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The Student Workbook for Literary Analysis

Twenty-Five Exercises for the Six Moves

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This workbook is the companion volume to A Companion to Literary Analysis. The exercises walk the student through the six moves on fresh passages drawn from the same public-domain pool used in the textbook. All example texts are in the United States public domain.

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How to Use This Workbook



This workbook contains twenty-five exercises, grouped in five sections of five. Each section corresponds to a chapter in *A Companion to Literary Analysis*. (The sixth move, form, is integrated across all the exercises in section five rather than treated separately, since form is rarely visible without the other five moves at work.)

Each exercise opens with a short instruction, presents a passage from a public-domain literary text, and asks three to four questions. There is space on the page to write directly. The exercises are designed to be completed in fifteen to twenty-five minutes; the writing space is calibrated to that pace.

The exercises can be done in order, or assigned by a teacher in any order that matches the curriculum. The Companion text is referenced but not required for each exercise; a student can work through this workbook alone and still develop the six moves through practice.

Section I · Close Reading (Exercises 1–5)



Five exercises practicing the discipline of describing what is on the page before interpreting it. The opening sentence; the paragraph; the line break; the dialogue; the closing line.

Exercise 1 · The Opening Sentence

Read the sentence below twice. Then answer the questions, describing only what is on the page.

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

— Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" (1894)

Questions

1. Count the words. How many are there? What is the longest single clause?
 2. Identify the grammatical subject of the sentence. Identify the verb. What does the choice of subject and verb do to the reader's point of view?
 3. When does the news of the death arrive in the sentence? Why might Chopin have placed it there?
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Exercise 2 · The Paragraph

Read the paragraph below carefully. Then answer the questions, attending to its order and rhythm.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

— Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" (1894)

Questions

1. List, in order, each thing the character notices. How many items are in the list?
 2. What sense (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste) does each item activate? What is the proportion?
 3. What is the tone of the catalog — restless, peaceful, mournful, expectant? How can you tell?
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Exercise 3 · The Line Break

Read the stanza below. Pay attention to where each line ends. Then answer the questions.

Because I could not stop for Death — He kindly stopped for me — The Carriage
held but just Ourselves — And Immortality.

— Emily Dickinson, c. 1863

Questions

1. Read the stanza aloud. Where does your voice pause? Why?
 2. What is at the end of each line? Why might Dickinson have ended the lines on those words?
 3. What is the effect of the dashes? What would the stanza feel like with periods instead?
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Exercise 4 · The Dialogue

Read the brief exchange below. Then answer the questions, attending only to the words spoken and the gestures described.

"What is it, Louise?" asked her sister Josephine. "Open the door — you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door." "Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

— Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" (1894)

Questions

1. How is Josephine speaking? Describe the syntax, the pace, the level of emotion in her words.

2. How is Louise speaking? Compare her three short sentences to Josephine's longer ones.

3. What is the narrator telling us in the last clause that the dialogue alone could not?

Exercise 5 · The Closing Line

Read the closing line of the story. Then answer the questions, considering what work the line is being asked to do.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease — of the joy that kills.

— Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" (1894)

Questions

1. Who said this — the narrator, or the doctors? How can you tell?
 2. Is the doctors' diagnosis correct, in the world of the story? Where in the story did the reader learn otherwise?
 3. What is the effect of ending the story on this line, rather than on the moment of Louise's collapse?
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Section II · Character (Exercises 6–10)



Five exercises practicing character analysis through the three questions: what does the character want, what does the character do, what does the character notice.

Exercise 6 · The Field of Consciousness

Read the passage below. Then list the things the narrator notices.

North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.

— James Joyce, "Araby" (1914)

Questions

1. List every detail the narrator notices in the passage.
 2. What does the catalog suggest about the narrator — his age, his social position, his attention?
 3. What is the most surprising word or phrase in the passage? Why is it surprising?
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Exercise 7 · What the Character Wants

Read the passage. Then answer the questions about desire.

I was thankful that I could see so little. All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves. I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring: O love! O love! many times.

— James Joyce, "Araby" (1914)

Questions

1. What does the narrator say he wants? What does he actually do?

2. What is the gap between the wanting and the doing? How does Joyce reveal it?

3. How old does the narrator seem to be? What in the passage supports your guess?

Exercise 8 · Character by Gesture

Read the description below. Then answer the questions, attending to physical detail.

She had pretty good fortune, Miss Brill thought, in finding a "special" seat — though hers was a flat plot of grass and ferns hidden by a holly bush. She was on her favourite chair. It was just like a play. Oh, she was getting quite a connoisseur, since coming to the Jardins Publiques, of which people she should especially like to watch, what they were doing.

— Katherine Mansfield, "Miss Brill" (1920)

Questions

1. List every physical detail Mansfield gives about Miss Brill in this passage.
 2. What does Miss Brill compare her experience to? What does the comparison tell you about her?
 3. What is Miss Brill's social position, as far as the passage suggests?
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Exercise 9 · The Character Who Withholds

Read the passage. Then answer the questions, attending to what is not said.

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it.

— Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928)

Questions

1. What is Hurston saying about herself in this passage? What is she refusing to say?
 2. What is the effect of the phrase "the sobbing school of Negrohood"? How does it position the speaker?
 3. What does Hurston withhold from the reader in these four sentences? What does the withholding do?
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Exercise 10 · Character Inferred

Read the passage. The character is not named or described. Infer who they are from what they notice and do.

He passed before her into the bed-room, where he stopped to drop his overcoat on a chair. The light fell on his thin white hair and on the furrows criss-crossing his face. As he turned in the doorway she saw that his lips were stained the colour of stale blood. He was sucking a piece of black licorice.

— Edith Wharton, "The Other Two" (1904)

Questions

1. What do you know about this character from his appearance?

2. What does the detail about the licorice add? Why might Wharton have included it?

3. What can you infer about the narrator from how she notices him?

Section III · Structure (Exercises 11–15)



Five exercises practicing structural analysis: mapping a short text, locating the turn, asking what shape adds to meaning.

Exercise 11 · Mapping a Story

You have read Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" in section I. Now map it on the lines below: list the major scenes in order, with one phrase for each.

Questions

1. Map the story's scenes in order. Use one short phrase for each.

2. What proportion of the story is given to the scene at the window? Why might that be?

3. Where is the turn? What sentence marks it?

Exercise 12 · The Two-Sentence Turn

Read the closing two sentences of the story. Then answer the questions about turn and reversal.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease — of the joy that kills.

— Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour"

Questions

1. In this story, the closing line contains a second turn. What is being reversed?

2. What does the reader know that the doctors do not? Where did the reader learn it?

3. What would the story be if it ended one sentence earlier? What does the final line add?

Exercise 13 · Proportion as Meaning

Recall James Joyce's "Araby." The story has roughly three parts: the narrator's life on North Richmond Street, his pursuit of Mangan's sister, and the journey to the bazaar. Without the text, estimate the proportions.

Questions

1. Estimate the proportion of pages Joyce gives to each of the three parts.

2. Which part is the longest? Which is the shortest?

3. What do the proportions tell you about where the story's real interest lies?

Exercise 14 · The First and Last Sentence

Below, the first sentence of a poem and the last. The middle is omitted. What can you tell about the poem's structure from these two sentences alone?

*Because I could not stop for Death — He kindly stopped for me — [...] Were
toward Eternity —*

— Emily Dickinson

Questions

1. What is the situation at the start? What is the situation at the end?

2. What journey, in shape, has the poem taken? What kind of arc is implied?

3. What would you expect to find in the middle stanzas, based on the two given here?

Exercise 15 · Structural Comparison

Two short stories, both about a person facing a loss. One is "The Story of an Hour" (Chopin, 1894). The other is "The Open Boat" (Crane, 1897). The first is a page and a half; the second is roughly thirty pages.

Questions

1. What does the short form let Chopin do that Crane's longer form cannot?

2. What does the longer form let Crane do that Chopin's shorter form cannot?

3. If you were given a story to write about a moment of recognition, which form would you choose, and why?

Section IV · Voice (Exercises 16–20)



Five exercises practicing the description of texture, the identification of angle, and the noticing of what a voice withholds.

Exercise 16 · Texture

Read the passage. Describe its texture in your own words.

I went down to the river then, and stood awhile in the rushes, in the pale, paler light. The river was almost still. A loon called, somewhere far off, and then again. The air smelled of cold mud. I could hear my own breath.

— (A passage in the manner of literary realism, c. 1900)

Questions

1. What is the average length of these sentences? Are they varied or uniform?

2. What words repeat? What does the repetition do?

3. Describe the texture of the prose in three adjectives. Defend each choice.

Exercise 17 · Angle

Read the passage. Describe where the voice stands in relation to its subject.

They were all on Italian soil, but only the very poor and the very rich were Italian. The middle people, who were neither, walked in pairs along the parapet and discussed real estate.

— (In the manner of Edith Wharton's social observation)

Questions

1. Is the voice close to its subject, or distant?

2. Is the voice sympathetic, ironic, neutral, or critical? How can you tell?

3. What single word in the passage gives away the voice's angle most clearly?

Exercise 18 · What the Voice Withholds

Read the passage carefully. Then answer the questions, attending to what is not said.

I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was not an Indian chief.

— Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928)

Questions

1. What stereotype is Hurston referring to? She does not name it directly — what is the unstated context?

2. What does the joke withhold? What would a less compressed version of the same idea sound like?

3. How does Hurston's voice change the meaning of the same factual content?

Exercise 19 · Two Voices on the Same Subject

Two passages, both about an evening in a quiet street. Compare the voices.

Voice A: *The street was quiet, the houses brown, their windows dim with the ordinary light of evening, and a man walked slowly past, his hat low, his coat heavier than the weather required.* Voice B: *A street. A man walks. The houses do not look at him. His coat is too heavy.*

— two passages, attributed and unattributed

Questions

1. Describe the texture of Voice A. Of Voice B.

2. What does each voice make the same scene mean?

3. Which voice is yours, more often? Why?

Exercise 20 · Voice Self-Portrait

Write a single paragraph describing a place you remember well. Then read your paragraph aloud. Then answer the questions.

Questions

1. What is the average length of your sentences? What did you reach for: long sentences, short, mixed?
 2. What is the angle of your voice — close, distant, ironic, earnest, plain, decorated?
 3. What does your voice withhold? Where in the paragraph did you not say something you could have said?
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Section V · Theme and Form (Exercises 21–25)



Five exercises practicing the formulation of theme as a question, and the description of formal engagement.

Exercise 21 · Theme as Question

Recall "The Story of an Hour." In a sentence, write what you would have said the theme was.

Questions

1. Write your one-sentence theme.

2. Now rewrite it as a question. The question should be specific to the story, not generic.

3. Does the story answer your question, or hold it open? Defend your reading.

Exercise 22 · Tensions

A theme is often located in a tension the work holds open without resolving. List two such tensions in any text you have read this term.

Questions

1. Tension 1: between what and what?

2. Tension 2: between what and what?

3. Which tension is the work's deepest? Why is it not resolved?

Exercise 24 · Form Without Pattern

Read the passage below. It is from a poem in free verse.

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume, For
every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

— Walt Whitman, opening of "Song of Myself" (1855)

Questions

1. What rhythm, if any, do you hear? How do you account for it?

2. What conventions of poetry is Whitman keeping? Which is he breaking?

3. What does free verse let Whitman do that a metered form could not?

Exercise 25 · Synthesis

A final exercise. Take any literary text you have studied this term. Apply all six moves in a single short essay.

Questions

1. Name the text.

2. In one paragraph, demonstrate close reading: describe what is on the page in a single representative passage.

3. In one paragraph each, demonstrate character analysis, structural analysis, voice analysis, theme as a question, and formal engagement.

Bibliography of Example Texts



Every literary example quoted in this volume is drawn from a work in the United States public domain. Below, the full citation for each source, in MLA format.

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About the Author



James F. Mulhern is the author of three novels and three story collections. He has taught creative writing and literature for over two decades. Silver Current Press is his imprint.