Methods of Literary Questioning and Analysis

Reading a literary work often produces a variety of responses from a group of students. This is not as simple as saying, “Well, we’re all different, so that’s why.” We have to consider in what ways we consciously approach the text, our expectations and interests. Many more methods exist than the four addressed here, but for our purposes these will do.

Directions: Read any short story in the textbook that we are not discussing in class. Do not choose one of the parables or fables. They won’t work here. Also, do not choose an Edgar Allan Poe story. You will find the ones we are discussing listed below. Choose three questions each from the Interpretive, Critical and Applied Reading sections below (not the Literal), and apply them to the story you have chosen. (That’s nine questions total.) Choose questions that are particularly relevant to your story. Answer each in at least two complete paragraphs, though many will require more than that. Type and double-space this assignment. Make sure you put your name, course name, the date and Writing Assignment #1 at the top of the page in the left hand corner. Proof read the entire assignment carefully before turning it in! This is not an essay. Please don’t try to make it into one – that doesn’t work very well. Put this into a Q and A format. Give the question that you are answering, and then your answer. Number the questions. Support your answers with at least one quote from the story in each answer. This means you must integrate the quote properly into your paragraph and use it to support a point. Your grade will be better if you use a quote to support all of your main points, not just one in each answer. Don’t, however, just string together quotes or use them as fillers. Cite your quotes correctly using the MLA documentation style. This includes putting a Works Cited citation for the story and anthology it came from at the end of the assignment. Note: Kennedy and Gaia are the editors of the anthology, not the authors of your story! Their names do not go in the parentheses!

A- Literal Reading: In this method, we seek to discern the “What Happens” of the essay, and the first level of description by identifying the sequence and consequence of action. We examine theme and locate the central argument in order to comprehend the text itself. Note: you are not doing anything with this in your paper. This is just to help you distinguish between reading literally and everything else.

B- Interpretive Reading: In this method, we employ the principles of Psychoanalytic Theory. By looking at the psychological connections of the text and its characters, we are able to journey into the central issues surrounding characterization, motivation and intention.
1- What are the motivations of the main characters; which selections from the text indicate or hint to these possibilities?
2- How would you profile the main character by his/her thoughts and actions; how do these characteristics affect what happens in the story?
3- What does the main character learn about himself or herself, the world and/or others? What does he/she do with this revelation?
4- How does the main character change and why?
5- What is at least one example of something which we know about the character that he/she does not at first know? Why is this?
6- What is at least one example of something which the character does know about himself/herself? How is this expressed in the story? Quote it. Why is this important to the story?

C- Critical Reading: In this method, we seek to develop our understanding of the “how” and “why” of the text by exploring the connections between form and content. In what ways does the structure and style of the text inform us and create meaning for the reader?

1- How is the structure related to the topic? For example, third person narration in “The Cask of Amontillado” would lessen the impact of Montresor’s characterization; furthermore, the attention to setting and its visual representations of death links strongly to the nature of Montresor’s internal conflict and theme of the story. In another example, the odd organization of the story “A Rose for Emily” helps the narrator reveal the characters’ motives, and the foreshadowing adds to the suspense and surprise of the ending, which adds to our horror.
2- Which words, symbols and techniques contribute to the tone and aesthetics of the text? How?
3- How are words and phrases used to directly inform us (the denotative approach)? How are they used to indirectly inform us? That is, where are we simply told about something, and when do we have to play detective? And why?
4- Is there use of repetition? If so, does it create any kind of theme, effect, or mood? Give examples and explain.
5- What symbols, colors or words are significant in the text and why?

D – Applied Reading: In this method, we seek to explore the connections between the text and our experiences, other cultural issues and sacred/ethical controversies. In doing so, we see our experience in reading literature as an interaction with it, an opportunity to think of the text as more than just a story, to see it as a document/snapshot/reaction of the human experience at least as important and compelling as any chapter in a psychology, sociology, religion or philosophy book.

1- What prejudices, expectations, and/or personal history do you bring to the text and its themes? How do these affect your reading of the text?
2- What event, theme, character, or question in the text reminds you of a personal experience, another story, essay, poem, novel or play that you have read? How and why does it remind you of this?
3- Does the text relate to any broad, human truths? Explain.
4- What are your personal responses to the text? Does it make you think? Feel? Can you react to it on an aesthetic level? Why?
5- Does the text seem to be related to any global or societal issues? If so, what are these, and why do you believe they are relevant to the text?

Note: I expect this to be written with care and attention paid to organization, development, grammar and appropriate word choices. Make sure you proofread for grammar and spelling mistakes. Errors in these will affect your grade!

The stories we will be reading this semester and that you may not write about are:

"The Story of an Hour," Kate Chopin
"Young Goodman Brown," Nathaniel Hawthorne
"Cathedral," by Raymond Carver
"Interpreter of Maladies," Jhumpa Lahiri
"Sonny's Blues," James Baldwin

Also, don’t write about any of the fables or parables. They won’t work for this assignment.