



## Literary Analysis Topoi

Are you stuck entering the conversation about analysis and connecting with a text feels like a struggle? Consider how these topoi (themes) may help you (and how you've already used them in the past perhaps!) draft a working thesis statement.

Fahnestock and Secor came up with the initial five:<sup>1</sup>

1. **Appearance/ Reality:** it seems like..., until/ however/ in actuality...
  - a. It *seems* like a good idea to expect the Cleveland Browns to win; *however*, once you watch a game, most fans know better. #factoryofsadness
2. **Paradigm:** (small [text itself] to macro [world and text]); provides a template to clarify information within a text
  - a. The ways in which Poe depicts hysteria in his short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," provides many links to the nineteenth-century's gendered understanding of this malady.
3. **Ubiquity:** a theme throughout a text
  - a. A regularly-occurring theme in Emily Dickinson's poems is death.
4. **Paradox:** two things in tension with one another at the same time
  - a. In the famous play of Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, the titular protagonist says, "I must be cruel to be kind" (III.iv.181). This pronouncement does not make sense as being both cruel and kind are contradictory ideas.
5. **Contemptus Mundi:** (contempt for the world) the critic despairs over society; there is unresolvable tension in the world
  - a. In his collection of stories, *The Dubliners*, James Joyce confronts the hopelessness of a post-war Ireland in which people face the white plague of tuberculosis.

Laura Wilder (not *that* Laura Wilder) added three more:<sup>2</sup>

6. **Social Justice:** literature and life are connected; there is an optimistic outlook to be had (often in direct response to **Contemptus Mundi**)
  - a. While the outlook in many of the tales in *The Dubliners* are grim, the hope characters such as Mr. D'Arcy embody continues to provide solace for readers.
7. **Mistaken Critic:** create/ establish a niche, on-going dialogue
  - a. Many have contested that Dickinson was suffering from tuberculosis; however, Lyndall Gordon offers a new perspective in *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and her Family's Feuds*.
8. **Context:** creates a context for the text, such as a historical context
  - a. In antebellum America, the pervading stereotype of the Southern Belle as presented by Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was that of a rich, lethargic woman.

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<sup>1</sup> Fahnestock, Jeanne and Marie Secor. "The Rhetoric of Literary Criticism." *Textual Dynamics of the Professions: historical and Contemporary Studies of Writing in Professional Communities*

<sup>2</sup> Wilder, Laura: *Rhetorical Strategies and Genre Conventions in Literary Studies: Teaching and Writing in the Disciplines*