

## What Does Literary Analysis Look Like?

Example 1: Mark Twain lived in America in the 19th century.

[Statement of fact. Not analysis.]

Example 2: Mark Twain published *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1884. In the novel, Huck learns the value of friendship as he and the escaped slave, Jim, descend the Mississippi River.

[Statement of fact with some plot summary. Not analysis, as Huck's maturation is not a matter of dispute. It's a basic story element.]

Example 3: In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's female characters lack credibility. Each one never achieves any real presence or dimensionality; instead they are calico-capped props, just useful as producers of dinner, morality, and bad poetry.

[An insight, and so therefore different from summary, making this an analytic statement. It still needs to be proved.]

Example 4: Twain's prose in *Huckleberry Finn* demonstrates why novelists, critics, and general readers all agree that he is a more talented writer than Bret Harte or his other contemporaries. From panoramic descriptions of landscape to his verb choice in individual sentences, Twain never fails to show a master's touch. This can be easily proved. For example, early in the book Huck and Jim are aboard a derelict steamboat at midnight in a storm. The scene itself is convincingly dramatic--one of the most dramatic moments, in fact, in American Literature. To add to the tension, the ship is about to break up at any moment, Jim (whose wisdom is becoming apparent by this point) is against their being aboard, and we have just learned that there are murderous criminals aboard. Most readers at this point are so caught up in the action that the

prose itself is transparent, and Twain could write sloppily and nobody would notice. But he doesn't. Instead he uses a jeweler's loupe throughout, producing such a line as this: "Packard [one of the criminals] didn't take no notice of that, but hung up his lantern on a nail, and started towards where I [Huck] was, there in the dark, and motioned for Bill to come. I crawfished as fast as I could, about two yards, but the boat slanted so that I couldn't make very good time" (186). The verb is perfect: in his crab-legged scramble backwards in the dark, Huck *crawfished* as fast as he could. It's a brilliant word choice. In a later scene Huck cooks up a whopper tale (he lies with tremendous imagination all the way through, or rather, Twain does for him). In describing how he and his fictitious companions crashed into the wreck in the dark, he explains that his scow had wrapped around the steamer, using the expression "saddlebagged" (189). In other words, the smaller boat has hit the big one in such a way that the small boat has folded around it the way that saddle bags drape over a horse's haunch. Throughout the book there are hundreds more examples such as these two--so much good writing as to give a beginning writer the fantods, just out of envy.

Although in some periods many great writers have lived side by side (New England in 1840, Paris in 1925, and so on), in the Gilded Age (a phrase coined by Twain) Twain had no rivals. Nothing of Bret Harte's work compares, nothing of Chandler Harris's, nothing of Cable's. Twain is alone. As Professor Snoodlebaum says in his book *The West and its Writers*, "Harte's lines are as lame as a three-legged horse, and only his pandering vulgarity and relentless self-promotion kept him in print even in his own lifetime" (561). By comparison, when Hemingway--whose own literary reputation remains Gibraltar solid--says that *Huckleberry Finn* is the only true American novel, calling it "the best book we've had," nobody in fifty years has successfully disputed him (Snitzlekrump 27). In fact, Twain would be considered a master of craft even if *Huckleberry Finn* were his one and only book; as we all know, it wasn't--he produced a dozen

other things of equal or only slightly-lesser value. Each of these books contains a full array of memorable phrases, original metaphors, or vividly described scenes.

[Analytic statement backed up with discussion and examples. This is what you should do. Citations follow MLA format.]