INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS

A quick review of “Analytical Writing” (available on the 1123 website) will reveal that analytical writing is divided into two modes, expository and critical. Expository analysis is strictly informative: it describes objects, events, people, places, processes, concepts, etc. Critical analysis, on the other hand, goes beyond mere description to formulate arguments about its subject matter. These arguments can themselves be divided into two types: interpretive and evaluative. When we interpret any subject matter, we address questions about its meaning or significance. When we evaluate any subject matter, we address questions about its value (e.g., whether it is effective or ineffective, democratic or undemocratic, reliable or unreliable, and so on).

Questions about meaning and significance can really be understood as questions about causes and effects, respectively. When we discuss the meaning of any particular subject matter, we address the basic question of why it has the particular form and content that it does. When we discuss the significance of any subject matter, we take up the basic question of what effects it has had or will have. Let’s consider, for instance, the Declaration of Independence as an object of interpretation.

Questions of Meaning

If we were to argue about the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, the central question we would address is, Why did Thomas Jefferson write the document as he did? This is a pretty straightforward question, but it is also a very large question that could take us in any number of directions. We would do well then, to identify a more specific, or narrow version of the question of meaning.

One such question involves the famous phrase “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Scholars have long pondered why Jefferson uses this phrase to identify the “unalienable rights” of man instead of the more common formula, “life, liberty, and property.” The latter phrase was coined by John Locke, a famous British philosopher whose ideas have always been regarded as the philosophical foundation of the American Revolution. Consequently, a lot of ink has been spilled over the question of why Jefferson substituted “pursuit of happiness” for “property.” Without any obvious answer to this question, many scholars have simply concluded that Jefferson didn’t want to glorify the pursuit of material wealth, so he substituted a vague reference to “happiness” without meaning anything very particular by it.

Historian Garry Wills, however, has recently presented evidence that Jefferson and his peers were not nearly as dependent on Locke as is commonly thought. He argues that they were more directly influenced by Frances Hutcheson, a Scottish philosopher who had very specific ideas about what it means to pursue happiness within a social environment where the well-being of each individual depends on the quality of his or her relations with other people. If Wills is right that Jefferson is referencing these specific ideas about happiness, then his argument has serious implications for how we understand the Declaration. It means, for instance, that Jefferson wasn’t advocating an anything-goes pursuit of whatever feels good but instead a more enlightened pursuit of shared happiness among individuals who recognize that their fates are intertwined. In short, when we know more about the cause of Jefferson’s word choice, we know more about his meaning.

Questions of Significance

Another general question that we might consider in interpreting the Declaration is the question of its significance: What effect has it had? As with the basic question of the document’s meaning, this is a very big question that could lead us in a lot of different directions. In order to formulate a focused argument on the Declaration’s significance, then, we would need to
take up a much more specific version of this question. We might, for instance, think specifically about the effects of the document on the institution of slavery.

Because the Declaration emphasizes universal liberty, we might assume that it played a vital role in the eventual abolition of slavery. And we would be right; the Declaration was an important document for American abolitionists. But when we consider that slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833, thirty years before Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, we are confronted with the possibility that American independence may have actually delayed the emancipation of American slaves for three decades longer than if the states had remained British colonies. This fact, of course, opens up room for a great deal of debate about the actual significance of the Declaration of Independence as it relates to slavery.

Because students are more often asked to take up questions of meaning than significance, the remainder of this reading deals specifically with the process of formulating arguments about meaning.

EXPLORING QUESTIONS OF MEANING

Any interpretive project, whether it is concerned with meaning or significance, begins with observation. Whenever we undertake to interpret any subject matter, it is best to clear our minds of any preconceived notions about that subject matter and simply start making observations. The observations we make can be classed in two basic types: patterns and anomalies.

**Pattern** – A pattern is any type of significant repetition within the subject matter. For instance, there are distinct patterns of rhythm, chord progression, and theme that distinguish blues music from other types of music. Likewise, there are distinct patterns of color, brush technique, and perspective that distinguish Impressionist paintings from other artworks. The picture to right is of a home designed in the “prairie style” developed by the famous American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. As you can see, the prairie style features a pattern of long, horizontal lines that mirror the flat horizons of the American Midwest. A closer view would reveal that even the bricks are elongated to emphasize this horizontal pattern.

**Anomaly** – An anomaly is anything that deviates from established patterns. John F. Kennedy’s inauguration, for instance, caused a sensation because he was the first (and still only) Catholic president. Barack Obama’s inauguration caused an even larger sensation because he was the first non-white president. Other politicians who have “broken the mold” include Jesse “The Body” Ventura, a professional wrestler turned Minnesota governor; Arnold Schwarzenegger, the “Governator” of California; and Al Franken, U.S. senator and Saturday Night Live alum. All of these figures draw our attention because their career paths (and personalities) do not fit the normal pattern for high-level politicians. They are anomalies.

We might think of patterns and anomalies as entry points for interpretive analysis. A strong pattern usually reveals the basic character of our subject matter while an anomaly reveals some kind of meaningful fracture within that character—a contradiction, an inconsistency, a vulnerability, an evolution, etc. Consequently, observing patterns and anomalies helps us to formulate questions of meaning. What is it about our nation, for instance, that has caused such a strong pattern in the racial profiles of our first forty-three presidents? What recent factors have allowed that pattern to be broken?
Identifying Significant Patterns

When interpreting any subject matter, it is a good idea to start by observing patterns that reveal its basic structure and/or character. To illustrate this process, let’s consider the short story, “Dead Men’s Path,” by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (pp. 149-53 in the course textbook). When we analyze literature, we begin by looking for patterns regarding character (how people or other agents are portrayed), setting (how places are portrayed), plot (the sequence of action within a narrative), language (style, tone, and use of figurative language), and theme (central ideas or concerns). With this in mind, let’s think through two key patterns of characterization in Achebe’s story.

Pattern #1 (Michael Obi): Within the first paragraph of the story, the central character, Michael Obi, is described as young, energetic, enthusiastic, and outspoken. Achebe links Obi’s youthful energy to his passion for modernizing the education of African children.

Pattern #2 (Ndume Villagers): Obi’s modern character and values stand in stark contrast to the tribal character and traditional values of the residents of Ndume, the village where he has been sent to serve as schoolmaster. Throughout the story, the villagers are described as ignorant, superstitious, old, and hobbled—the very opposite of Obi.

Taken together, these two patterns of characterization constitute a larger thematic pattern of contrast. Patterns of contrast are called binaries. A binary is a pair of opposing concepts which, through their opposition to each other, provide the conceptual framework for understanding some given subject matter. For example, without even thinking about it, we tend to divide our world up by means of a male/female binary: certain toys and games are for girls and others for boys, certain careers are for women and others for men, certain movies and songs are feminine and others masculine, and so on. Similarly, the characters in “Dead Men’s Path” seem to divide their world up according to a modern/tribal binary.

It is important to keep in mind that binaries are artificial conceptual frameworks and therefore have their limits and their dangers. In many ways, for instance, the gender binary works more as a self-fulfilling prophecy than as an accurate description of the “nature” of men and women. In other words, if we are constantly teaching boys and girls to conform to certain gender roles, then we are actually creating men and women in the image of the binary (rather than deriving the binary from observations of some actual essence of manhood and womanhood). When we do this, those individuals who do not fit, or do not want to fit comfortably into prescribed gender roles can feel alienated, unwanted, and/or disempowered.

The point here is not that binaries are inherently bad. In fact, binaries are useful conceptual frameworks that help us make sense of the world we inhabit. As in the case of gender roles, however, it is important that we recognize that binaries are artificial so that we can examine them critically, get beyond their limitations, and counteract their negative effects. Much of what we consider good art and literature appeals to us because it helps us do this by challenging our existing conceptual frameworks, binaries included. Most critics would agree that this is one of the most important functions of art and literature in our lives.

With this in mind, let’s consider whether Achebe’s story simply perpetuates the modern/tribal binary or whether it challenges this binary in some way. We can do this by looking for anomalies.

Identifying Significant Anomalies

Because anomalies disrupt existing patterns, the presence of anomalies within works of art generally tell us something about the artist’s attitudes toward the patterns that his or her art references. One anomaly that appears fairly quickly within Achebe’s story is the fact that Obi, despite his youth and energy, demonstrates many of the characteristics of advanced age: “He was stoop-shouldered and looked frail . . . . He was only twenty-six, but looked thirty or more” (151). Considering that Achebe
has established a clear connection between Obi’s youth and his modern values, why would he go out of his way to describe Obi as looking stooped and frail?

At first glance, there is no clear explanation for this anomaly. We might, then, be tempted to simply dismiss it as an inconsistency, a meaningless departure from the established pattern. But if we resist this temptation and instead consider it a deliberate and meaningful disruption of the modern/tribal binary, then we are prompted to look for other related anomalies.

With this task in mind, we might notice two anomalies in the final paragraph of the story. The first is that the supervisor (a government official) who observes the conflict between Obi and the villagers is described as white. This stands out as the first and only reference to race within the story and seems significant because it unexpectedly introduces a new and powerful binary: black/white. The second (and very closely related) anomaly is the supervisor’s description of the conflict as a “tribal-war situation developing between the school and the village” (153). Suddenly, Obi himself is categorized as tribal along with the villagers, effectively collapsing the modern/tribal binary into the race binary. In the view of the white supervisor, black equals tribal and, presumably, white equals modern. From this viewpoint, Obi is permanently relegated to the “tribal” category that he considers so inferior to the “modern” category.

With this conclusion in mind, we might think back to the description of Obi’s aged appearance and recognize it as a foreshadowing of the fact that he will ultimately be tossed by the white supervisor into an equivalence with the aged villagers. The story as a whole, then, sets up this final moment in which the modern/tribal binary is superseded, or overpowered by the black/white binary that intrudes in the form of the white supervisor. If we can answer the question of why Achebe does this, then we would have the makings of a good interpretive argument.

**INTERPRETIVE PROBLEMS**

What we’ve accomplished up to this point with Achebe’s story is that we have identified a compelling interpretive problem. An interpretive problem is anything about the subject matter that raises questions about its meaning or significance. A compelling interpretive problem is one that, once adequately introduced, will entice a sophisticated reader to keep reading until the problem is fully resolved.

In order to do this, the problem must be sufficiently complex, i.e., not be resolvable by any obvious, simple, or speedy means. It must also have implications for how we understand the subject matter as a whole and even things beyond that particular subject matter. For instance, if we can discover why Achebe chooses to end his story with the government official’s racist comment, then we would have a key insight into the meaning of the story as a whole and perhaps into the structure of race and racism within postcolonial Africa and beyond. Many sophisticated readers would find such insights worth the time and effort required to read a paper that works through this particular interpretive problem.

A good interpretive essay, then, begins by establishing a compelling interpretive problem. Consider this sample introductory paragraph:

**Sample Introductory Paragraph**

In his short story, “Dead Men’s Path,” Chinua Achebe describes the conflict surrounding a young African schoolmaster’s efforts to introduce modern education within the tribal village of Ndume. Throughout the story, Achebe emphasizes a contrast between the youth, energy, and ambition of Michael Obi, the schoolmaster, and the backwardness of the villagers, embodied in the hobbled village priest who tries to convince Obi of the importance of tribal customs. Angered by Obi’s refusal to allow their sacred path to cut across the school grounds, the villagers ultimately trash the school’s gardens and even pull down a school building. In the aftermath of these events, a white government official shows up to report
on the “tribal-war situation developing between the school and the village” (153). With this description of the conflict, the colonial official reveals a racist viewpoint that equates blackness with tribalism and thus identifies Obi with the villagers he despises. Curiously, Achebe allows the official to have the last word in the story, leaving the reader with his racist assessment of the situation. This decision by Achebe is puzzling—clearly he does not wish the reader to adopt the racist perspective of the official—but begins to make sense when we recognize that the official’s racism reveals the fatal flaw in Obi’s attempt to define himself and his educational mission in complete opposition to the traditional values of the villagers.

Obviously, the introductory paragraph (or paragraphs) of an interpretive essay must introduce the subject matter, which this sample paragraph does; but notice that the paragraph does not get sidetracked from its primary purpose, which is to establish a compelling interpretive problem. The paragraph provides introductory information regarding Achebe, Obi, and the plot of the story, but all of this information contributes toward establishing the question (and the importance of the question) of why Achebe chooses to end his story with the racist comment of the colonial official. In other words, the paragraph provides a necessary overview of the paper’s subject matter, but it is a very focused overview. We do not, for instance, see any reference to Obi’s wife, who is an important character within the story but one whom the reader does not need to be familiar with in order to understand the interpretive problem. Though she might figure prominently in other parts of the paper, then, it would only be a distraction to mention her within the introduction.

Because the introductory paragraph centers on the task of establishing an interpretive problem, it leads smoothly into a thesis statement—an arguable claim that the remainder of the paper will support and develop. If we had written an introduction that just gave an overview of the subject matter (in this case, a summary of “Dead Men’s Path”), then any argumentative claim attached to the end of that overview would probably feel tacked on or out of place to our readers. Within our sample paragraph, however, the claim that is articulated in the final sentence seems like a reasonable response to the interpretive problem that has been established through the course of the paragraph.

Notice, however, that this claim leaves several important questions unanswered. What exactly is the “fatal flaw” in Obi’s approach? And how exactly does the racism of the government official reveal that flaw? The answers to these questions are complicated, too complicated to be provided within a one-sentence statement of the paper’s argument. In fact, it would take a whole paper, several paragraphs of analysis and commentary, to adequately answer these questions. We might say of our thesis statement, then, that it does not fully resolve the interpretive problem but instead indicates to the reader how that interpretive problem will be resolved through the course of the paper. In order to answer the question of why Achebe chooses to give the last word in the story to the racist comment of the colonial official, our paper will, step-by-step, identify and explain a fatal flaw in Obi’s actions and demonstrate how the official’s racist comment reveals that flaw to the reader.

Such a paper would necessarily follow the simple-to-complex organizational scheme, which you have read about in your textbook (pp. 44-45) and which you will read more about in the “Simple-To-Complex” reading (available on the 1123 website). Within this scheme, an argument is developed gradually through body paragraphs that build off of each other to provide an increasingly complex understanding of the subject matter. Each of these body paragraphs employs a particular rhetorical mode, or “pattern of development” (see pp. 19-20 in your textbook), to provide evidence and critical commentary that not only supports the thesis statement but also adds a degree of specificity to the thesis. Each body paragraph in our essay on “Dead Men’s Path,” for instance, would add something significant to reader’s understanding of Obi’s fatal flaw and the way in which the official’s comment reveals that flaw. By the time our reader reaches the concluding paragraph(s) of our essay, then, he/she will be able to understand and fairly evaluate our fully developed resolution of the interpretive problem.