

Using the SIFT Method of Literary Analysis

When exploring how a writer uses literary elements and stylistic techniques to convey meaning or theme, you may want to consider the SIFT method to practice literary analysis. This method allows you to “sift” through the parts in order to comprehend the whole.

SIFT Method

Symbol: examine the title and the text for symbolism

Images: identify images and sensory details

Figures of speech: analyze figurative language and other devices

Tone and Theme: discuss how all devices reveal tone and theme

SYMBOL

Since the title of a story or novel often contains symbols that hint at theme, you should first be encouraged to reexamine the title. Is part of the title a central symbol in the story? Are there other significant symbols in the story? What are the characteristics of the symbol(s)? Speculate about its significance. Has the symbol been used in literature before to represent the same themes in this story? Does the meaning of the symbol change throughout the story, and does the change reveal insights about the author’s use of symbolism and its contribution to theme?

IMAGERY

Writers use language to create sensory impressions and to evoke specific responses to characters, objects, events, or situations in their works. The writer “shows” rather than “tells,” thus allowing the reader to participate in the experience more fully. Therefore, imagery helps to produce mood and tone. When reading a piece of literature containing imagery, consider two questions:

1. What do I see, hear, taste, smell, or feel?
2. What EFFECT is the author trying to convey with these images?

Does the story open or close with significant or intense images? Why might the author begin or end with those images? What kind of information or message do they provide?

FIGURES OF SPEECH (aka FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE)

Writers form images by using figures of speech such as similes, metaphors, and personification. Find examples in the story and discuss how these figures of speech help to convey effect and meaning. Consider the following questions:

1. What is the significance of comparisons in the story? (metaphors, similes, etc.)
2. How do figures of speech enhance meaning?

Consider other devices used in the story such as irony and allusion. Irony is often found in the contradictions of expectations and reality, or appearance and reality. How do allusions enhance the meaning or effect of the novel? Does the author retain the original symbolic meaning of an allusion, or does he/she alter it?

tone

A close examination of word choice, imagery, and detail reveals a narrator’s attitude or tone and contributes to the reader’s understanding. Find details that reveal the author’s tone toward the subjects of the story.

THEME

To determine the theme, you might:

1. Summarize the story.
2. List the subject s or motifs that emerge from the summary, such as evil, injustice, inhumanity, social protest, corruption, poverty, tradition, individuality, survival, etc.
3. Write a sentence about each subject or motif based on insights gained from analyzing symbolism, imagery, figurative language, and other devices. Because all literary devices lead to tone and theme, this process will help you to perceive what insights about life the author is revealing about each subject and to refine the process of determining meaning in a text.

Ask yourself what life-lessons the main characters have learned or what lessons they themselves have learned as a result of reading. Look for statements in the story by the characters or the narrator that comment on life, the world, or human nature, thereby implying theme. Discuss each thematic possibility and decide which to be the most probable based upon the evidence from the text and from this “SIFTing” process, keeping in mind the fact that many stories have more than one theme and there is seldom just one “right” answer.

Example themes:

- Based on the **motif** of social protest: “When a man becomes a threat to society , that society sets out to destroy him.”
- Based on the **motif** of individual and society: “Man has no individual identity and cannot exist as a single human person apart from society.”