

How to show evidence of critical or analytical interpretation of a short story

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Cranes Fly South” by Edward McCourt**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **30 minutes**

Reminder

Now you are ready to present an insightful and sensible analysis of the text. In the first exercises of Module 1 and 2, we thoroughly analysed the main idea of the text and identified how the author employs techniques and devices to develop a clear understanding of the short story “Cranes Fly South.” In order to demonstrate your critical and analytical interpretation of the text, you must distinguish between summary and analysis. (Summary simply retells the basic plot events, whereas analysis explains **why** the plot, etc., is meaningful.) In addition, you must show that you have understood and not misread the text.

Instructions

From the examples below, select the responses that express a critical or analytical interpretation of “Cranes Fly South,” rather than a plot summary or a misreading of the text. Decide whether the selection is **acceptable** or **unacceptable**. Check for the correct answer and explanation in the **Answer key**.

Exercise 1

1. In “Cranes Fly South,” Edward McCourt tells the story of Lee, who helps his grandpa to enjoy the flight of a whooping crane one fall day. Lee takes his grandpa to the slough, even though it is a cold, bleak day. The grandfather witnesses the flight of the crane and becomes very excited.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Reason: _____

2. Lee is determined that Grandpa see the whooping crane again because he knows what this experience will mean to Grandpa. Lee overcomes his own initial hesitation and reluctance about taking Grandpa out on the cold, bleak day, because he realizes that Grandpa’s desire and enthusiasm about seeing the whooping crane again are much more important at that moment than following the rules and guidelines about Grandpa’s care that his mother would have wanted him to follow.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Reason: _____

3. The potential extinction of the whooping crane mentioned in the beginning of the story relates to the idea of the importance and appreciation of life. Grandfather knows life is short and that he must see the overwhelming beauty of the crane, just once more, before he dies. In a sense, Grandpa is reliving an important part of his earlier days, 40 years before, when he was a much younger man, because he also knows that his own life is beginning to fade.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Reason: _____

4. McCourt uses symbolism in the short story. Symbolism provides an extended meaning for the reader. The writer’s symbols are the crane and the pale sky.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Reason:

5. Grandpa recovers from his illness at the end of the story. Lee is so happy about this as is explained by his final line when he says, “He’s gone south.” Grandpa finally will have a chance to see the sea. This is important because Grandpa always wanted to go south to Texas, just like the whooping cranes.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Reason:

6. When Bessie, the old mare, breaks into a startled trot, the reader realizes that she, like grandpa, has a feeling of revival—a purpose and meaning in life. When Bessie’s gait transforms into a reluctant walk, Lee knows she will succeed in bringing them safely to the slough. This can be compared to the difficulty Grandpa experiences maintaining the energy needed to accomplish his goal. Bessie’s determination mirrors Grandpa’s.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Reason:

7. Lee’s mother and father are both very angry and blame Lee for Grandpa’s death.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Reason:

8. Lee is so depressed and anguished over Grandpa’s death that he will never forgive himself for taking Grandpa to see the crane fly south.

Acceptable _____

Unacceptable _____

Reason:

9. The mood and tone set by the final events of the story—Grandpa’s delirious raving, the mother’s reaction, the father’s reaction and Lee’s final thoughts—demonstrate to the reader that children have insight into life and death that adults may not necessarily appreciate.

Acceptable _____

Unacceptable _____

Reason:

10. The significance of the title of the story, “Cranes Fly South,” indicates to the reader that whooping cranes fly south in the winter to escape the cold.

Acceptable _____

Unacceptable _____

Reason:

Answer key

1. **Unacceptable.** This passage is straight plot summary. It only tells about what happens in the story, but not why these points of plot occur.
2. **Acceptable.** This shows critical thinking because it provides an interpretation of **why** seeing the whooping crane again is so important to Lee and his grandfather.
3. **Acceptable.** This shows critical thinking because the reader has made a connection between the bird and its meaning in the story.
4. **Unacceptable.** This passage mentions that symbols are used but omits the explanation of how the symbols are connected to the theme.
5. **Unacceptable.** This is a misreading of the text. “He’s gone south” is a symbolic statement referring to Grandpa’s final joy before his death and that he is, perhaps (depending on a person’s belief system), in a happier place.
6. **Acceptable.** This passage clearly takes a critical distance and analyses the comparison between the mare and the grandfather.
7. **Unacceptable.** This is also a misreading of the text. The mother is forgiving, and the father condones (agrees with) Lee’s decision to take his grandfather to see the whooping crane, saying he wished he had been there.
8. **Unacceptable.** This is a misread. Lee is very happy he helped Grandpa to experience the crane’s flight. He is sad his grandfather has died, but he does not regret his decision.
9. **Acceptable.** This is a clear connection between the ending of the story and its theme (main idea). Look back at the **Module 1, Exercise 1** Answer key for a reminder of some suggested theme statements.
10. **Unacceptable.** This is only a literal (direct) interpretation. It does not explore the symbolic significance of the title at all.

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Reminder

Now you are ready to present an insightful and sensible analysis of the text. Because you should now have a strong understanding of the text, you should be able to provide a critical and analytical interpretation of it. Remember: this is where you show what you have interpreted and analysed. One of the mistakes many students make in this objective is writing a plot or text summary rather than an analysis of the text.

Instructions

In the exercise below you will find five paragraphs, each summarizing a part of the plot of the story. Your task is to transform the summary into an analytical paragraph where you discuss the significance of the passage in the short story by showing how it illustrates one of the main themes of the text. (See **Module 1, Exercise 1** for sample theme statements.) Refer to the **Answer key** below for possible responses. Compare your own response to the suggested response for tone and content.

Exercise 2

Summary 1

At the beginning of the story the grandfather describes to Lee how the sound he hears when the cranes fly overhead is like thunder or even a freight train passing right over your head. Lee, then, insists to Grandpa that he really did see a whooping crane. He even describes the black tips of his wings. Grandpa is in a state of disbelief because he says, “Ain’t no whoopin’ cranes nowadays.”

Summary 2

Lee knows Grandpa is old and feeble. Because of this frailty, Lee’s mother has advised him not to allow grandpa to get excited. Grandpa does get excited but convinces Lee to take him on the three-mile trip to see the whooping crane. Grandpa even knows how they will get there—by using a horse and buggy that hasn’t been used for years.

Summary 3

Grandpa decides he has changed his mind about seeing the crane. He is tired and wants to go home. He doesn't think there are any cranes are left to see. Lee encourages Grandpa and helps him dismount the buggy and walk toward the slough. Grandpa continues to be very cold, though, as he huddles under his great coat.

Summary 4

Grandpa sees the crane. He stands up to see the crane fly into the pale sky. He is excited. He and Lee stand together watching the crane rise steadily higher swinging into a wide arc. Eventually, the bird fades into the distance. The light in Grandpa's eyes also fades and goes out. Grandpa comments that the whooping crane has gone south.

Summary 5

Toward the end of the story, Lee realizes that his grandfather is sick—very sick. He is weak and has no strength to lift his head from the pillow. Grandpa is muttering words that only Lee understands. Eventually Lee falls asleep on the couch alone in the living room. Later, Lee awakens and feels the house is strange and lonely. His mother then approaches, and she tells Lee that Grandpa has died.

Answer key

The paragraphs below are possible analytical responses. Each summary from the exercise above has been transformed into a critical response.

Summary 1 – CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL VERSION

In the introduction of the story, the reader is introduced to the importance of the whooping crane. First, Grandpa describes the power of their flight, equating the sound and power of their movement with that of thunder or a freight train. The significance of the cranes in the story is further reinforced when Lee convinces his grandfather that he has recently seen one of these mighty birds with the black-tipped wings, even though the species is almost extinct. This exchange between Lee and Grandpa sets the tone of suspense in the story as the reader wonders what role Lee's discovery will play.

Summary 2 – CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL VERSION

Grandpa, old and feeble like the mare, Bessie, experiences a feeling of excitement and re-birth as he realizes that a three-mile trip to see a whooping crane once again is within his reach. Grandpa's age and weariness is compared to the horse and buggy, also aged, yet significantly enough, their ages do not hinder their ability to embark on their adventure together.

Summary 3 – CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL VERSION

A complication in the plot arises when the grandfather feels he is too cold and tired to continue to the slough where Lee had spotted the crane. Even though Grandpa is ready to give up and succumb to his weakness and frailty, Lee finds a way to encourage Grandpa to persevere.

Summary 4 – CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL VERSION

When the crane flies up into the pale sky, Grandpa is overwhelmed and overjoyed to see this majestic sight once again. The experience is almost spiritual as Grandpa appears to come to youthful life again as he experiences the same joy as he had forty years earlier when he witnessed the same powerful image.

Summary 5 - CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL VERSION

Irony is demonstrated in the story when it appears that only Lee understands what his grandfather is muttering while lying on his death bed. The adults misinterpret Grandpa's ranting as delirium—but Lee knows differently. He, with Grandpa, experienced joy together in the final stage of the cycle of life and only Lee deeply understands the meaning in Grandpa's final words.