

**Mastering Literary Analysis - Student Lesson**  
**Class 0 - Fundamentals of Symbolism and Literary Analysis**

**An important note for students:** Each week you will be expected to come to class prepared in the following ways: 1) carefully read through the lesson, 2) carefully read through any pre-reading questions, 3) carefully read through assigned readings, keeping the lesson and the pre-reading questions in mind so that you can answer them. Your tutor will use the pre-reading questions in the seminar discussion, and it will be very clear whether or not you gave them adequate thought. Sometimes (not this first time) you may also be asked to write out your answers.

Also, sometimes you will be instructed to read some of the readings *before* you read the lesson, but most of the time, you need to read the lesson *first* so that you know what you're looking for. After each week's class, you will have a writing assignment which will be the focus of the next week's fifteen minute tutorial.

**Readings:**

- Read these *before* you read the lesson:
  - "How I Take Notes," by Ted Gioia - [https://www.honest-broker.com/p/how-i-take-notes?utm\\_source=substack&publication\\_id=296132&post\\_id=124212905&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=share&triggerShare=true&isFreemail=true](https://www.honest-broker.com/p/how-i-take-notes?utm_source=substack&publication_id=296132&post_id=124212905&utm_medium=email&utm_content=share&triggerShare=true&isFreemail=true)
  - "Three Level Comprehension Guide for Active Reading" - <https://www-s3-live.kent.edu/s3fs-root/s3fs-public/file/Three%20Level%20Comprehension%20Guide%20for%20Active%20Reading.pdf?VersionId=o.jW.7McHopGHobKfvV4akE58StgcOsS>
- Read these *after* you read the lesson:
  - **Fables:** The Lion & the Mouse, The Tortoise & the Hare, Four Oxen & the Lion
  - **Fairy Tales:** [Goldilocks & the Three Bears](#), The Gingerbread Man

**Pre-Class Assignment:**

- **Please read through the following after you read the lesson and before you read the class readings.** You do *not* need to find complete answers to any of these questions, nor do you need to write anything down. You simply need to come prepared to discuss the following with the class:
  - Bring to class three questions about the same story/fable: a first level question, a second level question, and a third level question.
    - Since these are simple pieces of literature, you may not have an honest first level question (something on the literal level that confuses you); that's okay this time. As we work with more complex pieces of literature, you will be expected to bring in honest questions: things that you genuinely do not know the answer to (or feel like you don't know the *whole* answer to).
  - For each of the fables, come to class with a list of the main images and their corresponding symbols. Try to figure out what the moral of each fable is.

- For the fairy tales, again list the images and figure out what the corresponding symbolism might be. What might be the moral of each fairy tale? What's weird about each fairy tale (you might use this question to help you with those three-level questions you also need to bring)?

### Lesson/Discussion:

- The goal of literary analysis is to understand the author's **meaning**. The meaning or theme is how the story relates to life/the world.
  - The **theme** or **meaning** of a work of literature can be **prescriptive** or **descriptive**. Sometimes, the author is trying to call our attention to something and cause us to change our thinking or behavior. Other times, an author is primarily trying to show us what human life/behavior is like. Often complex literature is doing some of both.
  - What's the difference between **theme** and **meaning**? Sometimes the words are used interchangeably. Sometimes they are used to mean different things: **Theme** is often used for prescriptive fiction: The call for society to be more just (sometimes crime fiction) or to beware of the lure of technology (often science fiction). **Meaning** is often used for descriptive fiction: A coming-of-age story (*Bildungsroman*—you'll see this form later) is generally not so much telling us to be or not be a certain way, but rather to show us what the process of growing up is like, to see ourselves and our lives in a new, deeper light. These lessons will most often use the language of meaning rather than theme, but you should be aware of both terms.
- The author uses **images** to build a theme or meaning. You can't jump ahead to the theme/meaning of a work without understanding the details of a work and how those details relate to one another. It's the relationship between details which creates meaning.
- An **image is anything that can be seen/heard/felt/smelled/tasted within the world of the story**. Some images are simple images, and others are compound images. A **compound image is an image made of other images**—for example, a town in a story might be a compound image: a whole which has its own discrete meaning which is made up of a lot of other images with their own meanings (people, buildings, etc.). The most important images in a story are usually going to be the characters. It might take some time and practice to tell important symbols from less important symbols.
- So how do you know what an image means? **Context**. Take, for instance, an apple. Imagine a picture of an apple. What does the apple mean?
  - By itself, the apple means nothing. It's just an apple.
  - But what if the apple is next to a stethoscope? On top of a pile of books? Next to a snake and has a bite taken out of it? In a pile of other fruits and vegetables?
  - Notice that each of these examples is a compound image: the group of images becomes a whole which indicates a particular meaning. Sometimes context creates compound images, but not always.
  - Often culture is important to understand context/meaning—for example, if you are from a non-Christian culture, the image of the apple and the snake won't mean anything to you. Often, older literature will assume you have a rigorous knowledge of the Bible and Greek and Roman literature because such knowledge

was common when the author was writing. If something doesn't make sense to you when you're reading, make note of it—you may need a little help picking up on the **allusions** to which the author is referring.

- An **allusion** is when an author brings in something from the outside in an indirect manner. For example, an author might allude to the story of the Fall of Man by giving you an image of a snake curled around a tree, or he might allude to the story of Sisyphus by showing someone pushing something heavy up a hill. As you become a better read individual, you'll be able to pick up on allusions more easily.
- When an image gains a higher meaning, it becomes a symbol. In the previous examples, the apple with the stethoscope indicates health or medicine. The apple with the pile of books symbolizes education or the teaching profession. The apple with the snake symbolizes sin or the Fall of Man. The pile of produce might symbolize the autumnal abundance of the earth.
- **The final term you need to know is perspective. What is perspective?** Perspective is noticing from whose viewpoint you're seeing the text.
  - How might perspective change the meaning of a work? As you read "Four Oxen and the Lion," consider what the moral is from the different character's perspective. How might perspective also change the meaning of "The Gingerbread Man"?
- **Ok, so if literary analysis is about finding the meaning of a work, how do you begin? Literary analysis begins with noticing that something is "weird."** Too often, students think, "I don't understand that," and they just move on when the weird thing is actually the author pointing your attention in a particular direction. You have to learn to notice and not ignore when you don't understand (or when you do understand!). There are two groups of students, in general: Those who think they understand everything and those who think they understand nothing. Both groups have to learn to carefully and consciously separate the knowns from the unknowns. Both have to learn to ask, "But why . . . ."