

How to Analyze a Text – Some Aspects to Consider

Please Note:

There are MORE WAYS to approach a text than there are readers/listeners. How each of us understands a text depends on our cultural upbringing, our personal experience, the context of our encounter with the text, as well as on an infinite number of other things. What we think and say about a text is therefore always necessarily SUBJECTIVE - no matter how objective we think we are: it is our INTERPRETATION of the text at a particular moment in our life (and even our own interpretation of a particular text varies with each reading).

Nevertheless, our interpretation of a text can be SHARED with others to ENRICH their personal experience with a text. Since every reading is a DIALOGUE between the text and the reader, sharing our reading experience with other readers means adding a voice to their dialogue with the text - and thus turning the interaction into a POLYPHONIC conversation.

The GOAL of any textual analysis is to help other readers see the text in a new way - a way in which they have NOT (yet) seen it before - just as reading other people's interpretations gives us the chance to open up to new ways of seeing.

There is not much point in JUST LISTING the devices that characterize a certain text (e.g. use of parallelism, metaphors, alliterations) if we don't try to understand what their FUNCTION is in that particular text (and its context!) and how they work TOGETHER to create the text's underlying message(s). One way of doing this is to try to find the PATTERNS that exist in a text. These patterns are sometimes a bit hidden and might not be obvious from a superficial reading but they often show the CONNECTIONS between various parts or aspects of the text and can therefore DEEPEN our understanding of the text and give us more INSIGHTS into its unique being.

*A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.*

*I say it just
Begins to live
That day.*

(Emily Dickinson, #1212)

ASPECTS that can be addressed in a textual analysis include - but are not limited - to the following.

THEME

Questions to ask:

- what is the text really about? what is its main message?
- what exactly forms the core of the text and how does this core relate to the text's individual parts?
- how does this core fit into a larger framework (cultural concepts, ways of thinking, value systems, pool of existing research)?

Aspects that might help to answer these questions:

- **title** (however, the title could be ironic, or it could deliberately put the reader on the wrong track: the writer might play with audience expectations and/or assumptions)
- **key words** (which words or phrases are emphasized? why?)
- **semantic fields** (which areas do many of the words come from and why?)
- **leitmotifs** (are there any expressions or images or situations that reappear? if so, what is their function?)
- **repetitions** (what is repeated in the text and WHY? please consider all levels, not just sounds, words, parts of sentences, images and symbols, but also settings, characters, actions, events, etc)
- **syntax** (what is characteristic or even unusual about the syntax? why? does this give any clues about how to understand the text?)
- **tone** (how does the speaker talk/write about the subject? for example, does he/she criticize, praise, support, or undermine something? does he try to persuade the reader or make an effort to be detached and objective? does he/she express his opinion clearly or try to manipulate the reader in a more subtle way? does he/she make fun of something or is he serious and respectful? does he/she exaggerate or play things down? etc)
- **voice** (do you hear a mainly oral or a written voice [or voices] in the text? what function does this have? what values and/or attitudes does the speaker reveal by speaking or writing that way? why? what does this tell you about him or her?)

STRUCTURE

Looking at the structure of a text reveals the way in which the theme unfolds.

Questions to ask:

- into how many major parts can the text be divided?
- what's the common denominator of each part?
- how do the individual parts relate to each other?
- what function does each part have in the larger whole? e.g.:
 - › thesis - antithesis - synthesis
 - › question - answer
 - › climactic sequence
 - › statement - undermining of statement - conclusion
 - › statement - examples
 - › association of thoughts/words
 - › different aspects of one topic
 - › different opinions about the same theme
 - › interaction with different people
 - › flashback and/or flashforward
 - › real world - imagined world
- can you discover any patterns in the text?
- if so, what is their function?
- how do these patterns relate to each other and to the surface structure of the text?

Aspects that might help to answer these questions:

- **genre expectations** and **deviations** from the usual genre expectations
- **change of one or more of the following:**
 - › time
 - › place
 - › speaker
 - › perspective
 - › voice
 - › tone
 - › characters
 - › value system
- **conjuncts, subjuncts, adverbs, and linking phrases** (such as: but, however, yet, moreover, in addition, and then, similarly, ironically, on the other hand, what is more, etc)
- the existence of **patterns**
 - › repetitions
 - › parallels and similarities
 - › contrasts

PATTERNS

A pattern is a composite of features that gets repeated in some form or another. The repetition creates a relationship between the various occurrences. Most texts contain simultaneously a variety of different patterns. These patterns can either reinforce each other, undermine each other, or form some other kind of relationship. The INTERPLAY of the different patterns can be a way to approach the deeper meaning of a text.

Questions to ask:

- which patterns can we distinguish in the text? e.g.
 - › thought patterns
 - › syntactic patterns
 - › semantic patterns (words, images)
 - › sound patterns (alliteration, assonance, rhythm, rhyme)
- what functions do these patterns have?
- how are these patterns related to each other and to the theme of the text?

Aspects that might help to answer these questions:

- what is **repeated** in the text? e.g.:
 - › behaviors or actions
 - › relationships (between people, people and objects, experiences, etc)
 - › structural elements
 - › grammatical elements
 - › images, metaphors, leitmotifs
 - › words or phrases
 - › sounds
- what **function** does this have?
- why is the **connection** that is created through this repetition between different parts of the text important?
- does this reveal anything about the **deeper meaning** of the text, for example, about the underlying value system?

PLOT:

A plot is the OUTWARD action or sequence of events; it can be enriched, complemented or even undermined by the INNER DEVELOPMENT (experiences, insights, thoughts, feelings, changes in awareness and consciousness, changes in values and points of views) the speaker/narrator and/or (one/some of) the characters go through.

Questions to ask:

- what happens? ... and then? ... and then?
- is that all that happens or is something else going on, perhaps on another level?
- what are the **major conflicts and/or oppositions**?
- how are they resolved?
- does anything **change** in the course of the text (for example, the speaker's attitude, the values of one of the characters, the setting, the syntax, the vocabulary, the rhythm, the imagery etc)? if so, why?

Aspects that might help to answer these questions:

- the **sequence of events** (which is NOT necessarily identical with the chronological sequence of the events)
- the **length of time** spent on telling each event
- the **connotations of the times** mentioned (e.g. night, spring, easter, diwali)
- the underlying **chronological sequence** of the events (which might differ dramatically from the sequence in which the events are told)
- the **"gaps,"** i.e.: **what is NOT told in the text but somehow implied** (through hints, images, choice of words, atmosphere, context, etc)
- the **connection or relationship between the events** (e.g. cause & effect, action & consequence, acting out of various possibilities, associations in the protagonist's mind etc)
- the **locations of the events** and what each of these location implies on a more symbolic level (e.g. garden, desert, city, hill, underworld, Vancouver, Venice, Egypt, Japan)

COMMUNICATIVE SITUATION:

NARRATOR/STAGE MANAGER/SPEAKER/"I" - READER/LISTENER/AUDIENCE

Questions to ask:

- who is the speaker of the text/ narrator of the story?
- in what form does he/she appear? does he/she identify him/herself as "I"?
- is there more than one speaker/narrator? if so, who and why?
- how many voices can we distinguish altogether? what is the function of this?
- how does this/each speaker present the story or material/ information?
- what does the speaker/narrator reveal about his/her point of view, values, cultural, historical, social, political, educational, religious, philosophical, etc background ?
- what emotions does the speaker show? what can we conclude from that?
- whom does the speaker/narrator address? what does this imply?
- what does the speaker/narrator think of his/her "you"?
- is the "you" identical with the reader/listener/audience of the text? if yes, what does this imply? if no, is there a relationship between the "you" in the text and the reader/listener/audience?
- how does the speaker interact with the you? how with the listener/reader? why? what effect does this have on the story/information that is presented?
- what do we learn from the speaker's words, actions, emotions, and thoughts about his/her character? in what way is that important for the text?
- what does the speaker really try to communicate? why?
- how does he/she do that? what are his/her strategies? why?
- does the speaker's/narrator's attitude or point of view or values change in the process of the communication? why?

Aspects that might help to answer these questions:

- ' **use of pronouns** (e.g. I-you, them-us)
- ' **tone** (e.g. humorous, funny, ironic, serious, respectful, contemplative, objective, detached, polemic, enthusiastic, caring, worried, critical, etc)
- ' **perspective/point of view** (one perspective or more than one; perspective same throughout text or changing; narrator/speaker omniscient or deliberately(or unintentionally!) limited/restricted; cultural, political, etc background, values, etc)
- ' **vocabulary** (level of formality, preferred semantic fields, making use of images, symbols, connotations or focused on denotations)
- ' **syntax** (degree of complexity; syntactic rhythm/contrast; recurring constructions, active-passive)

CHARACTER

Questions to ask:

- who are the major and minor characters in the text?
- what do we know about them and how do we know what we know? is that information reliable? if not, are there any clues about a different interpretation of the characters than the one provided on the surface?
- how do the characters interact with each other? what does that imply?
- what do the characters' actions, words, thoughts, and emotions reveal about their personalities? what does that say about the world they live in or represent?
- do the characters stay the same throughout the text or do they change? if so, why, and what brought about their change?
- how are the characters related to each other, to the theme of the text and to the plot and structure of the text? what does that imply? can we detect any patterns?

Aspects that might help to answer these questions:

- **outward appearance** of characters (this could be telling or symbolic, e.g. someone who always wears formal clothes may be very insecure; someone who likes to wear red might enjoy life etc)
- **emotions and thoughts**
- **language** the characters use (tone, style, register, preferred words or images, syntactic complexity, focus etc)
- **actions and behavior** of the characters (to each other and to the world around them)
- **relationship(s)** of each character to the other character(s)
- **function** of each character for the piece as a whole (theme, plot, etc)

SETTING

Question to ask:

- where is the text located geographically? what does that imply?
- does the place change? if so, why is that important?
- when do the events presented in the text happen? what can we conclude from that?
- what's the temporal order of the events in the text? are they presented chronologically or in some other form? are there any flashforwards or flashbacks? why? what's the connection between the events that are juxtaposed?

Aspects that might help to answer these questions:

- symbolic meaning of time and place (e.g. winter, mountain top)
- connotations (e.g. snow: coldness, lack of emotions, lack of love/ compassion, old age, death, purity, clarity, innocence, newness)
- historical & cultural background

FORM

Please keep in mind that the form and the content are not really separate things but that they are ultimately just two sides of the same thing.

Two basic approaches are possible:

- a) form as evidence that supports the thematic interpretation of the text*
- b) form as starting point that leads to a discovery of the text's content*

Questions to ask:

- what catches your attention
 - quantitatively
 - › does the text use a particular linguistic device conspicuously often?
(e.g.: repetitions of all kinds, negations, certain pronouns)
 - › does the text use a particular linguistic device conspicuously seldom or not at all?
(e.g. verbs, names, adjectives)
 - › why?
 - qualitatively
 - › does the text use language in a way that somehow deviates from the 'linguistic norm' (whatever that may be)?
(e.g. ungrammatical sentences, no punctuation, unusual spelling)
 - › does the text somehow deviate from the pattern it builds up itself?
(e.g. a poem that starts out with a certain meter and/or rhyme scheme later turns into free verse)
 - › why?
- what would be an alternative way of expressing what is said in the text?
 - › compare this alternative way with the actual choice the author has made in the text: what's the difference?
 - › why do you think the author has made this particular choice? (i.e. what exactly is the function of saying things the way they were said)

- can you find a pattern/ patterns in the text? cf. in particular:
 - › recurrences, repetitions, parallels
 - › oppositions, contrasts
 - › relations between certain elements of the text

Aspects that might help to answer these questions:

visual level:

- › arrangement of words/sentences on the page
- › division in visual parts (paragraphs, stanzas, lines, images, captions, headlines, etc)
- › blank space in between parts
- › typographical aspects
(e.g. capitals, italics, bold, size, font, etc)
- › orthography and punctuation
- › concrete poetry

sound level:

- › rhythm (note interplay with meaning or meter!)
- › quality of sounds
- › onomatopoeic aspects
- › repetitions and contrasts of sounds
(e.g.: assonance, dissonance, alliteration)
- › rhyme
(often regulated by the stanza form)
- › meter
(iamb: / U; trochee: U /; amapest: U U /, dactyl: / U U, spondee: / /
free verse)

semantic level:

- › choice of words
 - semantic fields (e.g. color, weather, writing, law, medicine, music)
 - etymologies (history & origin of words)
 - denotation and connotations (associations) of words
 - register (high. low, colloquial, etc)
 - tone (ironic, sad, detached)
 - word formation
 - morphology

- › imagery:
 - metaphor
 - simile
 - metonymy
 - symbol
 - personification
 - paradox
 - oxymoron
 - analogy

grammatical level:

- › syntactic complexity
 - length of sentences
 - hypotactic (subordinate clauses: connected by *because, but, which, that, ...*) or paratactic structure (main clauses: connected by *and, or, then, while, ...*)
 - character of clauses (causal, relative, etc)

- › character of sentences
 - questions
 - statements
 - exclamations
 - imperatives

- › word order
 - focus: often at the beginning and end of a sentence/ paragraph/ stanza/ text

- › rhetorical devices
 - parallelism ("the king came from France, the queen left for England")
 - chiasm ("to her, the kiss meant love, despair it meant to him")
 - anaphora ("Whom can I trust? Whom can I love?")
 - ellipsis ("the kiss meant love to her, despair to him")

- › characteristic usage of:
 - tense (past, present, future)
 - mood (subjunctive, conditional)
 - active or passive voice
 - negation

A FINAL NOTE ON TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Like any essay, your textual analysis can be presented in a variety of different FORMS - reaching from casual conversations among friends to very personal - and emotionally involved - journal entries, to creative responses (poems, stories, plays), passionate participation in discussions, or detached and highly formal (as well as formulaic) academic exposes.

In a more academic and research-oriented context, most texts - even if they break the typical academic conventions and are inspired by other genres (such as narratives, autobiographies, newspaper editorials, public speeches, etc) usually have some kind of tripartite structure - consisting of introduction, main part, and conclusion - and present some kind of thesis: an idea that you think is true and that you therefore would like to share with the world.

INTRODUCTION

Questions to ask:

- what's unusual about the text?
- what makes the text interesting for me?
- how does the topic relate to my own life?
- what's the larger framework or context (cultural, social, psychological etc)?
- what background information might the reader need?
- how can I catch the reader's attention?

CONCLUSION

Questions to ask:

- what was really important in my analysis?
- do I want to put that into a broader context - perhaps with a suggestion about future research possibilities in that field?
- can I create a link to the introduction - thus giving the whole piece a frame?
- what do I want my readers/listeners to remember most about the topic?
- how can I express this in a powerful and effective way?