Literary Analysis: Getting Started

When writing an essay about literature, it is not acceptable merely to summarize a text. Instead, you should use your insights, backed by quotations, to illustrate a certain point (or answer a specific question) about the text. The following is a list of questions to help you get started in finding a topic you would like to pursue.

- What is the author trying to say?
- What is the theme of the work? How does the author relay the theme?
- Does the author use any special techniques? (e.g., foreshadowing, flashback, story-within-a-story, analogy, irony, satire) How do these techniques contribute to the text's general meaning or theme?
- What is the author's tone? (Sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek, amused, etc.) Why would the author employ this tone?
- Who is the narrator? Does the narrator's point of view differ from the author's? How can you tell? What is the narrator's perspective? Why is the narration from this perspective?
- What is the setting of the text? How does setting contribute to the text's overall meaning?
- What symbols does the author employ? How do the symbols contribute to the work as a whole?
- Does the work have a motif? What is the significance of a given motif? How does the motif add to the text as a whole?
- Which character interests you the most? Why?
- Do characters change over time? How?
- How does a specific character function within the work? What is her/his purpose?
- What does the work remind you of? (Other poems, books, articles)
- Can you compare/contrast two characters in the text?
- Can you compare/contrast this work to another text you are familiar with?
- Have you ever seen a play or movie version of this work? How did it differ?
- Can you critique the work from a different perspective? (Feminist, conservative, Marxist, theological, historical, etc.)
- How does the author portray a particular social group? Why?
- What interests you the most about the work?
- Did you enjoy the text? Why or why not?
- If you were to meet the author, what questions would you ask?
- Were you confused by any parts of the text? Why?
- What were the text's strongest points? What were the text's weakest points?