



Unpacking Texts: How to Read, What to Notice (especially in Literary Analysis)

Unpacking a text is an essential skill in literary critical analysis. Analyzing the purpose and meaning of a statement, phrase, or even a single word within the larger text begins with paying close attention to the various rhetorical devices used. In a longer passage or section, not every word or detail will be useful or especially meaningful. Your first task is to look carefully at the given passage and note which elements stand out in some way. How can we establish which details are important? Paying attention to the “small” stuff, as suggested in the below list, might help you consider what details seems significant:

- Unusual, unconventional, or otherwise notable diction and word choice
- Use of repetition
- Notable punctuation and changes in punctuation
- Strong or unusual images, symbolism, or metaphors
- Notable sentence structure as well as shifts in sentence structure
- Historical, mythical, and/or Biblical allusions and references
- Identifiable tone and point of view
- Pronoun use as well as shifts in pronouns

This is a short list, but a useful starting point. For a complete critical literary analysis, you must not only evaluate these rhetorical details individually, but also consider the text in question as a whole. In order to properly explore the significance of a text you will need to do the following (although not necessarily in this order):

1) Construct a thesis that clearly and precisely answers the question: how does this passage help articulate the overall “message” of the narrative? You might start by determining what you think the “message” of this particular passage is, and then push your claim further to consider the relevance of this passage to the novel's main argument. What is this passage - and this novel - trying to tell us?

2) Support this thesis by utilizing the specific details of the selected passage. Pay attention to rhetorical devices such as language (word choice, sentence structure, repetition), imagery, symbolism, etc. Use these details to help “show” what you are arguing about the overall importance of the passage.

3) Contextualize the passage within the rest of the work: what is important about this passage in terms of what is happening in the narrative overall? Who is in this “scene” and what is happening? The point here is to explain why this particular passage stands out in the narrative, not to summarize the whole plot.

Stronger essays will avoid excessive plot summary, utilize the specific details of the passage itself to make and support claims, contain an identifiable thesis, and will also consider other parts of the novel (using appropriate quotes) to help support the argument about the importance of the selected passage and its meaning.