

## **ANALYZING A PASSAGE**

In writing about literature or any specific text, you will strengthen your discussion if you offer specific passages from the text as evidence. Rather than simply dropping in quotations and expecting their significance and relevance to your argument to be self-evident, you need to provide sufficient analysis of the passage. Remember that your overriding goal of analysis writing is to demonstrate some new understanding of the text.

### **HOW TO ANALYZE A TEXT?**

1. Read or reread the text with specific questions in mind.
2. Marshal basic ideas, events and names. Depending on the complexity of book, this requires additional review of the text.
3. Think through your personal reaction to the book: identification, enjoyment, significance, application.
4. Identify and consider most important ideas (importance will depend on context of class, assignment, study guide).
5. Return to the text to locate specific evidence and passages related to the major ideas.
6. Use your knowledge following the principles of analyzing a passage described below: test, essay, research, presentation, discussion, enjoyment.

### **PRINCIPLES OF ANALYZING A PASSAGE**

1. Offer a thesis or topic sentence indicating a basic observation or assertion about the text or passage.
2. Offer a context for the passage without offering too much summary.
3. Cite the passage (using correct format).
  - Then follow the passage with some combination of the following elements:
  - Discuss what happens in the passage and why it is significant to the work as a whole.
  - Consider what is said, particularly subtleties of the imagery and the ideas expressed.
  - Assess how it is said, considering how the word choice, the ordering of ideas, sentence structure, etc., contribute to the meaning of the passage.
  - Explain what it means, tying your analysis of the passage back to the significance of the text as a whole.
4. Repeat the process of context, quotation and analysis with additional support for your thesis or topic sentence.

## SAMPLE ANALYSIS PARAGRAPHS

### FROM JAMES MCBRIDE'S *THE COLOR OF WATER*

An important difference between James and his mother is their method of dealing with the pain they experience. While James turns inward, his mother Ruth turns outward, starting a new relationship, moving to a different place, keeping herself busy. Ruth herself describes that, even as a young girl, she had an urge to run, to feel the freedom and the movement of her legs pumping as fast as they can (42). As an adult, Ruth still feels the urge to run. Following her second husband's death, James points out that, "while she weebled and wobbled and leaned, she did not fall. She responded with speed and motion. She would not stop moving" (163). As she biked, walked, rode the bus all over the city, "she kept moving as if her life depended on it, which in some ways it did. She ran, as she had done most of her life, but this time she was running for her own sanity" (164). Ruth's motion is a pattern of responding to the tragedy in her life. As a girl, she did not sit and think about her abusive father and her trapped life in the Suffolk store. Instead she just left home, moved on, tried something different. She did not analyze the connections between pain and understanding, between action and response, even though she seems to understand them. As an adult, she continues this pattern, although her running is modified by her responsibilities to her children and home.

The image of running that McBride uses here and elsewhere supports his understanding of his mother as someone who does not stop and consider what is happening in her life yet is able to move ahead. Movement provides the solution, although a temporary one, and preserves her sanity. Discrete moments of action preserve her sense of her own strength and offer her new alternatives for the future. Even McBride's sentence structure in the paragraph about his mother's running supports the effectiveness of her spurts of action without reflection. Although varying in length, each of the last seven sentences of the paragraph begins with the subject "She" and an active verb such as "rode," "walked," "took," "grasp" and "ran." The section is choppy, repetitive and yet clear, as if to reinforce Ruth's unconscious insistence on movement as a means of coping with the difficulties of her life.

### FROM TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

#1 The negative effect the environment can have on the individual is shown in Morrison's comparison of marigolds in the ground to people in the environment. Early in the novel, Claudia and Frieda are concerned that the marigold seeds they planted that

spring never sprouted. At the end of the novel, Claudia reflects on the connection to Pecola's failure:

I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, our land, our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. (206)

Morrison obviously views the environment as a powerful influence on the individual when she suggests that the earth itself is hostile to the growth of the marigold seeds. In a similar way, people cannot thrive in a hostile environment. Pecola Breedlove is a seed planted in the hostile environment, and, when she is not nurtured in any way, she cannot thrive.

#2 One effect of the belief that white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes are the most beautiful is evident in the characters who admire white film stars. Morrison shows an example of the destructive effect of this beauty standard on the character Pecola. When Pecola lives with Claudia and Frieda, the two sisters try to please their guest by giving her milk in a Shirley Temple mug. Claudia recalls, "She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's face" (19). This picture of two young African-American girls admiring the beauty of a white American film star is impossible for Claudia to comprehend. Another character who admires white beauty is Maureen Peale. As Pecola and the girls walk past a movie theater on their way home with Maureen, Maureen asks if the others "just love" Betty Grable, who smiles from a movie poster. When she later tells the others she is cute and they are ugly, Maureen reveals her belief that she is superior because she looks more like a Betty Grable image than the blacker girls do. Pecola's and Maureen's fascination with popular images is preceded by Pauline's own belief in the possibility of movie images. She describes doing her hair like Jean Harlow's and eating candy at a movie. Rather than being transported into the romantic heaven of Hollywood, she loses a tooth and ends in despair. "Everything went then. Look like I just didn't care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly" (123). Admiring beauty in another is one thing; transferring a sense of self-hatred when a person doesn't measure is another. At that point, the power of white beauty standards becomes very destructive.

## TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS*

Although Tambu recognizes the injustices she and Nyasha endure as females, she hesitates to act on her suspicion because of fear. First of all, she is afraid that she might not recognize and feel comfortable with herself in a critical role. She hesitates to pursue her critique, noting to herself, "I was beginning to suspect that I was not the person I was expected to be, and took it as evidence that somewhere I had taken a wrong turning" (116). Using other people's perceptions rather than her own, she judges her thoughts to be wrong. Although she senses that her behavior as the "grateful poor female relative" was insincere, she admitted it felt more comfortable. "It mapped clearly the ways I could or could not go, and by keeping within those boundaries I was able to avoid the mazes of self-confrontation" (116). While she is somewhat embarrassed that she lacks the intensity she had when fighting against Nhamo and her father over the maize, she is reluctant to lose Babamakuru's protection and fears experiencing the same kind of trauma Nyasha does in her struggle. Although she says she feels "wise to be preserving [her] energy, unlike [her] cousin, who was burning herself out," she reveals that she fears losing a familiar sense of herself in order to battle injustices.