WRITING WORKSHOP:

Literary Analysis
How does one conduct literary analysis?
Once again, we must consider **FORM** and **CONTEXT**.
FORMAL ANALYSIS:

Formalists ("new critics") treat the literary work as a "verbal icon," that is, a full and complete meaning-making composition in and of itself.
To conduct an effective formal analysis, we must examine things like:
PIANO

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.
Having conducted an analysis of “Piano’s” formal elements, we can now formulate an argument in the form of a thesis statement like the following:

Through its hymn-like **structure**, pulsing **rhythm**, sensuous **repetition of “s” sounds**, and the close association it constructs between the piano and the female body, “Piano” seems to confuse sex with song, reading more like a description of a carnal act than a trip down memory lane.
“But what about novels and short stories?”
you might ask...
Novels and short stories also deploy **figurative language**, **exhibit/resolve tension**, follow distinct structural arrangements in terms of **plot**, **give voice to a speaker** (or speakers), engage their readers' senses through **images** and elaborate **themes**, so it makes sense to pay careful attention to these formal elements and make note of them when reading fiction even if you don’t have a sense yet of what your argument will be. In fact, oftentimes, the most convincing and clever arguments develop over an extended period of time, as you engage with a text and allow it to unfold in your hands.

In other words: don’t rush it. Leave yourself plenty of time to conduct a strong literary analysis.
Discussion:

Q: What do we gain by conducting a FORMAL analysis?

Q: What do we lose?
What happens when we add back what formalism ignores in the poem from our earlier example?
PIANO

By DH Lawrence

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betray me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

1918
Even a quick internet search can grant us some insight into an author’s life and works

D. H. Lawrence Page

I have always known about D.H. Lawrence. Recently, I acquired a book of his poems. All I can say is I have found heaven. Lawrence's poetry is all perfection. I have not read a single poem that I did not understand or enjoy. I hope you find what you are looking for in this page.

- D.H. Lawrence Biography
- D.H. Lawrence Selected Poems
- D.H. Lawrence Magazine/Journal Articles
- D.H. Lawrence Links
- How to Cite Erin's Poetry Pages
- Sign and View Guestbook

Such a claim would be suspect even if it escaped the mouth of a renown scholar.

Though I caution you to be wary of non-academic sites like this one.

Notice.
Regardless, when we inquire after the context in which a work of literature was produced (the social structure of the age, the author’s personal history, issues of class, race, gender, the various artistic movements of the time, etc.), we engage in what is referred to in literary theory as “new historicism.” Beyond this horizon, we move into the realm of theory.
Critical Theory

Feminism

Marxism

Psychoanalysis

deconstruction

4 Pillars
Simply put, theories are nothing more than sets of assumptions.
Remember how **FORMALISM** assumed (1) that literary works are “verbal icons,” (2) that the context in which a literary work is produced, its author, etc. is irrelevant to the critic’s understanding thereof and (3) that the critic *can* and does understand literary works in ways that even their authors cannot?

**Well...**

**MARXIST CRITICS** assume (1) that History essentially records an evolving class struggle that will inevitably culminate in an overthrow of the established order and (2) that evidence of this struggle is recognizable in literature and can be interpreted as such.

**FEMINIST CRITICS** assume (1) that there exists in society a raging gender conflict with women, ultimately, (by most accounts) coming out on the losing end and (2) that traces of this conflict can be detected in literary works.

**PSYCHANALYTIC CRITICS** assume (1) that literary works function much like dream-texts, encoding the unconscious desires of their readers, their authors and the societies from which they sprung, (2) that there is such thing as an unconscious realm that can speak through and is organized like language and (3) that, through careful examinations of an author’s language, the desires of the unconscious can be recognized and understood by the critic.

**DECONSTRUCTIONISTS** assume (1) that language is inherently flawed and inaccurate and (2) that communication is mostly unsuccessful. In this way, any “text” becomes something of a failed communication, a claim that requires deconstructors to rely heavily on formal analysis for support.
Questions a MARXIST critic might ask:

Does the text somehow articulate class conflict?

Can the text be said to call for social change?

How does the text act as a window into the social structure of the culture that gave rise to...
a FEMINIST critic might ask:

How does the text implicate women/femininity?

Does the text demean women?

Does it suggest women’s structural inferiority in society?

Does it advocate for a change in the role/status/treatment of women in society?
a **PSYCHOANALYTIC** critic might ask:

How does the text reflect the inner life of the **author**?

What about **society**?

The **reader**?

The **characters**?

Is there evidence in the text of an inner conflict?
WHILE...

A DECONSTRUCTOR would ask:

How is the meaning of the text destabilized by its syntax, word choice, structure, etc.?

Does the author's text mean what s/he wants it to mean?
Note the ways in which the implications of Marxist, Feminist, Psychoanalytic and Deconstructionist theories bear on the formal analysis we conducted earlier—

Through its hymn-like structure, pulsing rhythm, sensuous repetition of “s” sounds, and the close association it constructs between the piano and the female body, “Piano” seems to confuse sex with song, reading more like a description of a carnal act than a trip down memory lane.

If Lawrence’s upbringing was so tumultuous, so poor (as we might have learned from his background), how is it his mother came by such an expensive item as a piano? Is “Piano” a class commentary? Does it purposefully contrast a quiet, wholesome life of leisure with his own?

“Piano” places the mother at the focal point of the household, omitting the father altogether, thus inverting the typical family dynamic at or around the turn of the 20th century. Does this inversion reflect Lawrence’s close relationship with his mother and contempt for his father?

Suddenly that association between song and sex starts to seem a bit more sinister, as though it implicates some deep unconscious drive in Lawrence himself. Does Lawrence, dare we suggest it, desire his mother? Does he exhibit symptoms of an oedipal complex, the omission of the father figure in “Piano” constituting a sort of figurative murder and his association between his mother’s song and sex indicating his desire to return to his mother’s womb?

What if Lawrence really meant, by writing “Piano,” to record a quiet childhood memory? If so, given the above, we can suggest that his poem fails, can we not?