



Handbook for Literary Analysis: How to Evaluate Prose Fiction, Drama, & Poetry

By James P. Stobaugh

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Literary analysis is literary criticism. They are the same.

What is literary criticism? Literary criticism is talking and writing about literature. Any literature, at any age. In that sense, literary analysis is a critical discussion of literature. To be “critical” is not necessarily to be “negative.” It is to be intentional in one’s evaluation of literature. Indeed, “evaluation” is the highest form of thoughtful analysis.

When children read Margaret’s Wise Brown’s *Runaway Bunny* and ask, “Do I like this book?” and “Why?” they are, in effect, analyzing the literary piece. They are doing literary criticism. As they get more adept, students ask, “Who are the central characters? What conflict do they face? Where is the climax? Is there a theme?” But further sophistication and advanced metacognition in no way diminishes the intentional, informed opinions of the most unsophisticated, readers.

Literary critics, no matter what their age, use a special “language” to talk about literature. This book is a reference book about that language.

For example, in *The Runaway Bunny* the protagonist (the main character), a little runaway bunny, is pursued by his loving mother, a mother bunny, an important foil (a character who develops the main character). The protagonist experiences several layers of internal conflict as he tries to escape his mother. Along the way, the author, Margaret Wise Brown, uses several setting changes to develop her characters. And so forth. Now readers have a way to discuss this literary work.

Fundamentally, literary criticism, then, will help readers reclaim the metaphor in their psyche, language, and writing. This will presage laudable outcomes in the kingdom of God. My goodness, it will presage laudable outcomes in the kingdom of man!

Therefore, amid so many competing media options, readers must learn to analyze, to evaluate, to appreciate great literature. The propagation of the gospel will not be enhanced by how quickly we can appreciate and text messages to one another; however, it will be

enhanced by how well we grasp the critical nuances of Bible stories. We cannot suppose that our unsaved world will grasp concepts like “love” and “faith” unless we have words, rhetoric, to tell them what these things are. If we learn how to do literary analysis well, we will be better able to create and to share vital truths to future generations. The Handbook for Literary Analysis: How to Evaluate Prose Fiction, Drama, and Poetry reclaims the metaphor, reclaims rhetoric, reclaims literary analysis. It has a high view of the reader, the critic, and the student. All three are invited to think critically, to discuss thoroughly, the great literary works of all civilizations. Systematically, this Handbook defines, explains, and illustrates a wide range of significant literary terms in fiction, drama, and poetry. Along the way, readers explore copious, inspired examples, including biblical examples. Finally, readers read real literary analytical essays by American high school students. Caution: these are real, slightly edited versions of my students’ essays. They are not perfectly written essays. But they perfect vehicles for learn how to write literary analysis, which, after all, is the laudable purpose of this book. Enjoy!

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