

Title of Module: Strategies for Literary Analysis**Collaborators' Names: Brandy Barents and Kevin Barents**

Outline of Module:

1. Introduction to Literary Analysis
 - 1) **What is Literary Analysis?**
 - 2) **Scene: Analysis in Action**
2. Three Effects
 - 1) **Tone**
 - 2) **Theme**
 - 3) **Style**
3. Three Fundamental Strategies for Analysis
 - 4) **Interpret Subtlety**
 - 5) **Evaluate Quality**
 - 6) **Consider Cause and Effect**
4. Strategies for Developing Analysis
 - 4) **Find a Counterargument**
 - 5) **Invent a Counterargument or Misinterpretation**
 - 6) **Find a Significant Pattern**
 - 7) **Translate Stylization**
 - 8) **Explain Ambiguity**
 - 9) **Contrast with Fictional Alternative**
 - 10) **Use a Touchstone**

Video 1: Introduction to Literary Analysis**What is Literary Analysis?**

Brandy: Students are often unclear about what is expected when they're asked to analyze a literary work, and in fact there are many different methods for meaningfully discussing an exhibit text, including some that require quite a robust understanding of philosophy, history, literary theory, or other disciplines.

Kevin: This module will introduce even those completely new to analysis to some practical strategies for talking or writing about literature. Many of these strategies could also be used to discuss non-literary texts or non-textual sources like films or paintings.

Brandy: The other videos in this module will discuss the major effects of tone, theme, and style; three fundamental strategies for analysis; and some further strategies for developing analysis.

Scene: Analysis in Action

Kevin: Please consider the following scene and then complete the activity for this video.

FADE IN:

INT. CLASSROOM--AFTERNOON

DAVID (a student) is looking at his neighbor KATE as the class listens to TEACHER finish reading "To Virgins to Make Much of Time" by Robert Herrick.

TEACHER

(off-camera)

"...That age is best which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry;
For having lost but once your prime,
You may forever tarry."

DAVID (looking at KATE, rolls his eyes)

TEACHER

(off-camera)

So who can analyze this poem? David?

DAVID

(caught off guard)

Umm...I think this poem is about death. It is filled with emotion and imagery. And he uses a metaphor in the first line.

TEACHER

(off camera)

Any other ideas? Yes, you Brian ...

A bell rings, interrupting TEACHER. STUDENTS begin gathering their things, getting ready to leave.

TEACHER

(off camera)

That's all for today. Please bring your books again on Wednesday

DAVID

(looking proudly at KATE)

I totally made all that stuff up.

KATE

(nodding yes, polite but unimpressed)

Yeah.

LISA

(walking up to Kate)

Kate, I watched that movie you recommended, *The Favourite*. It was terrible! Nobody talked like that back then.

KATE

That's why it's so brilliant! He's showing how obscene and blunt some of those aristocrats really were. It would sound too polite and subtle to us if the language were realistic. It's not just a gimmick like Sophia Coppola putting Adam and the Ants on the soundtrack to *Marie Antoinette*. And, come on, it's a comedy! Like Armando Iannucci did with the similarly unrealistic language in *The Death of Stalin*, Lanthimos wanted to create a contemporary absurdist comedy about history to show that ruthlessness transcends time and milieu.

DAVID looks impressed.

Video 2: 3 Effects

Kevin: Though there are many effects we might perceive in a literary work, the effects of tone, theme, and style are often important to consider.

Tone

Brandy: We can consider the tone of a text to be the emotion conveyed by the work or expressed by the speaker. In an effective work of art, the tone might be an emotion also felt physically by the reader, listener, or observer. For many works of art, this might be the most important of the effects the author or artist is trying to convey.

Theme

Kevin: The theme of a work is an idea or message a writer or artist hopes to convey, directly or indirectly. Though the term “theme” is sometimes used to mean a general “topic” or “subject,” like “death,” such claims are often too general or obvious to be contestable or meaningful enough for an argument, so we recommend that you try to determine a more developed idea you believe the writer or artist hopes to communicate and/or promote through the exhibit.

Brandy: Instead of “death,” for example, we might define the theme of Robert Herrick’s poem “To the Virgins to Make Much of Time” like this: “life is short, so we should make the most of our time while we’re alive.”

Style

Kevin: The style of an exhibit is how it is written or presented. This could include any of a number of considerations about the means by which the author or artist communicates a theme or creates an emotion.

Brandy: For example, you could say an essay is stream-of-consciousness, humorous, dry, poetic, boring, tangential, pedantic, straightforward, allusive, disjointed, or some other description of your perception of the style.

Online Activity for Video 2: Choose any literary text—such as a poem or story—and write a short imitation closely imitating its effects of tone, theme, and style. Write a brief description of the precise effects that you tried to demonstrate.

Video 3: 3 Fundamental Strategies for Analysis

Brandy: Three of the most effective strategies for analysis are to interpret subtlety, evaluate quality, and consider cause and effect.

1) Interpret Subtlety

Kevin: Common advice for creative writers is “show, don’t tell,” and indeed we might feel offended if we read something in which the author hits us over the head with his or her theme, for example.

Brandy: Since an author often wants to show us things in a subtle way, we can sometimes serve our readers by pointing out how a seemingly insignificant detail or a seemingly random image might be more meaningful than it appears. As a good critic you have a responsibility to spell it out, to TELL your reader what you believe the author is trying to show us.

2) Evaluate Quality

Brandy: Explain to your readers why the text is an accomplishment or has value. In meaningful analysis, it is generally not enough to simply list the techniques used:

Student: ...three similes, four allusions, and synecdoche.

Brandy: We should explain how the usage is effective or ineffective.

Kevin: The critic William Empson tells us that “we usually begin with the assumption that a work of art is worth reading.” Avoid writing about exhibits you feel are not worth discussion, but feel free to give a qualified appreciation if you believe something is ultimately successful despite some flaw such as cliché, sentimentality, mixed metaphor, or triteness.

3) Consider Cause and Effect

Kevin: After you precisely define an effect, work to explain some specific choices the author made to cause that effect, providing reasons and evidence for your claim.

Student: The long rambling sentences reinforce the stream-of-consciousness style

Student: The images from the author’s youth contribute to the wistful tone.

Brandy: Note that some “effects” could also be considered “causes.”

Student: Ironically, Nick Flynn’s dispassionate tone describing his tragic life engenders more sympathy in the reader than would have a more sentimental tone.

In addition to considering how the different aspects of the text reinforce one another, you might consider how they are meaningfully juxtaposed. It can be particularly significant and illuminating if you can find a correlation between theme and style, content and form, between WHAT the author says and HOW it's said.

Video 4: Strategies for Developing Analysis

Brandy: This video will present some more strategies for analysis. Though some of these might occasionally be used as the basis for a sustained multi-paragraph argumentative essay, many are best used for shorter projects or to make claims that develop and serve a larger argument.

Kevin: Remember that meaningful argumentative claims, even in analysis, should usually be contestable: it should be at least theoretically possible for somebody to disagree with your descriptions, interpretations, or evaluations. A great way to make your claims more contestable is to make them more precise. Perhaps everybody would agree that the tone of a short story is “sad.” Not everybody might further distinguish that sadness as “bitter” and “nostalgic.”

4) Find a Counterargument

Kevin: You know your claim is contestable if you find a counterargument from an argument source disagreeing with part or all of it. Make sure to fairly paraphrase or quote the counterargument and to give specific reasons for your disagreement.

Student: I disagree with Helen Vendler’s claim that Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead” is anti-Irish, since she’s basing her theory largely on one image that has many other possible interpretations.

5) Invent a Counterargument or Misinterpretation

Brandy: Even if you can’t find a meaningful counterargument about the exhibit you examine, you can play devil’s advocate or summarize a possible misinterpretation.

Student: Though some people might consider Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” to be a patriotic anthem, it is actually deeply critical of American patriotism.

6) Find a Significant Pattern

Kevin: It can be illuminating to find and describe a meaningful pattern.

Student: Malcolm Lowry’s lifelong identification with William Blackstone shows his obsession with escaping civilization.

7) Translate Stylization

Kevin: A very “stylized” work might alter reality in some way, through surrealism, exaggeration, or some other distortion. You should consider the reasons for this distortion as well as the underlying reality the style obscures or complicates.

Student: In Chapter 11 of *Ulysses*, James Joyce renders a typical afternoon at the saloon at the Ormond Hotel both epic and musical through his allusions to the sirens of the *Odyssey* and his approximations of various musical techniques, such as *fuga per canone*.

8) Explain Ambiguity

Brandy: Explain ambiguity, how and why an aspect of an exhibit might have more than one possible meaning or interpretation.

Student: We can interpret Joni Mitchell's claim, "I could drink a case of you," as either a declaration that she can't get enough of her lover or a complaint that he doesn't do much for her.

9) Contrast with Fictional Alternative

Kevin: Contrast the exhibit with a fictional alternative, explaining how the exhibit would have been different if the author had made a different choice.

Student: If Gwendolyn Brooks had not restricted herself to monosyllabic words and equally stressed syllables, her poem "We Real Cool" would not have its forcefulness or slangy menace.

10) Use a Touchstone

Brandy: Use what Matthew Arnold called "touchstones," excerpts from other texts or works of art that you compare and/or contrast with your main exhibit source.

Student: Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" is much like *Shrek* in its anachronistic cast of characters from throughout history and literature, but the film's playfulness couldn't be more different from the foreboding and pessimistic tone of the song.

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