

ANGLISTISCHE LITERATUR- UND KULTURWISSENSCHAFT

LEIBNIZ UNIVERSITÄT HANNOVER
ENGLISCHES SEMINAR

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WHAT IS A LITERARY STUDIES ESSAY?

An essay in literary studies is an independent analysis and interpretation of one or more literary texts. Students demonstrate that they have absorbed the basic methods and knowledge derived from the *Introduction to Literary Studies* (AmerBritF1) and a course on literary theories and methods. A literary studies essay also provides indispensable preparation for the final Bachelor's or Master's thesis.

A literary studies essay follows the three interconnected steps of analysis and interpretation (*cf.* Vera and Ansgar Nünning. *An Introduction to the Study of English and American Literature*, p. 25f and Michael Meyer. *English and American Literature*, 4th edition, p.10f):

- ▶ What? What are the themes and content of the text?
- ▶ How? How is the text constructed? What textual strategies does it employ?
- ▶ Why? Why does the text use these textual strategies? What functions do they perform within and possibly beyond the text?

What? and How? literary analysis (description of textual strategies)
Why? literary interpretation (explanation and exegesis)

A literary studies essay formulates key questions and/or a thesis, i.e. a contention or judgement, that must be substantiated; and it presents these with clear argumentation. Why does the text employ specific strategies? What are the effects? What does the text thereby say in relation to the chosen theme? Key questions and/or theses constitute the heart of the essay and are to be declared in the introduction.

The analytical section of the essay draws on the analytical concepts relevant to the genre of the chosen text (*cf.* Nünning chs. 3, 4, 5 and Meyer chs. 2, 3, 4), and forms the foundation of every interpretation.

The interpretation is further based on a theory or several theoretical approaches (*cf.* Nünning ch. 2 and Meyer ch. 5), a concise account of which precedes the analysis and interpretation section. The theoretical approach determines what one pays special attention to, which key questions one formulates, how one assesses the textual strategies, and how one finally ascribes meaning to the text. There is a clear distinction here between text-oriented and context-oriented theories. It is from the combination of these with literary-analytical concepts that an independent method arises. Theory and method may be briefly explained in the introduction to an essay or – as in the final Bachelor's or Master's thesis – may form a separate chapter. Either way, it is important to define the key concepts, which can vary from theory to theory.

In developing the formulations of questions and the theoretical approach, a literary studies essay makes (critical) use of secondary literature about the specific text and the main theoretical concepts. This lends the essay originality even when the primary text has already been written about in terms of the same or similar aspects. Although theme and text are usually inspired by a seminar, the essay also offers a good opportunity to explore new texts (see *Lektüreliste Anglistik*) and thereby to widen the student's expertise.