

Early American Literature



introduction

Primary focus in this class:

- In depth examination of what is termed early American literature.
- Readings will show different aspects of the past literary canon plus supplements from other cultures.

When does “American” Literature begin?

What does the term “American” mean to the early settlers?

How many diverse cultures composed the overall “American” culture?

Historical writing remains a focal point of our society—it explains our past diversity as humans and enables different ideas to be traded between various people and current cultures.

Historical Critical Analysis

Examining past literature:

- helps us comprehend the creative process of an individual author or group of authors within their time frame
- shows the understanding we have of a specific culture, within its time frame
- explains how one culture interacts with other cultures
- shows possible (dis)connection between an author and the culture he/she lived in
- develops new literature for the current generation

Historical Critical Analysis

There are three levels of literary appraisals.

- **Paraphrase:** helps clarify the meaning of the work when you quickly write out the intentions of the story or poem in your own words. This is a good technique as well to use after reading a story to make sure you understand the author's strategies. However, use it carefully. A full story should only be paraphrased into two sentences for a critical research paper.

- **Explicate:** you deconstruct the work scene by scene, analyzing each set of images and word choice. You check for symbols, characters, narrator, and tones. Decide how these factor together. Best used for poetry and examination of songs.

Historical Critical Analysis

- With a **critical analysis** you delve deeper into the text through the explication process. You focus on a specific image or word or symbol or event and then compare it to the meaning of the entire work as a whole.

For example:

To use E. A. Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" the word *impunity* is used frequently throughout the piece. Does this imply the main character Montresor is trying to convince himself that he has no feelings of remorse for getting away with his crime? Since the setting of the story is assumed to be Italy or France, what is Poe saying about the past European cultural landscape versus the "present" American culture?

Critical Analysis papers

Literary Analysis uses both persuasive and argumentative purposes:

- papers must show a clear, concise thesis statement
- papers must defend the thesis utilizing evidence from primary source
 - > the story itself is primary source
 - > critical, outside opinions (research) are secondary source
- Always use present tense when discussing the action within a story or poem— even if the action is related to you by a narrator in past tense, you always use present tense when discussing action in a story in your paper
- When referring to a past author use present tense, even if the writer is deceased.

ex: Homer traditionally invokes a muse at the beginning of his epic *The Odyssey*.

Critical Analysis papers

As well, whenever describing action in the text, or paraphrasing the text, use present tense, even if the information is told you in past tense.

ex:

The scarlet letter is a punishment placed upon Hester's breast by the community and yet it is an extremely imaginative product of Hester's own needlework.

Six Types of Analysis

1. Response Essay—emotional reaction to work (personal writing)
2. Explication Essay—primarily for poetry analysis; break the poem apart line by line, word by word
3. Historical/Social/Cultural Analysis Essay—explore the background developments from a perspective of history, society, or culture of the times
4. Comparison-Contrast Essay—take two characters or two themes then compare and/or contrast them
5. Critical Analysis Essay—analyze a literary work according to a single principle or element within the story: characterization, theme, style, or technique
 - then the critic will judge its effectiveness

Six Types of Analysis

6. Research Essay—a writing assignment which researches beyond the text itself

- expands your understanding of the story
- use library databases to find critics; show how their opinions fit your observations
- paper should include elements of:
 - > Historical/Social/Cultural Analysis
 - > Comparison-Contrast
 - > Critical Analysis

See *Literature and the Writing Process*, page 32 “Interpreting and Arguing”

Guidelines for Reading

Elements Which Enhance Understanding of Historical Nonfiction and Fiction

1. characters' actions
2. characters' intentions
3. plot rhythms
4. story structure
5. points of view (narration)

Guidelines for Reading

You should read material three times.

- The first reading acts on an emotional level.
- Concentrate on the actions of characters and basic plot.

First Reading

A. Read first for enjoyment, without interruption

1. notice the use of language and word play
2. consider the actions of the characters
3. note the setting and the atmosphere of the scene

B. Afterwards, as soon as possible, determine the impact

1. Do you have any unanswered questions?
2. Did you like the story?
3. Did you relate to any of the characters?

Second Reading

The second reading acts on an analytical level.

- Material you may have missed on the first reading can be explored in better detail.
- Resolves unanswered questions from first reading.

Second Reading

A. Concentrate on the plot details:

1. to answer any possible questions
2. to confirm what you already know

B. Determine:

1. theme
2. conflict type
3. How do these two elements affect the developments
and actions of the characters?



Third Reading

**The third reading specifically targets
a higher level of *critical analysis*.**

- Since you can predict what will happen, you can analyze in closer details why characters act or react in the manner they do.
- Newer insights can be gained regarding the author's strategy.
- Hidden symbols are easier to recognize.
- You can determine influences and inspirations for the author.

Third Reading

A. It is important to be open to the entire work.

1. consider how it relates to other readings
2. discover what sets it apart from other writings

B. Ask yourself: *(At this stage it is easier to answer these questions.)*

1. What images are used in the story?
2. What literary devices are used in the story?
3. Is this an analogy?
4. What is the author's main goal for telling me this story?
5. Who do the characters resemble? What symbolic images are used?
6. Ask yourself: where have I seen this situation before?

What inspirations or obvious emulations did the author use?

Guidelines for Reading

What is important about number six:

- Literature grows out of other literature. This is nothing new.
- No idea is original— *nothing is original in the creative process*; borrowing from other established authors is frequent, subconsciously and consciously.

intertextuality: the reinvention, insertion of situations and conflicts in a new sequence of thought to present a new idea; creation of something new out of an older concept.

- *With a third reading, it is easier to spot intertextuality.*

intertextuality

The Top Four Writings which are referenced, reworked, reinvented :

1. Biblical stories
2. Shakespearean plays
3. Greek/Roman myths
4. Fairy tales

Look for these emulations; they establish mood, atmosphere, scenery, and theme
— consciously and subconsciously.

Review of Reading Points

- The first reading acts on an emotional level.
- The second reading acts on an analytical level.
- The third reading targets a higher level of critical analysis.

Literary Devices & Terminologies

- **plot:** main course of action
- **setting:** the landscape of the story
- **conflict:** clash of opposing views, needs, actions
- **protagonist:** main character; focal point of action
- **antagonist:** a person the protagonist struggles against, or competes with;
an adversary
- **climax:** the ultimate scene of action; the decisive moment in a novel or play,
results in the conclusion/resolution
- **subplots:** minor secondary story lines behind the scene of main action

Literary Devices & Terminologies

- **points of view:** (voice/narration) thoughts and feelings which motivate story
- **irony:** an event deliberately contrary to what the reader expects
- **foreshadowing:** hints of a future development through elements of the story
- **motifs:** reoccurring symbols which appear throughout the story
- **paradox:** conflicting/contradictory statement
- **exposition:** establishment of setting, prepares the fictional world for reader
- ***in medias res:*** latin: “in the middle of.” *Many short stories use this technique.*