

Literary Analysis Sample Paper

A literary analysis is an argumentative analysis about a literary work. Although some summary is needed within the argument of a literary analysis, the objective is not to write a report about a book or story. Instead, a literary analysis discusses a writer's interpretation of a text through careful examination of the author's choices within the text: word choice, themes, motifs, as well as many other literary devices. The writer uses portions of the text, as well as his or her reasoning, to demonstrate how the evidence supports the interpretation. For more information about how to write a literary analysis, please refer to the [Writing a Literary Analysis Paper handout](http://www.germannna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/) available at www.germannna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/.

Formatting a Literary Analysis

Literary analysis papers are typically written using MLA citation style formatting guidelines. However, your professors may assign a literary analysis assignment that is formatted with APA or another citation style's guidelines. Please follow the citation style format assigned by your professor.

Throughout this sample literary analysis, footnotes are used to highlight the key components of a literary analysis paper, including:

- a strong thesis statement
- an explanation of quotes
- a utilization of credible, scholarly sources

Please do not include footnotes in a literary analysis paper unless they are specified by your professor.

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English 111

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The Character of a Man: Style in Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea*¹

Ernest Hemingway is widely recognized as one of the most important stylists in modern American literature. Characterized by short, simple sentences with few adjectives, extensive use of repetition, and colloquial language, his style also avoids emotionalism, and is developed extensively through the use of understatement (Britannica). The effect of his terse, disciplined approach to the craft of writing makes him one of the most dramatic writers of the twentieth century. **Hemingway's novella, *The Old Man and the Sea* demonstrates his ironic and stylistic approach and deals with the theme of narrating profound ethical challenges.**²

Hemingway describes his own approach to his style in *The Old Man and the Sea* in an interview as one that depends on close observation; that is:³

Notes:

1. This paper follows MLA formatting guidelines. For more information on MLA format, see the [MLA Format](http://www.germannanna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/) handout available at www.germannanna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/.
2. The introduction paragraph starts with basic information about the author of the work being analyzed and transitions into a clear, debatable, and specific analytical thesis statement. Please note that unless your instructor requires your thesis to be in bold, MLA format does not require a bolded thesis statement.
3. The paper's author transitions to the first body paragraph by introducing the first stylistic element that contributes to Hemingway's discussion of the theme.

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Everything he sees goes into the great reserve of things he knows or has seen. If it is any use to know it, I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show.

(Plimpton)

Therefore, a reader should understand that a great deal of knowledge and experience informs Hemingway's narrative, and that the simplicity of his approach to language is deceptive.

On the surface, the plot of *The Old Man and the Sea* appears to be straightforward, and tells the story of a Cuban fisherman named Santiago and his three-day struggle to land a giant Marlin only to lose his trophy to sharks on his journey back to shore. It is told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator that allows the reader to share in Santiago's struggle to understand the meaning of his life through his battle with a fish.

For example:

Then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked. He is wonderful and strange and who knows how old he is, he thought. Never have I had such a strong fish nor one who acted so strangely. Perhaps he is too wise to jump. He could ruin me by jumping or by a wild rush. But perhaps he has been hooked many times before and he knows that this is how he should make his fight. He cannot know that it is only one man against him, nor that it is an old man. But what a great fish he is and what will he bring in the market if the flesh is good. He took the bait like

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a male and he pulls like a male and his fight has no panic in it. I wonder if he has any plans or if he is just as desperate as I am? (*OMTS* 48-49)⁴

The passage illustrates the simple sentence structure that is typical of Hemingway in addition to the parallel structure in the phrasing, especially in the repetition of such words ‘hooked,’ ‘strange,’ ‘fight,’ and ‘fish.’ Moreover, by making use of alliteration he reinforces the parallelism. In suggesting pity for the fish, and by characterizing the fish as male, Hemingway also provides a glimpse of his theme and creates a structural identification between Santiago and his catch. He suggests that man and fish are each locked in a ‘desperate’ struggle to survive; however, the desperation and violence of the intense struggle is masked by the use of understatement. The lack of emotionalism contributes to the dramatic tension in the internal monologue.

The emphasis on the masculine nature of the dramatic situation is also important to understanding Hemingway’s unemotional style in relation to his theme. “His overriding theme is honour, personal honour: by what shall a man live, by what shall a man die, in a world the essential condition of whose being is violence?” (Poetry Foundation). Hemingway is interested in representing a man’s world in direct conflict with nature: “Fish,” he said, “I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends (*OMTS* 54).

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4. The paper’s author uses MLA block quotations to insert longer passages into the paper.

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Santiago's ethical conflict is further developed when he reflects on the question of the difference between human and non-human relationships (Hediger 50).⁵ For example,

Hemingway writes:

It is silly not to hope, he thought. Besides I believe it is a sin. Do not think about sin, he thought. There are enough problems now without sin. Also I have no understanding of it. I have no understanding of it and I am not sure that I believe in it. Perhaps it was a sin to kill the fish. I suppose it was even though I did it to keep me alive and feed many people. But then everything is a sin. Do not think about sin. It is much too late for that and there are people who are paid to do it. Let them think about it. You were born to be a fisherman as the fish was born to be a fish. San Pedro was a fisherman as was the father of the great DiMaggio.

(*OMTS* 104-105)

Contained in the simple sentence structure and naïve formulations of a spiritual debate is an important moral question that Santiago cannot answer: how can one value and respect nature and need to kill it at the same time? Hemingway again uses an internal monologue in order to create ironic juxtaposition; the reader is forced to think about sin and question assumptions about the superiority of man over beast.

Santiago's solution to his thoughts about the morality of killing his fish is deeply fatalistic, and connects to Hemingway's understanding of the importance of appreciating the

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5. Note that both quoted material from the text being analyzed and from credible sources are incorporated to support the paper's thesis.

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beauty and power of nature. By using parallel structure, he suggests a pattern that defines the essence of a fisherman in Santiago's world. In other words, Santiago, St. Peter, and Joe DiMaggio's father were all fisherman, and that equivalence creates an order in the world that can be understood as a representation of stability.⁶

Hemingway's description of Santiago's reaction to his loss of his marlin also is typical of his style:

He knew he was beaten now finally and without remedy and he went back to the stern and found the jagged end of the tiller would fit in the slot of the rudder well enough for him to steer. He settled the sack around his shoulders and put the skiff on her course. He sailed lightly now and he had no thoughts nor any feelings of any kind. He was past everything now and he sailed the skiff to make his home port as well and as intelligently as he could. In the night sharks hit the carcass as someone might pick up crumbs from the table. The old man paid no attention to them and did not pay any attention to anything except steering. He only noticed how lightly and how well the skiff sailed now there was no great weight beside her. (OMTS 119. This passage exemplifies Hemingway's distrust of using emotion as a rhetorical device. The battle is lost; the struggle is over. Yet,

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6. This paragraph is a great example of the paper's author showing the reader how and why the supporting material supports the paper's thesis.

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Santiago has survived, he has endured. Hemingway believed strongly that to endure great suffering gives meaning to life. (Poetry Foundation)

Santiago is now completely exhausted and the strong alliteration of 's' sounds reinforces the reader's sense of the scale of the fisherman's loss. The style of *The Old Man and the Sea* is shaped by an idea of a hero who now, after paying so much attention to capturing his fish, now pays attention to nothing. He is now a man, "who is defeated but finds a remnant of dignity in an honest confrontation of defeat" (Poetry Foundation).

Hemingway's style can be characterized, finally, as one that depends on a deceptive simplicity of word choice and sentence structure, the consistent use of repetition, parallelism and alliteration, extensive use of internal monologue and a deliberate repression of emotion. The stylistic effect results in creating a portrait of the theme of the terrible irony of a man's struggle against himself and nature. The enormous existential conflict is scaled down to Santiago's three-day encounter with forces more powerful than he can control. In his capacity to endure, Santiago's experiences become a narrative that shows the inevitability of defeat and the serenity he gains through its acceptance.⁷

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7. The conclusion of the analysis reiterates the paper's thesis and sums up the moral produced by the theme of the book.

Works Cited

- “Ernest Hemingway.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica Academic Online*, 2014.
academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/260825/Ernest-Hemingway.
- “Ernest M. Hemingway.” *Poetry Foundation*, 2014, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/ernest-m-hemingway#poet.
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- Plimpton, George. “Ernest Hemingway, The Art of Fiction No. 21.” *The Paris Review*, no. 18, Spring 1958, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4825/the-art-of-fiction-no-21-ernest-hemingway.

Notes:

- This handout has been adapted from a paper submitted by a student for a Germanna ENG 111 course with permission from the student.
- For further questions about Literary Analysis Papers, check out the Academic Center for Excellence’s handout [Literary Analysis](#).
- Further information about the MLA style can also be obtained in the Academic Center for Excellence’s handouts [MLA Format](#), [MLA Sample Paper](#), and [MLA Formatting in Word 2010](#).
- Additionally, the Academic Center for Excellence offers MLA style information in on-campus workshops. Contact the Academic Center for Excellence’s Locust Grove center at (540) 423-9148, Fredericksburg center at (540) 891-3017 or the Barbara J. Fried Center at (540) 834-1993 for further information about scheduling an on-campus workshop, or check out the [on-campus workshop schedule](#) on the Academic Center for

Excellence's website to view the dates and times for scheduled on-campus workshops.