

UNIT 3: Literary Analysis



Inspirations

UNIT 3

Literary Analysis

STEP

1

ANALYZE THE MODEL

Evaluate a student model about author's craft and style in William Stafford's poem "Fifteen."

STEP

2

PRACTICE THE TASK

Write a literary analysis about Whitman's Civil War experiences as described in a poem and a letter to his mother.

STEP

3

PERFORM THE TASK

Write a literary analysis of the themes in "If—" and in "Kipling and I."

What inspires you? Which songs make your heart soar? Which stories make you believe that you can make a difference? The word *inspiration* comes from the Latin word *spirare*, meaning "to breathe," and has the same root as the word *spirit*. We humans need inspiration almost as much as we need air to breathe. Literature is a ready source of stories and poems that can lift our spirits, make us believe in ourselves, and help us survive and overcome hardship.

Literature allows us to see ordinary events in a different light. A teenager's encounter with a motorcycle in Stafford's poem "Fifteen" becomes a symbol for an adolescent yearning for freedom. "Kipling and I" by Jesús Colón tells the true story of a young man's struggles with poverty and the inspiration that helps him overcome his troubles.

A great believer in the power of words, the writer Walt Whitman celebrated the American spirit of individualism. He served as a nurse to soldiers who had fought in the bloody battles of the American Civil War. Whitman's life and work, featured in this unit, continue to inspire us today with their compassion, honesty, and unwavering belief in the strength of the human spirit.

IN THIS UNIT, you will analyze one student's response to the poem "Fifteen" by William Stafford. Then you will analyze how Whitman's experiences as a nurse in a Civil War hospital compare and contrast with his poem "The Artilleryman's Vision." Finally, you will analyze themes across cultures and genres in "If—" by Rudyard Kipling and in "Kipling and I" by Jesús Colón.

ANALYZE THE MODEL

*What inspires us to grow
and change?*



You will read:

- ▶ **A BIOGRAPHY**
William Stafford: The Poet and His Craft
- ▶ **A POEM**
"Fifteen"

You will analyze:

- ▶ **A STUDENT MODEL**
Growing Up: Theme and Style in Stafford's "Fifteen"

Source Materials for Step 1

Mr. Lewis assigned the following biography and poem to his class to read and analyze. The notes in the side columns were written by Jennifer Ricardo, a student in Mr. Lewis's class.

William Stafford: The Poet and His Craft

Poet and pacifist William Stafford (1914–1993) was born in Hutchinson, Kansas. Stafford was the oldest of three children in a family with a great love for literature. During the Great Depression, his family moved from town to town seeking work. Stafford contributed to the family's income by delivering newspapers, working in sugar-beet fields, raising vegetables, and working as an electrician's apprentice.

A conscientious objector, Stafford worked in the civilian public service camps during World War II. His first major collection of poetry, *Traveling Through the Dark*, was published when he was forty-eight years old and won the National Book Award. He went on to publish more than sixty-five volumes of poetry and prose.

That's pretty late to start writing poetry!

Hmm . . . that should be interesting.

I'd better pay attention to the voice in the poem.

Like Robert Frost's poetry, Stafford's poems are deceptively simple—written in familiar language but focused on complex feelings and ideas. His subject matter is life in the western United States. In this locale, ordinary encounters reveal extraordinary moments. Stafford's poems are earthy and specific. The poet speaks in a gentle, slightly self-mocking, dreamy tone of voice.

The people, animals, and varying landscapes were the backdrop of Stafford's life—and his writing. He wrote that the houses of his youth were always on the outside of town, on the cusp of "adventure fields forever, or rivers that wended off over the horizon, forever. And in the center of town was a library, another kind of edge out there forever, to explore."

Despite his late start as a poet, Stafford published six volumes of poetry, many prose articles, and a nonfiction book, *Down in My Heart* (1947), describing his experiences as a conscientious objector during World War II.

Fifteen

by William Stafford

South of the bridge on Seventeenth
I found back of the willows one summer
day a motorcycle with engine running
as it lay on its side, ticking over
5 slowly in the high grass. I was fifteen.

alliteration

I admired all that pulsing gleam, the
shiny flanks, the demure headlights
fringed where it lay; I led it gently
to the road and stood with that
10 companion, ready and friendly. I was fifteen.

*“demure” usually
describes a person,
not a machine*

*motorcycle is like a
horse—or a girl*

We could find the end of a road, meet
the sky on out Seventeenth. I thought about
hills, and patting the handle got back a
confident opinion. On the bridge we indulged
15 a forward feeling, a tremble. I was fifteen.

Thinking, back farther in the grass I found
the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale—
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
20 over it, called me good man, roared away.

*Is the owner hurt?
He calls the speaker
“a good man” though
he’s only a teenager.*

I stood there, fifteen.



Discuss and Decide

What words in the last stanza signal a shift in the speaker’s view? What does the speaker realize at this point?

Analyze a Student Model for Step 1

Read Jennifer’s literary analysis closely. The red side notes are the comments that her teacher, Mr. Lewis, wrote.

Jennifer Ricardo
Mr. Lewis, English
April 24

Growing Up: Theme and Style in Stafford’s “Fifteen”

William Stafford’s poem “Fifteen” is deceptively simple. One summer, a teenage boy finds a motorcycle and rides it. He then finds its owner, who has had an accident and has fallen, and the boy returns the bike to him.

Nice points about the “companion” motorcycle. I really like your idea about its being a symbol of love. Write some more about that!

I like the points you make about theme. Can you unify them in an overarching controlling idea?

There is much more happening in these lines than such a simple encounter, and the motorcycle is much more than an inanimate vehicle. The motorcycle is very nearly alive. It “pulses,” and has “flanks,” like a horse—or a large girl or woman. The narrator describes this adolescent fantasy machine, which has now become very close and near to him, as a “companion.” “Trembling,” he dares to go for a ride.

The speaker of the poem is fifteen, as he keeps repeating. He encounters this motorcycle as a young boy might encounter a girl or a woman, both attracted to her and terrified of her. This personification of the machine is a central part of the theme. The motorcycle, with all its glamour, could be a symbol of love.

The poet uses alliteration in this poem quite effectively. The *r* sounds in the poem help us hear the rumble of the motorcycle (“ready and friendly,” “a forward feeling,” “a tremble”). The *s*

sounds convey the breath of the personified vehicle, and the heady season in the poem's key words ("South," "Seventeenth," "summer," "sky").

Freedom and temptation are the focus of the third stanza as the speaker imagines himself "stealing" the motorcycle and taking it for a ride. He clearly states that there is "a forward feeling, a tremble," a growing excitement rising within him. As he imagines finding "the end of a road," and meeting "the sky on out Seventeenth," he conjures up freedom and the thrill of the open road.

At the end, we discover the injured and dazed owner of the motorcycle. We see that the "friendly" creature, love, is not always so friendly and can throw one off balance and over the edge, literally and figuratively. The motorcycle owner is pale and shaken from his encounter, but ready to take the helm. He calls the speaker a "good man" and rides off, leaving the boy alone again, and "still fifteen."

Make your conclusion stronger by tying up your preceding points.

Jennifer, great job of interpreting the poem and its stylistic elements!

Discuss and Decide

Why does the author repeat the words "I was fifteen"? How does this repetition affect the theme of the poem?

Terminology of Literary Analysis

Read each term and explanation. Then look back at Jennifer Ricardo's literary analysis and find an example to complete the chart.

Term	Explanation	Example from Jennifer's Essay
main idea	The main idea is an observation or assertion about the poem or piece of literature.	
theme	The theme is the underlying message about life or human nature that the writer wants the reader to understand.	
tone	The tone is the attitude the writer takes toward a subject.	
figurative language	Figurative language is language that communicates meanings beyond the literal meanings of words.	
style	The style is the particular way in which a work of literature is written—not <i>what</i> is said but <i>how</i> it is said.	
voice	The voice is a writer's unique use of language that allows a reader to "hear" a human personality in the writer's work.	

PRACTICE THE TASK

How can real events inspire poetry?

**You will read:**

- ▶ **A BIOGRAPHY**
Walt Whitman
- ▶ **A POEM**
"The Artilleryman's Vision"
- ▶ **A LETTER**
Letter to His Mother

You will write:

- ▶ **A LITERARY ANALYSIS**
Compare and contrast Whitman's depictions of Civil War experiences in "The Artilleryman's Vision" and in a letter to his mother.

Source Materials for Step 2

AS YOU READ You will be writing a literary analysis that compares and contrasts Whitman’s depictions of Civil War experiences in his poem “The Artilleryman’s Vision” and in his “Letter to His Mother.” As you read about Whitman’s life and work, underline and circle information that may be useful to you when you write your essay.

Source 1: Biography

Walt Whitman

by Mark Botha

One of nine children, Walt Whitman (1819–1892) grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and Long Island and experienced both the community of country life and the urban bustle of a growing new city. As a young man, he plied many trades, including printer, teacher, and journalist. By the time he was twenty, his fascination with the boomtown atmosphere of Brooklyn led him to journalism. After ten years of reporting, he took a kind of working vacation—a difficult overland journey to New Orleans. He put his journalistic talent to work at the New Orleans *Crescent* while also observing the alien culture of New Orleans and the brutal face of slavery that existed there.

Returning to Brooklyn, Whitman served as editor of the *Brooklyn Freeman* while supplementing his income as a part-time carpenter and contractor. All this while, he was keeping notebooks and quietly putting together the sprawling collection of poems that would transform his life and change the course of American literature.

In 1855, Whitman self-published his groundbreaking collection of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*. Its original style drew lifelong admirers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, and many critics, who condemned it as “disreputable.” *Leaves of Grass* was expanded and

revised through many editions until the ninth “deathbed” edition was published in 1892, thirty-seven years after its first appearance. It is a spiritual autobiography that tells the story of an enchanted observer who says how he is inspired at every opportunity.

When Whitman learned that his younger brother had been wounded in Fredericksburg, Virginia, he immediately traveled to the front. There he saw the aftermath of one of the war’s bloodiest battles. This experience convinced him to work in Washington, D.C. as a volunteer nurse. While caring for the wounded, Whitman witnessed the effects of war on men’s bodies and minds. During this time, he wrote numerous poems, including “The Artilleryman’s Vision.” His years of nursing, he once wrote, were “the greatest privilege and satisfaction . . . and, of course, the most profound lesson of my life.”

Beset by ill-health, Whitman suffered a stroke in 1873. However, his influence continued to grow as he released new editions of *Leaves of Grass*. In the preface to one of these editions, Whitman wrote: “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” He believed there was a vital relationship between the poet and society. Whitman died on March 26, 1892. His funeral drew thousands of mourners, and his casket could not even be seen for the many wreaths of flowers left upon it.

Discuss and Decide

Why might Whitman have called his experiences nursing in the Civil War “the most profound lesson” of his life? What do you think he learned?

Source 2: Poem

Background: Walt Whitman's "The Artilleryman's Vision" describes the nighttime dreams of a Civil War veteran after the war has ended.

The Artilleryman's Vision

by Walt Whitman

While my wife at my side lies slumbering, and the wars are over
long,
And my head on the pillow rests at home, and the vacant midnight
passes,
And through the stillness, through the dark, I hear, just hear, the
breath of my infant,
There in the room as I wake from sleep this vision presses upon me;
5 The engagement opens there and then in fantasy unreal,
The skirmishers begin, they crawl cautiously ahead, I hear the
irregular snap! snap!
I hear the sounds of the different missiles, the short *t-h-t! t-h-t!* of
the rifle balls,
I see the shells exploding leaving small white clouds, I hear the great
shells shrieking as they pass,
The grape like the hum and whirr of wind through the trees,
(tumultuous now the contest rages,)
10 All the scenes at the batteries rise in detail before me again,
The crashing and smoking, the pride of the men in their pieces,
The chief-gunner ranges and sights his piece and selects a fuse of
the right time,
After firing I see him lean aside and look eagerly off to note the
effect;
Elsewhere I hear the cry of a regiment charging, (the young colonel
leads himself this time with brandish'd sword,)
15 I see the gaps cut by the enemy's volleys, (quickly fill'd up, no
delay,)
I breathe the suffocating smoke, then the flat clouds hover low
concealing all;
Now a strange lull for a few seconds, not a shot fired on either side,
Then resumed the chaos louder than ever, with eager calls and
orders of officers,



While from some distant part of the field the wind wafts to my ears
a shout of applause, (some special success,)

- 20 And ever the sound of the cannon far or near, (rousing even in
dreams a devilish exultation and all the old mad joy in the
depths of my soul,)

And ever the hastening of infantry shifting positions, batteries,
cavalry, moving hither and thither,

(The falling, dying, I heed not, the wounded dripping and red I heed
not, some to the rear are hobbling,)

Grime, heat, rush, aide-de-camps galloping by or on a full run,
With the patter of small arms, the warning *s-s-t* of the rifles, (these
in my vision I hear or see,)

- 25 And bombs bursting in air, and at night the vari-color'd rockets.

Discuss and Decide

What is happening in "The Artilleryman's Vision"? What events occur in the present and which events occur in the past?

Source 3: Letter

Background: *In this letter to his mother, Whitman describes a meaningful encounter with a wounded Union soldier following the Battle of Fredericksburg.*

Letter to His Mother

by Walt Whitman

January 29, 1865

Dear Mother—

Here is a case of a soldier I found among the crowded cots in the Patent hospital—(they have removed most of the men of late and broken up that hospital). He likes to have some one to talk to, and we will listen to him. He got badly wounded in the leg and side at Fredericksburg that eventful Saturday, 13th December. He lay the succeeding two days and nights helpless on the field, between the city and those grim batteries, for his company and his regiment had been compelled to leave him to his fate. To make matters worse, he lay with his head slightly down hill, and could not help himself.

10 At the end of some fifty hours he was brought off, with other wounded, under a flag of truce.

We ask him how the Rebels treated him during those two days and nights within reach of them—whether they came to him—whether they abused him? He answers that several of the Rebels, soldiers and others, came to him, at one time and another. A couple of them, who were together, spoke roughly and sarcastically, but did no act. One middle-aged man, however, who seemed to be moving around the field among the dead and wounded for benevolent

purposes, came to him in a way he will never forget. This man
20 treated our soldier kindly, bound up his wounds, cheered him,
gave him a couple of biscuits, gave him a drink and water, asked
him if he could eat some beef. This good Secesh, however, did not
change our soldier's position, for it might have caused the blood
to burst from the wounds where they were clotted and stagnated.
Our soldier is from Pennsylvania; has had a pretty severe time; the
wounds proved to be bad ones. But he retains a good heart, and is at
present on the gain. . . .

Walt

Close Read

Why might Whitman have been particularly interested in this soldier? Cite text evidence in your response.

Respond to Questions on Step 2 Sources

These questions will help you analyze the sources you've read. Use your notes and refer to the sources in order to answer the questions. Your answers to these questions will help you write your essay.

- 1 Which of the following best summarizes the theme of Whitman's poem "The Artilleryman's Vision"?
 - a. The true heroes of war are the officers and cavalry.
 - b. War is a glorious pursuit that is worth all the pain and suffering it causes.
 - c. War causes suffering and ends in death.
 - d. War is hard on common soldiers even when the war is over.

- 2 Select the three pieces of evidence from the Whitman poem that best support your answer to Question 1.
 - a. "While my wife at my side lies slumbering, and the wars are over long . . ." (line 1)
 - b. "There in the room as I wake from sleep this vision presses upon me . . ." (line 4)
 - c. ". . . I hear the irregular snap! snap!" (line 6)
 - d. "The crashing and smoking, the pride of the men in their pieces . . ." (line 11)
 - e. "The chief-gunner ranges and sights his piece and selects a fuse of the right time . . ." (line 12)
 - f. "Elsewhere I hear the cry of a regiment charging, (the young colonel leads himself this time with brandish'd sword,) . . ." (line 14)
 - g. "Now a strange lull for a few seconds , not a shot fired on either side," (line 17)
 - h. ". . . (rousing even in dreams a devilish exultation and all the old mad joy in the depths of my soul)," (line 20)

- 3 In what way does the historical context in which they were written affect the poem and the letter?
 - a. Both works reflect the daily experiences of common Civil War soldiers in battle.
 - b. Both works glorify the Union cause in the Civil War, which Whitman supported.
 - c. Both works delve deeply into the feelings of the families of Civil War soldiers.
 - d. Both works show that the common soldier in the Civil War was lost without his leaders.

- 4 Select the three pieces of evidence from the Whitman poem and the letter that best support your answer to Question 3.
- a. "There in the room as I wake from sleep this vision presses upon me . . ." (poem, line 4)
 - b. " . . . tumultuous now the contest rages . . ." (poem, line 9)
 - c. "I breathe the suffocating smoke, then the flat clouds hover low concealing all . . ." (poem, line 16)
 - d. "He got badly wounded in the leg and side at Fredericksburg that eventful Saturday, 13th December." (letter, lines 4–5)
 - e. "We ask him how the Rebels treated him . . ." (letter, line 12)
 - f. " . . . good Secash, however, did not change our soldier's position . . ." (letter, lines 22–23)
 - g. "Our soldier is from Pennsylvania . . ." (letter, line 25)
 - h. "But he retains a good heart . . ." (letter, line 26)

5 **Prose Constructed-Response** How does Whitman's word choice in "The Artilleryman's Vision" and his use of phrases such as "rousing even in dreams a devilish exultation" (lines 20–21) describe his attitude toward war?

6 **Prose Constructed-Response** How does the letter give you a glimpse into Whitman's sensitivity as a nurse?

7 **Prose Constructed-Response** Does the poem or the letter offer a more disturbing view of the after-effects of war? Cite text evidence in your response.

ASSIGNMENT

Write a literary analysis that compares and contrasts Whitman's depictions of Civil War experiences in his poem "The Artilleryman's Vision" and in his letter to his mother.

Planning and Prewriting

When you compare, you tell how two things are similar. When you contrast, you tell how they are different.



You may prefer to do your planning on the computer.

Decide on Key Points

Summarize the key points that you will include in your essay. As you make notes about each point, identify how the themes in the poem and the letter are alike, and how they are different.

Point	Poem	Letter
1. Characters <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alike <input type="checkbox"/> Different	<i>Civil War soldiers</i>	<i>Civil War soldiers</i>
2. Theme <input type="checkbox"/> Alike <input type="checkbox"/> Different		
3. Genre <input type="checkbox"/> Alike <input type="checkbox"/> Different		
4. Speaker / author <input type="checkbox"/> Alike <input type="checkbox"/> Different		
5. Events (plot/story) <input type="checkbox"/> Alike <input type="checkbox"/> Different		

Developing Your Topic

Before you write your essay, decide how you want to organize it. For both organizational strategies, your essay will begin with an introductory paragraph and end with a concluding paragraph.

Point-by-Point Discuss the first point of comparison or contrast for both the poem and the letter. Then move on to the second point. If you choose this organization, you will read across the rows of this chart.

Topic	Poem	Letter	
1. Characters			If you use this organizational structure, your essay will have a paragraph comparing or contrasting the characters, followed by paragraphs comparing and contrasting the other topics in your chart.
2. Theme			
3. Genre			
4. Speaker / author			
5. Events (plot/story)			

Subject-by-Subject Discuss all the points about the poem before moving on to the letter. If you choose this method, you will be reading across the rows of this chart.

Selection	Characters	Theme	Genre	Speaker / author	Events (plot/story)	
1. Poem						If you use this organizational structure, your essay will have one or two paragraphs addressing all your points as they relate to the poem, followed by one or two paragraphs addressing all your points as they relate to the letter.
2. Letter						

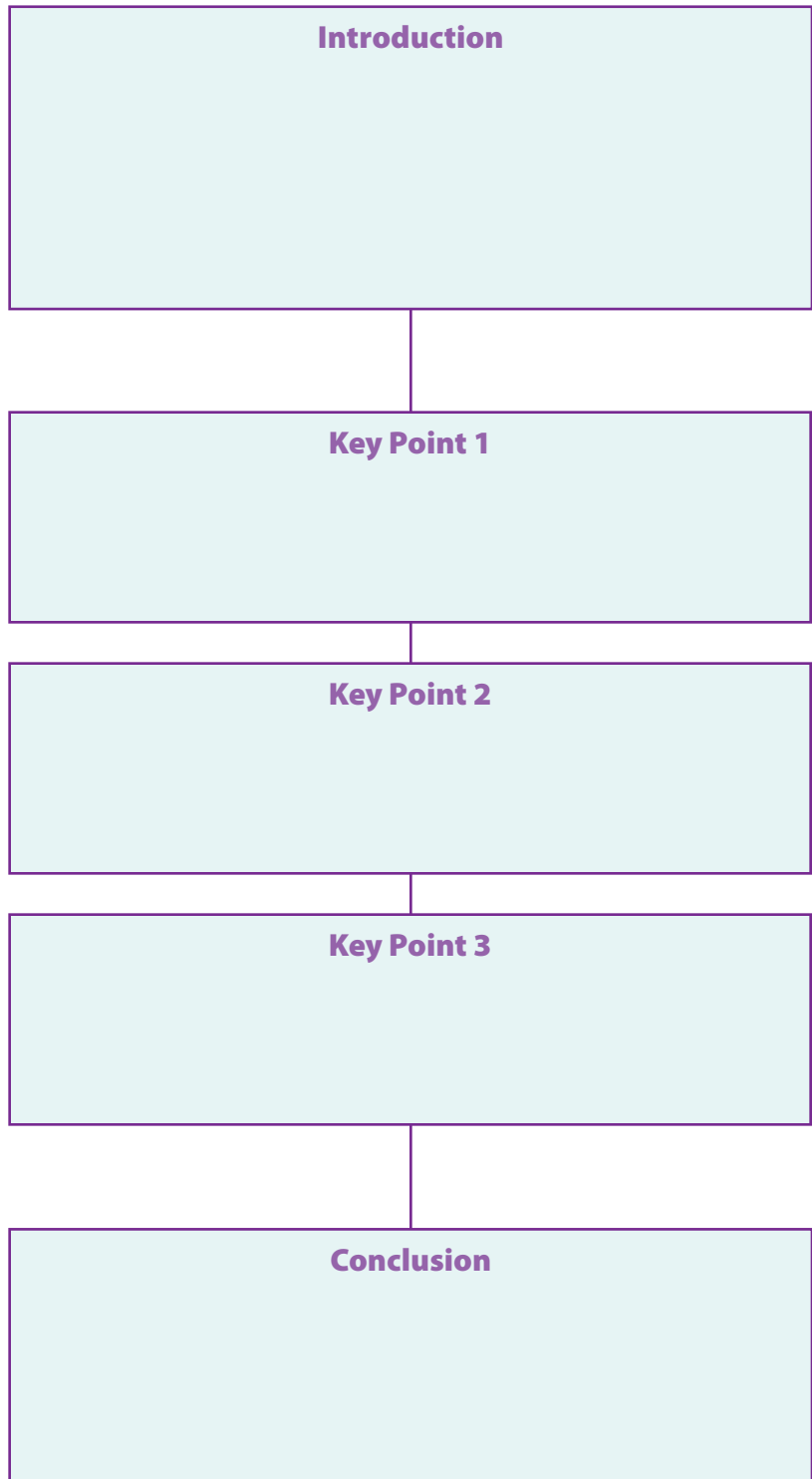
Finalize Your Plan

Use your responses and notes from previous pages to create a detailed plan for your essay.

- ▶ “Hook” your audience with an interesting detail, question, quotation, or anecdote.
- ▶ State your ideas about the themes in both texts.

- ▶ Chose the text structure:
Point-by-Point Compare and contrast both subjects, one point at a time; or
Subject-by-Subject Discuss all the points relating to the poem before moving on to the letter.
- ▶ Include relevant facts, concrete details, and other evidence. Restate your ideas.

- ▶ Summarize the key points and restate your main idea.
- ▶ Include an insight that follows from and supports your main idea.



Draft Your Essay

As you write, think about:

- ▶ **Audience:** Your teacher
- ▶ **Purpose:** Demonstrate your understanding of the specific requirements of a literary analysis using a compare-and-contrast text structure with attention to theme and historical background.
- ▶ **Style:** Use a formal and objective tone.
- ▶ **Transitions:** Use words and phrases such as *both*, *and*, *like*, and *in the same way* to show similarities and words and phrases such as *but*, *however*, *while*, and *on the other hand* to show differences.

Revise

Revision Checklist: Self Evaluation

Use the checklist below to guide your analysis.



If you drafted your essay on the computer, you may wish to print it out so that you can more easily evaluate it.

Ask Yourself	Tips	Revision Strategies
1. Does the introduction get the readers' attention and include a clear main idea?	Draw a line under the compelling introductory text. Circle the main idea.	Add a compelling introductory sentence or idea. Make your main idea clear and precise.
2. Are there examples of ways in which themes of the poem and the letter are alike, and ways in which they are different? Are the comparisons and contrasts supported by textual evidence?	Underline each example. Circle the evidence from the texts and draw a line to the comparison or contrast it supports.	Add examples or revise existing ones to make them more valid. Provide evidence from the text.
3. Are appropriate and varied transitions used to connect, compare, and contrast ideas?	Place a checkmark next to each transitional word or phrase. Add transitional words or phrases, where needed, to clarify the relationships between ideas.	Add words, phrases, or clauses to connect related ideas that lack transitions.
4. Is there a strong conclusion? Does it give the reader insight into the two texts and the themes?	Put a plus sign beside the concluding statement. Star the text that supports the conclusion. Underline the insight that is offered to readers.	Add an overarching view of key points or a final observation about the two texts.

Revision Checklist: Peer Review

Exchange your essay with a classmate, or read it aloud to your partner. As you read and comment on your classmate's essay, focus on how the poem and the letter have been compared and contrasted. Help each other identify parts of the draft that need strengthening, reworking, or a new approach.

What To Look For	Notes for My Partner
1. Does the introduction grab the audience's attention and include a clear main idea?	
2. Are there examples that show ways in which the themes in the poem and the letter are alike, and ways in which they are different? Are the comparisons and contrasts supported by evidence from the texts?	
3. Are appropriate and varied transitions used to connect, compare, and contrast ideas?	
4. Is there a strong conclusion that follows from or is supported by the preceding paragraphs? Does it give the reader something to think about?	

Edit



Edit your essay to correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.

PERFORM THE TASK

How can inspiration sustain us in difficult times?



You will read:

- ▶ A POEM
"If—"
- ▶ A MEMOIR
"Kipling and I"

You will write:

- ▶ A LITERARY ANALYSIS
Write a literary analysis that examines the universal themes in Kipling's poem "If—" and Colón's memoir "Kipling and I."

Part 1: Read Sources

Source 1: Poem

Background: Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) was one of the most popular writers in the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “If—” is one of his best-known poems.



by Rudyard Kipling

AS YOU READ Focus on the theme of the poem “If—” by Rudyard Kipling. Record comments or questions about the text in the side margins.

NOTES

- IF you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too:
5 If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;
- If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
10 If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
15 Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap or all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
20 And never breathe a word about your loss:
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

25 If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
30 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

NOTES

Close Read

In your own words, state the theme of this poem.

Source 2: Memoir

Background: *Jesús Colón (1901–1974) grew up in Puerto Rico. At sixteen, he left Puerto Rico as a stowaway and ended up in Brooklyn, New York where his initial experiences provided the basis for this essay.*



AS YOU READ *Think about the central message or idea that Colón conveys in this memoir. Record comments or questions about the text in the side margins.*

NOTES

SOMETIMES I pass Debevoise Place at the corner of Willoughby Street . . . I look at the old wooden house, gray and ancient, the house where I used to live some forty years ago . . .

My room was on the second floor at the corner. On hot summer nights I would sit at the window reading by the electric light from the street lamp which was almost at a level with the windowsill.

It was nice to come home late during the winter, look for some scrap of old newspaper, some bits of wood and a few chunks of coal, and start a sparkling fire in the chunky fourlegged coal stove.

10 I would be rewarded with an intimate warmth as little by little the pigmy stove became alive puffing out its sides, hot and red, like the crimson cheeks of a Santa Claus.

My few books were in a soap box nailed to the wall. But my most prized possession in those days was a poem I had bought in a five-and-ten-cent store on Fulton Street. (I wonder what has become of these poems, maxims and sayings of wise men that they used to sell at the five-and-ten-cent stores?) The poem was printed on gold paper and mounted in a gilded frame ready to be hung in a conspicuous place in the house. I bought one of those fancy silken picture cords

20 finishing in a rosette to match the color of the frame.

I was seventeen. This poem to me then seemed to summarize, in one poetical nutshell, the wisdom of all the sages that ever lived. It was what I was looking for, something to guide myself by, a way of life, a compendium of the wise, the true and the beautiful. All I had to do was to live according to the counsel of the poem and follow its

instructions and I would be a perfect man—the useful, the good, the true human being. I was very happy that day, forty years ago.

The poem had to have the most prominent place in the room.

Where could I hang it? I decided that the best place for the poem was
 30 on the wall right by the entrance to the room. No one coming in and out would miss it. Perhaps someone would be interested enough to read it and drink the profound waters of its message . . .

Every morning as I prepared to leave, I stood in front of the poem and read it over and over again, sometimes half a dozen times. I let the sonorous music of the verse carry me away. I brought with me a handwritten copy as I stepped out every morning looking for work, repeating verses and stanzas from memory until the whole poem came to be part of me. Other days my lips kept repeating a single verse of the poem at intervals throughout the day.

40 In the subways I loved to compete with the shrill noises of the many wheels below by chanting the lines of the poem. People stared at me moving my lips as though I were in a trance. I looked back with pity. They were not so fortunate as I who had as a guide to direct my life a great poem to make me wise, useful and happy.

And I chanted:

*If you can keep your head when all about you
 Are losing theirs and blaming it on you . . .*

*If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
 Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
 50 Or being hated don't give way to hating . . .*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings;
 And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
 And lose, and start again at your beginnings . . .*

“If—,” by Kipling, was the poem. At seventeen, my evening prayer and my first morning thought. I repeated it every day with the resolution to live up to the very last line of that poem.

Discuss and Decide

Reread the excerpt from the poem. Why do you think it means so much to the narrator?

NOTES

I would visit the government employment office on Jay Street. The conversations among the Puerto Ricans on the large wooden benches in the employment office were always on the same subject.

60 How to find a decent place to live. How they would not rent to Negroes or Puerto Ricans. How Negroes and Puerto Ricans were given the pink slips first at work.

From the employment office I would call door to door at the piers, factories and storage houses in the streets under the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges. “Sorry, nothing today.” It seemed to me that “today” was a continuation and combination of all the yesterdays, todays and tomorrows.

From the factories I would go to the restaurants, looking for a job as a porter or dishwasher. At least I would eat and be warm in a

70 kitchen.

“Sorry” . . . “Sorry” . . .

Sometimes I was hired at ten dollars a week, ten hours a day including Sundays and holidays. One day off during the week. My work was that of three men: dishwasher, porter, busboy. And to clear the sidewalk of snow and slush “when you have nothing else to do.” I was to be appropriately humble and grateful not only to the owner but to everybody else in the place.

If I rebelled at insults or at a pointed innuendo or just the inhuman amount of work, I was unceremoniously thrown out and

80 told to come “next week for your pay.” “Next week” meant weeks of calling for the paltry dollars owed me. The owners relished this “next week.”

I clung to my poem as to a faith. Like a potent amulet, my precious poem was clenched in the fist of my right hand inside my secondhand overcoat. Again and again I declaimed aloud a few precious lines when discouragement and disillusionment threatened to overwhelm me.

*If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone . . .*

90 The weeks of unemployment and hard knocks turned into months. I continued to find two or three days of work here and there. And I continued to be thrown out when I rebelled at the ill treatment, overwork and insults. I kept pounding the streets looking for a place where they would treat me half decently, where my

devotion to work and faith in Kipling's poem would be appreciated. I remember the worn-out shoes I bought in a second-hand store on Myrtle Avenue at the corner of Adams Street. The round holes in the soles that I tried to cover with pieces of carton were no match for the frigid knives of the unrelenting snow.

100 One night I returned late after a long day of looking for work. I was hungry. My room was dark and cold. I wanted to warm my numb body. I lit a match and began looking for some scraps of wood and a piece of paper to start a fire. I searched all over the floor. No wood, no paper. As I stood up, the glimmering flicker of the dying match was reflected in the glass surface of the framed poem. I unhooked the poem from the wall. I reflected for a minute, a minute that felt like an eternity. I took the frame apart, placing the square glass upon the small table. I tore the gold paper on which the poem was printed, threw its pieces inside the stove and, placing the small
110 bits of wood from the frame on top of the paper, I lit it, adding soft and hard coal as the fire began to gain strength and brightness.

I watched how the lines of the poem withered into ashes inside the small stove.

NOTES

Close Read

Why do you think the narrator burns the poem at the end of the story? What theme, or insight about life, is suggested by his final actions?

Respond to Questions on Step 3 Sources

These questions will help you analyze the texts you have read in this section. Use your notes and refer to the sources in order to answer the questions. Your answers to these questions will help you write your essay.

- 1 Prose Constructed-Response** What are the values set forth in the poem “If—” that the writer Jesús Colón responds to?

- 2 Prose Constructed-Response** How are the themes of the poem and the memoir alike? Cite text evidence in your response.

- 3 Prose Constructed-Response** How does the poem “If—” sustain Colón through his difficult times? Cite text evidence in your response.

Part 2: Write

ASSIGNMENT

Write a literary analysis that examines the universal themes in Kipling's poem "If—" and Colón's memoir "Kipling and I."

Plan

Use the graphic organizer to help you outline the structure of your literary analysis.

The graphic organizer consists of five light blue rectangular boxes arranged vertically, connected by a central vertical line. The boxes are labeled as follows from top to bottom:

- Introduction**
- Key Point 1**
- Key Point 2**
- Key Point 3**
- Conclusion**

Draft



Use your notes and completed graphic organizer to write a first draft of your literary analysis.

Revise and Edit



Look back over your essay and compare it to the Evaluation Criteria. Revise your literary analysis and edit it to correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.

Evaluation Criteria

Your teacher will be looking for:

1. *Statement of purpose*

- ▶ Did you clearly state your main idea?
- ▶ Did you respond to the assignment question?
- ▶ Did you support it with valid reasons?

2. *Organization*

- ▶ Are the sections of your literary analysis organized in a logical way?
- ▶ Is there a smooth flow from beginning to end?
- ▶ Is there a clear conclusion that supports your main idea?
- ▶ Did you stay on topic?

3. *Elaboration of evidence*

- ▶ Did you cite evidence from the sources, and is it relevant to the topic?
- ▶ Is there sufficient evidence?

4. *Language and vocabulary*

- ▶ Did you use a formal, essay-appropriate tone?
- ▶ Did you use vocabulary familiar to your audience?

5. *Conventions*

- ▶ Did you follow the rules of grammar usage as well as punctuation, capitalization, and spelling?