



Analyzing Literature: Critical Analysis

3. Images that may have universal symbolic value (darkness and light, the earth, religious images, etc.) Check your interpretation against the rest of the text to see if it holds water. Be prepared for complex symbolism. Does darkness suggest evil? death? (i.e., safety)? ignorance? all of the above? none of the above?

Don't worry if you can't nail everything down. Label educated guesses as such (as long as you have some reason for what you say) and don't be ashamed of them. Be guided by this general rule: the interpretation that is most likely to be useful and plausible is the one that fits best with the rest of the text.

Avoid Using Secondary Sources (unless required to do so)

In literary criticism, the work that you are directly analyzing is called a primary source, and any other books or articles about that work are called secondary sources. You can use these books to get ideas if you do, you must document not only quotations from those books, but also any ideas you get from them. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism, which is a serious academic offence. If you do borrow an idea, one way to integrate it is use the "x says that..." formula, as in the following example:

Baldwin says that pilgrimage in "The Canterbury Tales" is symbolic of Man's pilgrimage to Heaven. I do not believe it is accidental that this pilgrimage is led by the noble knight (15).

Thus you can use Baldwin's original idea and expand on it with your ideas (in this case by discussing how the Knight fits the symbolic pattern suggested by Baldwin). In the example above,