

CHAPTER 36

## Writing About Literature

**36a** What is literature?

Literature includes fiction (novels and short stories); drama (plays, scripts, and some films); poetry (poems and lyrics); as well as nonfiction with artistic qualities (memoirs, personal essays, and the like). Since ancient times, literature has represented human experiences, entertained, and enlarged readers' perspectives about themselves, others, diverse cultures, and different ways of living.

By writing about literature, you shape and refine the insights that result from your reading. Writing about reading, more than reading without writing, helps you move to a deeper understanding of other people and of ideas, times, and places. Writing about literature facilitates your investigations of how authors use language to stir the imaginations, emotions, and intellects of their readers. And, of course, writing allows you to share your own reading experiences and insights with other readers.

**36b** What reading skills help me interpret literature?

Interestingly, many readers are surprised to discover that CRITICAL READING actually enhances their enjoyment of the text. Critical reading means reading systematically, closely, and actively (5d). Above all, it means asking questions: What does the work mean? Why has the author made particular choices in plot, characterizations, and word choice? What other works influenced the author's choices? How do readers react to the work?

Sometimes instructors ask students to answer questions that deal with material on a literal level; that is, to tell exactly what is said on the page. If a question asks what happens in the plot or what a passage is saying, you need to answer with a SUMMARY or PARAPHRASE of the work. If a question asks about the historical context of a work, or asks for biographical or situational information about the author, you likely need to do some research and then report exactly what you find.

More often, assignments call for making INFERENCES. Making inferences means reading “between” the lines to figure out what is implied but not stated. This reading skill is especially crucial for reading literature because it tends to “show” rather than to “tell.” Literature depicts events, characters, conversations, and settings, but the author doesn't say precisely what the work means. For example, your instructor might ask you to discuss why a character does something for which the author provides no explicit reason; to explain the effect of images in a poem; to investigate how a work depicts the

roles of women, men, and/or children; or to explore the author's stance on a social issue. In such papers you're not only analyzing the literary text but also examining your own experiences and beliefs.

To read a literary work closely, and then to write about it, you look for details or passages that relate to each other. In so doing, you can form a **TOPIC** or **THESIS STATEMENT** for writing about the text. As you read, mark up the text by selectively underlining or highlighting passages, by writing notes, comments, or questions in the margin, or by taking notes separately on paper or on a computer. If you use the third method, be sure to note exactly what part of the text you're referring to so that you don't lose track of what applies to what.

### **36c** What forms of inquiry do I use to write about literature?

Several different types of inquiry are used for writing about literature.

#### **Personal response to literature**

In a personal response, you explain your reaction to a work of literature or some aspect of it through discussions of specific passages or elements from the text. You might write about whether you enjoyed reading the work, or whether situations in the work are similar to your personal experience, and why such observations are worth the reader's consideration. You might explain whether you agree with the author's point of view. You might answer a question or explore a problem that the work raised for you. For example, how did you react when a likeable character broke the law?

#### **Interpretation of literature**

Most works of literature are open to more than one interpretation. Your task, then, is not to discover the single right answer. Instead, you determine a possible interpretation and provide an argument that supports it. The questions in Box 36-1 can help you write an effective interpretation paper.

#### **BOX 36-1** SUMMARY



#### Questions for a literary interpretation paper

1. What is the central theme of the work?
2. How do particular parts of the work relate to the central theme of the work?
3. What do patterns, if they exist in various elements of the work, mean?
4. What meaning does the author create through the elements listed in Box 36-2?
5. Why does the work end as it does?

### Formal analysis of literature

A formal analysis explains how elements of a literary work function to create meaning or effect. The term “formal analysis” refers to analysis of *formal elements* that make up a work of literature, such as the plot structure of a novel or the rhythm of a poem. Box 36-2 describes many of these formal elements. Your instructor may ask you to concentrate on just one formal element (for example, “How does the point of view in the story affect its meaning?”) or to discuss how a writer develops a theme through several elements (for example, “How do setting, imagery, and symbolism reveal the author’s viewpoint?”).

To prepare to write your formal analysis, read the work thoroughly, looking for patterns and repetitions. Write notes as you read to help you form insights about these patterns and repetitions. For example, if you need to analyze a character, you want to pay attention to everything that character says or does, everything that other characters say about him or her, and any descriptions of the character.

#### BOX 36-2 SUMMARY



#### Major elements of formal analysis in literary works

PLOT	Events and their sequence
THEME	Central idea or message
STRUCTURE	Organization and relationship of parts to each other and to the whole
CHARACTERIZATION	Traits, thoughts, and actions of the people in the plot
SETTING	Time and place of the action
POINT OF VIEW	Perspective or position from which the material is presented—by a narrator, a main character, or another person either in the plot or observing the plot
STYLE	Words and sentence structures chosen to present the material
IMAGERY	Pictures created by the words used to create figures of speech (simile, metaphor, etc.)
TONE	Author’s attitude toward the subject of the work—and sometimes toward the reader—expressed through choice of words, imagery, and point of view
FIGURE OF SPEECH	Unusual use or combination of words, as in metaphor and simile, for enhanced vividness or effect
SYMBOLISM	Meaning beneath the surface of the words and images
RHYTHM	Beat, meter
RHYME	Repetition of similar sounds for their auditory effect

### Cultural analysis of literature

A cultural analysis relates the literary work to broader historical, social, cultural, and political situations. Instructors might ask you to explain how events or prevailing attitudes influence the writing of a work or the way readers understand it. For example, “How did Maxine Hong Kingston’s experience as a Chinese American affect the way she tells her story in *The Woman Warrior*?” or “How do differences between the institution of marriage in the early nineteenth century and today affect readers’ interpretations of *Pride and Prejudice*?” Box 36-3 lists some common focuses for cultural analysis.

#### BOX 36-3 SUMMARY



#### Major topics for cultural analysis

GENDER	How does a work portray women or men and define or challenge their respective roles in society?
CLASS	How does a work portray relationships among the upper, middle, and lower economic classes? How do characters’ actions or perspectives result from their wealth and power—or the lack thereof?
RACE AND ETHNICITY	How does a work portray the influences of race and ethnicity on the characters’ actions, status, and values?
HISTORY	How does a work reflect or challenge past events and values in a society?
AUTOBIOGRAPHY	How might the writer’s experiences have influenced this particular work? Similarly, how might the times in which the writer lives or lived have affected his or her work?
GENRE	How is the work similar to, or different from, other works of its type, often—but not always—those written at the same general time? Literature’s genres include fiction and memoirs, plays, and poems.

## 36d What special rules apply to writing about literature?

When you write about literature, certain special elements come into play.

### 36d.1 Using first and third person appropriately

Many instructors require students to use the **FIRST PERSON** (*I, we, our*) only when writing about their personal point of view in evaluations; they want students to use the **THIRD PERSON** (*he, she, it, they*) for all other content. These rules are becoming less rigid, but be sure to ask about your instructor’s requirements.

### 36d.2 Using present and past tense correctly

Always use the PRESENT TENSE when you describe or discuss a literary work or any of its elements: *George Henderson* [a character] **takes** control of the action and **tells** the other characters when they may speak. The present tense is also correct for discussing what the author has done in a specific work: *Because Susan Glaspell* [the author] **excludes** *Minnie and John Wright* from the stage as speaking characters, she **forces** her audience to learn about them through the words of others.

Use a PAST-TENSE VERB to discuss historical events or biographical information: *Susan Glaspell* **was** a social activist who **was** strongly **influenced** by the chaotic events of the early twentieth century.

### 36d.3 Using primary and secondary sources

Some assignments call for only your own ideas about the literary work that is the subject of your essay. In such cases, you are dealing only with a PRIMARY SOURCE. In writing about literature, a primary source is the original creative work (a poem, play, story, novel, memoir, diary). Other assignments require you additionally to use SECONDARY SOURCES, which consist of interpretations of literary works. As with all source-based writing, you need to DOCUMENT primary sources and secondary sources because you want to ensure that readers never mistake someone else's ideas as yours. Otherwise, you're PLAGIARIZING, which is a serious academic offense (for a complete discussion, see Chapter 32).

Most literature instructors require students to use the DOCUMENTATION STYLE of the Modern Language Association (MLA), described in Chapter 33. However, some instructors prefer APA style (Chapter 34). So check with your instructor before you begin to conduct your research.

Secondary sources include books, articles, and Web sites in which experts discuss some aspect of the literary text or other material related to your topic. You might use secondary sources to support your own ideas, perhaps by drawing upon the ideas of a scholar who agrees with you or debating the ideas of a scholar who disagrees with you. Or, if you think that you have a new or different interpretation, you might summarize, analyze, or critique what others have written, in order to provide a framework for your own analysis. You can locate secondary sources by using the research process discussed in Chapters 30 and 31. A particularly important resource for research about literature is the *MLA International Bibliography*, which is the most comprehensive index to literary scholarship (Box 31-4 in section 31e).

## 36e Sample student essay about literature

### Working on the assignment

Michael Choi, a student in first-year English, fulfilled an assignment to write an interpretation of the images and metaphors in Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Blackberries." When Michael first read the poem, several of the images

puzzled him. He wondered how they connected to an apparently simple scene of a boy picking, eating, and selling blackberries. In the process of writing his essay, Michael came to understand how those images and metaphors help shape the poem's deeper meaning. His final draft is reproduced here.

### Learning about the poet, Yusef Komunyakaa

Yusef Komunyakaa is an African American poet who was born in 1947 and raised in Louisiana. Komunyakaa was educated at the University of Colorado, at Colorado State University, and at the University of California–Irvine. He served a tour of duty in Vietnam and was awarded the Bronze Star. In 1994, he won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry—one of the most prestigious honors a poet can receive in the United States—for his book *Neon Vernacular*.

### BLACKBERRIES

#### Yusef Komunyakaa

They left my hands like a printer's  
 Or thief's before a police blotter  
 & pulled me into early morning's  
 Terrestrial sweetness, so thick  
 The damp ground was consecrated 5  
 Where they fell among a garland of thorns.  
 Although I could smell old lime-covered  
 History, at ten I'd still hold out my hands  
 & berries fell into them. Eating from one  
 & filling a half gallon with the other, 10  
 I ate the mythology & dreamt  
 Of pies & cobbler, almost  
 Needful as forgiveness. My bird dog Spot  
 Eyed blue jays & thrashers. The mud frogs  
 In rich blackness, hid from daylight. 15  
 An hour later, beside City Limits Road  
 I balanced a gleaming can in each hand,  
 Limboed between worlds, repeating *one dollar*.  
 The big blue car made me sweat.  
 Wintertime crawled out of the windows. 20  
 When I leaned closer I saw the boy  
 & girl my age, in the wide back seat  
 Smirking, & it was then I remembered my fingers  
 Burning with thorns among berries too ripe to touch.

*Student's essay about literature*

Choi 1

Michael Choi  
Professor May  
English 100  
8 November 2005

Images, Metaphors, and Meaning in "Blackberries"

In Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Blackberries," the poet describes himself as "limboed between worlds" (line 18). At that moment, he is a boy standing beside City Limits Road--a symbolic line between the city and the country--selling berries that he has just picked. Yet the boy is also caught between his familiar natural world and a world of wealth and privilege. One of the poem's key issues is whether the boy is responsible for his situation. Komunyakaa uses a rich set of images and metaphors to suggest the boy's complicated position.

Some plain and direct images connect the boy to the world of nature. As he picks blackberries, the poet describes the "bird dog Spot" watching blue jays and thrashers (13-14), and he mentions "mud frogs" hiding in the dark (14-15). Readers form an impression of a rustic boy trying to earn some money from a countryside that is familiar and comfortable to him. He eats as he fills "gleaming" half-gallon cans (17) and dreams of "pies & cobbler" (12). The day is "thick" with "terrestrial sweetness" (4), and the atmosphere is peaceful, almost sleepy.



Choi 2

When the boy moves beyond the country to the City Limits Road to sell his harvest, however, his pleasant morning is shattered. After a customer drives up, the boy says, "The big blue car made me sweat" (19). Partly, he sweats because the car's air-conditioning makes him aware of heat that had not bothered him until that very moment. Komunyakaa uses the strong image that "wintertime crawled out of the windows" to heighten the contrast between the artificial environment of the car and the natural environment of the boy (20). Even more important, the boy sweats because he is suddenly self-conscious. He feels uncomfortable at the gap between himself and "the boy / & girl my age, in the wide back seat" (21-22). The emphasis on the air-conditioning and the width of the seat makes clear that these children come not only from the city but also from wealthier circumstances. When they smirk at him, he remembers his berry-stained fingers. Those stained hands are a metaphor for how different he is from the children in the car, both socially and economically. He feels ashamed.

Should he feel this way? Several complicated images and metaphors in the poem make this question difficult to answer. For example, at the beginning, the poet says that the berries "left my hands like a printer's" (1). This image not only calls attention to the inky stains on his hands but also likens berry picking to printing. Both are forms of honest manual labor. Furthermore, picking ripe berries is similar to the messy job of shedding ink-saturated type from a printing press—the typesetting method used before computers. This printing metaphor suggests a subtle connection between the boy's work and the poet's work. Komunyakaa immediately complicates the first image with a second that compares the boy's hands to a "thief's before a police blotter" (2). The common element between the two metaphors is the ink, which in the second is used for fingerprinting.





## Choi 3

Note that the person whose fingerprints are being taken by the police is not simply a "suspect" but a thief (2). The person is already guilty of a crime. Has the boy been stealing berries that do not belong to him, and does he feel guilty when he is caught? This possible interpretation does not completely fit the encounter with the big blue car. The "smirking" response of the children in the car seems snobbish (23). Rather than accusing him of being a thief, the children make fun of him for getting dirty while picking berries, which they can buy in cool comfort. For his efforts, which even involve his "fingers / Burning with thorns" (23-24), the boy receives ridicule. The reader's sympathies lie with the boy selling the berries. Even if he did steal the berries, his crime does not seem that great.

Another set of metaphors, more mythic in nature, suggests an answer to the question of whether the boy should feel guilty. The boy reports that he "could smell old lime-covered / History" as he picks and eats (7-8). While lime might refer to a bright shade of green or to the citrus fruit, another meaning seems to apply here. The chemical substance lime has two uses. Farmers use it to reduce acidity in soil, where it serves as a kind of fertilizer. Alternatively, quicklime spread over the bodies of dead animals speeds their decomposition. To cover history in lime, therefore, means either to cultivate it or to bury it. Later, the boy states that he "ate the mythology & dreamt / of pies & cobbler" (11-12). Obviously, no one can literally eat mythology. This metaphor suggests that the boy is consuming the berries with little thought of any deeper significance his actions might have. There is a mythic dimension to picking blackberries, but the boy focuses on pleasant physical sensations and, eventually, the chance to make some money. Similarly, history is something to consume or ignore. If the boy is a criminal (which seems



Choi 4

unlikely), maybe he is unaware that he is doing anything wrong. Furthermore, perhaps no one owns the berries and he is merely “stealing” from nature.

The poem’s most profound images and metaphors have religious overtones. The poet describes the ground beneath the berry bushes as “consecrated” (5). This powerful word choice characterizes the ground as holy. The berries do not fall simply among thorns but among “a garland of thorns” (6). The image of a garland suggests the crown of thorns placed on the head of Jesus after his trial, and these images draw out the deepest meaning of the poet’s being “limboed between worlds” (18). In some religious traditions, limbo is a place where souls temporarily go before entering heaven or where innocent but unbaptized babies permanently dwell. In addition to standing between the world of wealth and status that is represented by the car and the simpler world of bird dogs and mud frogs, the boy stands outside paradise. He has left and knows that he cannot go back.

Although mythic and religious elements are present in “Blackberries,” Komunyakaa’s poem ultimately supports interpretations on several levels. The poet uses religious images to give depth to the boy’s situation. When the boy picks the berries, he is in a peaceful, natural environment that is almost sacred, even if he does not realize it. When he sells the berries, he encounters a foreign world of wealth and privilege. Because of his background, he cannot easily join that world. Yet he cannot easily go back to his familiar ways because he now sees his actions differently. He perceives that there may be something wrong with picking blackberries. Whether or not he should feel guilty, he does feel guilty. The poet is truly limboed between worlds.



Choi 5

## Work Cited

Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Blackberries." Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2001. 280-81.

(The proportions shown in this paper have been adjusted to fit the space constraints of this book. Follow the actual dimensions prescribed in Chapters 33 and 34 or in your instructor's directions.)

CHAPTER 37

## Writing in the Social Sciences

**37a** How do I gather information in the social sciences?

The social sciences focus on the behavior of people as individuals and in groups. The social science field includes disciplines such as economics, education, geography, political science, psychology, sociology, and at some colleges, history.

The social sciences use several methods of inquiry. They include observations, interviews, questionnaires, and experiments. Some of these methods lead to *quantitative research*, which analyzes statistics and other numerical data, and other methods lead to *qualitative research*, which relies on careful descriptions and interpretations.

Observation is a common method for inquiry in the social sciences. To make observations, use whatever tools or equipment you might need: a laptop or notebook, sketching materials, tape recorders, cameras. As you observe, take complete and accurate notes. In a report of your observations, tell what tools or equipment you used, because your method might have influenced what you saw (for example, your taking photographs may make people act differently than they would otherwise).

Interviews are useful for gathering people's opinions and impressions of events. If you interview, remember that interviews are not always a completely reliable way to gather factual information, because people's memories are not precise and people's first impulse is to present themselves in the best light. If your only source of factors is interviews, try to interview as many