be going too far to say that we always sympathize with him, but we are deeply interested in him and do not dismiss him in disgust as an out-and-out monster. How can we account for his hold on our feelings? At least five factors play their parts.

First, Macbeth is an impressive military figure. In the first extended description of Macbeth, the Captain speaks of “brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name” (1.2.16). The Captain tells how Macbeth valiantly fought on behalf of his king, and King Duncan exclaims, “O valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!” (1.2.2). True, Macbeth sometimes cringes, such as when he denies responsibility for Banquo’s death: “Thou canst not say I did it” (3.4.51). But throughout most of the play, we see him as a bold and courageous soldier.

Of course, Macbeth’s ability as a soldier is not enough by itself to explain his hold on us. A second reason is that he is in some degree a victim—a victim of his wife’s ambition and a victim of the witches. Yes, he ought to see through his wife’s schemes, and he ought to resist the witches, just as Banquo resists them, but surely Macbeth is partly tricked into crime. He is responsible, but we can imagine ourselves falling as he does, and his status as a victim arouses our sympathy.

A third source of his hold on us is that although Macbeth engages in terrible deeds, he almost always retains his conscience. For instance, after he murders Duncan he cannot sleep at night. When he tells Lady Macbeth that he has heard a voice saying, “Macbeth does murder sleep” (2.2.35), she ridicules him, but the voice is prophetic: he is doomed to sleepless nights. We in the audience are glad that Macbeth is tormented by his deed, since it shows that he knows he has done wrong and that he still has some decent human feelings.

A fourth reason why we retain some sympathy for Macbeth is that he eventually loses all of his allies, even his wife, and he stands before us a lonely, guilt-haunted figure. On this point, scene 2 of act 3 is especially significant. When Lady Macbeth asks Macbeth why he keeps to himself (line 8), he confides something of the mental stress that he is undergoing. But when she asks, “What’s to be done?” (44), he cannot bring himself to tell her that he is plotting the deaths of Banquo and Fleance. Instead of further involving his wife, the only person with whom he might still have a human connection, Macbeth says, “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck . . .” (45). The word *chuck*, an affectionate form of *chick*, shows warmth and intimacy that are touching, but his refusal or his inability to confide in his wife and former partner in crime shows how fully isolated he is from all human contact. We cannot help feeling some sympathy for him.

Finally, Macbeth holds our interest, instead of disgusting us, because he speaks so wonderfully. The greatness of his language compels us to listen to him with rapt attention. Some speeches are very familiar, such as “My way of life / Is fall’n into the sear, the yellow leaf . . .” (5.3.23-24) and “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day . . .” (5.5.19-20). But almost every speech Macbeth utters is equally memorable, from his first, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (1.3.38), to his last:

Before my body  
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff:  
And damned be him that first cries, “Hold, enough!” (5.8.32-34)

If we stand back and judge Macbeth only by what he does, we of course say that he is a foul murderer. But if we read the play attentively, or witness a performance, and give due weight to Macbeth’s bravery, his role as a victim, his tormented conscience, his isolation, and especially his moving language, we do not simply judge him. Rather, we see that, villain though he is, he is not merely awful but also awesome.

[New page.]

#### Work Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Ed. Sylvan Barnet. Rev. ed. New York: NAL, 1987.  
<http://www.ablongman.com/littlebrown>

Visit the companion Web site for more help with reading and writing about literature.

*“heart disease” at end of story*

*Too hasty, it turns out*

*Would men*

*have heard differently?*

*Is au. sexist?*

*“old-fashioned style*

*Notices spring: odd in a story of death*

## Questions for a literary analysis

See later boxes for specific questions on fiction (pp. 751–52), poetry (p. 753), and drama (pp. 755–56).

### Plot

**The relationships and patterns of events.** Even a poem has a plot, such as a change in mood from bitterness to resignation.

What actions happen?

What conflicts occur?

How do the events connect to each other and to the whole?

### Characters

**The people the author creates, including the narrator of a story or the speaker of a poem.**

Who are the principal people in the work?

How do they interact?

What do their actions, words, and thoughts reveal about their personalities and the personalities of others?

Do the characters stay the same, or do they change? Why?

### Point of view

**The perspective or attitude of the speaker in a poem or the voice who tells a story.** The point of view may be **first person** (a participant, using *I*) or **third person** (an outsider, using *he, she, it, they*). A first-person narrator may be a major or a minor character in the narrative and may be **reliable** or **unreliable** (unable to report events wholly or accurately). A third-person narrator may be **omniscient** (knows what goes on in all characters’ minds), **limited** (knows what goes on in the mind of only one or two characters), or **objective** (knows only what is external to the characters).

Who is the narrator (or the speaker of a poem)?

How does the narrator’s point of view affect the narrative?

### Tone

**The narrator’s or speaker’s attitude**, perceived through the words (for instance, joyful, bitter, or confident).

What tone (or tones) do you hear? If there is a change, how do you account for it?

Is there an ironic contrast between the narrator’s tone (for instance, confidence) and what you take to be the author’s attitude (for instance, pity for human overconfidence)?

### Imagery

**Word pictures or details involving the senses:** sight, sound, touch, smell, taste.

What images does the writer use? What senses do they draw on?

What patterns are evident in the images (for instance, religious or commercial images)?

What is the significance of the imagery?

### Symbolism

**Concrete things standing for larger and more abstract ideas.** For instance, the American flag may symbolize freedom, a tweeting bird may symbolize happiness, or a dead flower may symbolize mortality.

What symbols does the author use? What do they seem to signify?

How does the symbolism relate to the other elements of the work, such as character or theme?

### Setting

**The place where the action happens.**

What does the locale contribute to the work?

Are scene shifts significant?

**Form****The shape or structure of the work.**

What *is* the form? (For example, a story might divide sharply in the middle, moving from happiness to sorrow.)

What parts of the work does the form emphasize, and why?

**Theme**

**The central idea**, a conception of human experience suggested by the work as a whole. Theme is neither plot (what happens) nor subject (such as mourning or marriage). Rather it is what the author says with that plot about that subject.

Can you state the theme in a sentence? For instance, you might state the following about Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour": *Happiness depends partly on freedom.*

Do certain words, passages of dialog or description, or situations seem to represent the theme most clearly?

How do the work's elements combine to develop the theme?

**Appeal****The degree to which the work pleases you.**

What do you especially like or dislike about the work?

Do you think your responses are unique, or would they be common to most readers? Why?

You can download these questions from [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown). Copy the questions for each work you read, and answer the questions in writing.

**Guidelines for using quotations in literary analysis**

- ✓ **Use quotations to support your assertions, not to pad the paper.** Quote at length only when necessary to your argument.
- ✓ **Specify how each quotation relates to your idea.** Introduce the quotation—for example, *At the outset Chopin conveys the sort of person Richards is: ". . ."* Sometimes, comment after the quotation. (See pages 623–28 for more on integrating quotations into your writing.)
- ✓ **Reproduce spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and all other features exactly as they appear in the source.** See page 483 for the use of brackets when you need to add something to a quotation, and see page 484 for the use of an ellipsis mark when you need to omit something from a quotation.
- ✓ **Document your sources.** See page 637.

**Checklist for revising a literary analysis**

- ✓ **Title:** Does the title of your essay give the title and author of the work you discuss and also an idea of your approach to the work?
- ✓ **Introduction:** Does the introductory paragraph name the author and the title so that readers know exactly what work you are discussing? (Avoid opening sentences such as "In this story. . .") Does the introduction state and develop your thesis a bit so that readers know where they will be going?
- ✓ **Organization:** How effective is the organization? The essay should not dwindle or become anticlimactic; rather, it should build up.
- ✓ **Quotations:** What evidence does each quotation provide? Do quotations let readers hear the author's voice?
- ✓ **Analysis vs. summary:** Is the essay chiefly devoted to analysis, not to summary? Summarize the plot only briefly and only to further your own ideas. A summary is not an essay.
- ✓ **Verb tenses:** Have you used the present tense of verbs to describe both the author's work and the action in the work (for example, *Chopin shows* or *Mrs. Mallard dies*)?
- ✓ **Evaluation:** How well will readers understand your evaluation of the work and what it is based on? Your evaluation may be implied (as in Janet Vong's essay on "The Story of an Hour"), or it may be explicit. In either case, give the reasons for judging the work to be effective or not, worth reading or not. It is not enough to express your likes or dislikes; readers need the support of specific evidence from the work.
- ✓ **Are all your sources documented in MLA style?**

You can download the checklist from [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown). Using a duplicate, write out answers for each paper you revise.

Author's name and identification in MLA format (p. 687)

Paper title incorporating author and title of analyzed work

Introduction naming author/ title and stating thesis

Detailing of story's ironies, using quotations and some summary to emphasize the reversals

Parenthetical citations in

MLA style referring to the work cited at the end of the paper (see p. 648)

New page for work cited in MLA style (p. 656)

### Questions for analyzing fiction

- √ **What happens in the story?** For yourself, summarize the plot (the gist of the happenings). Think about what your summary *leaves out*.
- √ **Is the story told in chronological order, or are there flashbacks or flashforwards?** On rereading, what foreshadowing (hints of what is to come) do you detect?
- √ **What conflicts does the work include?**
- √ **How does the writer develop characters?** Is character revealed by explicit comment or through action? With which character(s) do you sympathize? Are the characters plausible? What motivates them? What do minor characters contribute to the work?
- √ **Who tells the story?** Is the narrator a character, or does the narrator stand entirely outside the characters' world? What does the narrator's point of view contribute to the story's theme? (On narrative points of view, see p. 741.)
- √ **What is the setting?** What do the time and place of the action contribute to the work?
- √ **Are certain characters, settings, or actions symbolic?** Do they stand for something in addition to themselves?
- √ **What is the theme?** That is, what does the work add up to? Does the theme reinforce your values, or does it challenge them?
- √ **Is the title informative?** Did its meaning change for you after you read the work?

You can download these questions from [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown) and answer them for each work you read.

### Questions for analyzing poetry

- √ **What parts of the poem interest or puzzle you?** What words seem especially striking or unusual?
- √ **How can you describe the poem's *speaker* (sometimes called the *persona* or the *voice*)?** The speaker may be very different from the au-thor.
- √ **What tone or emotion do you detect**—for instance, anger, affection, sarcasm? Does the tone change during the poem?
- √ **What is the structure of the poem?** Are there stanzas (groups of lines separated by space)? If so, how is the thought related to the stanzas?
- √ **What is the theme of the poem?** What is it about? Is the theme stated or implied?
- √ **What images do you find?** Look for evocations of sight, sound, taste, touch, or smell. Is there a surprising pattern of images—say, images of business in a poem about love? What does the poem suggest symbolically as well as literally? (Trust your responses. If you don't sense a symbolic overtone, move on. Don't hunt for symbols.)

You can download these questions from [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown) and answer them for each poem you read.

### Questions for analyzing drama

- √ **How does the plot (the sequence of happenings) unfold?** Does it seem plausible? If not, is the implausibility a fault? If there is more than one plot, are the plots parallel, or are they related by way of contrast?
- √ **Are certain happenings recurrent?** If so, how are they significant?
- √ **What kinds of conflict are in the play**—for instance, between two groups, two individuals, or two aspects of a single individual? How are the conflicts resolved? Is the resolution satisfying to you?
- √ **How does the author develop the characters?** How trustworthy are the characters when they describe themselves or others? Do some characters serve as **foils**, or contrasts, for other characters, thus helping to define the other characters? Do the characters change as the play proceeds? Are the characters' motivations convincing?
- √ **What do the author's stage directions add to your understanding and appreciation of the play?** If there are few stage directions, what do the speeches imply about the characters' manner, tone, and gestures?
- √ **What do you make of the setting, or location?** Does it help to reveal character or theme?
- √ **Do certain costumes** (dark suits, flowery shawls, stiff collars) or **properties** (books, pictures, candlesticks) **strike you as symbolic?**

You can download these questions from [ablongman.com/littlebrown](http://ablongman.com/littlebrown) and answer them for each play you read.