

## The Literary Analysis

Here's a quick analogy to help you start thinking about what a literary analysis is. For those of you who don't already know, I'm a huge movie fan. I love movies. I love going to a movie theatre; I don't even care what I see half the time. I love critiquing a movie. But I especially love analyzing movies. When I analyze a movie, I try to make guesses about the director's choices. What effect was he or she going for? What kind of reaction was he or she hoping to get from audiences? When I analyze a movie, I'm not actually evaluating it. Rather, I'm trying to understand why the director did what he or she did.

Here's an example. During Christmas break a few years ago, I saw the film *Rocky Balboa*. While I was impressed with the plot and dialogue, it was the setting that really caught my attention. Time and time again, I was treated to grim depictions of Philadelphia's south side. Everything from the stop signs and bus stations to the restaurants and pool halls looked old, decrepit, and yet stubbornly optimistic. Kind of like an aging boxer—kind of like Rocky. I understood then why the director kept showing audiences such grittiness. He wanted us to see the connections between the film's setting and central character. Both still had some fight left in them. And both would somehow endure.

That's what an analysis does. It answers the question "why." Literary works aren't random things. Every descriptive detail, every piece of dialogue, every move a character makes is all carefully and purposefully orchestrated by the author. So the question you have to answer when you analyze a work of literature, therefore, is, "why." Why did the author make the choices he or she made? And what effect do these choices have on other elements of that literary work?

When analyzing a literary work, you'll need to look closely at some of the choices the author has made in terms of setting, structure, plot, conflict, and character development. What you decide to write about in your analysis, however, is ultimately up to you. You might choose, for instance, to explore how the author's use of setting affects character development. Or you might focus instead on how the story's structure contributes to the complexity of its plot.

Keep in mind, however, that an analysis is not like other literary assignments such as book report, which merely summarizes a book's plot, or a book review critiquing the book's strengths and weaknesses. Rather, you're interpreting the work, shedding new light on how it might be read.

