Meaning Analysis
AP Lit/Lang

As we begin literary analysis in a timed-writing scenario, it helps to have a format to clearly articulate the way the author creates meaning in the poem or excerpt provided. The timed writing required by the AP exam demands that you clearly articulate your ideas and you get straight to the point. Whether or not you plan to take the AP exam, it will be helpful for you to practice identifying the author’s purpose and explaining the devices used to create meaning in a clear and concise format.

There are two primary questions that need to be answered before you can proceed with a clear and effective analysis.

1) Identify meaning: what is the larger idea or theme that the author wants us to take away from the piece?

2) Analysis: Identify the most important literary devices used by the writer to establish that meaning.

Once you’ve identified both of these, you will combine them into a meaning statement that will serve as a thesis for the analysis to follow. This meaning statement comes at the very beginning.

The initial meaning statement: should serve as a thesis for the writing that is to follow. That is, it should point out the meaning of the work (This is not the “lesson” of the story but a rich, deep inspection into what the author believes about life imperatives and human interaction given the choices s/he made while writing the story. Your meaning statement will examine the general meaning of the piece as revealed by specific elements of expression, and will consider the devices the author is using to create meaning in the work.

The substance of the meaning “analysis” is literally that; it is a detailed account of how the author or poet uses the devices mentioned to convey meaning (both mentioned in your meaning statement). The analysis should be specific, detailed, and should use analysis of direct quotations (from the poem or excerpt) as evidence to illustrate your points.

Here is a sample statement/analysis over a poem called “Bitch,” by Carolyn Kizer, explaining how the poet uses form (the arrangement and order of ideas) to convey her theme (meaning). (The poem is included below.)

Meaning Statement—Kizer arranges “Bitch” to juxtapose the narrative of current action—as the speaker encounters a former lover—with memories of their relationship, and the metaphorical incarnation of her suppressed emotions in order to illustrate the disparity between our actions when faced with the reality of the moment, and our inner sense of justice and self expression, leads us through a narrative driven by an encounter between former lovers. (Meaning Analysis) On the surface, the speaker appears cordial, though her thoughts quickly reveal substantial resentment. The source of her resentment is revealed little by little as the speaker progresses through the form. She begins by referring to the man as a “trespasser” in line three, and “just an old acquaintance tipping his hat” in line four, yet the reader can clearly sense that her bitterness for this man and the hurt he caused her runs deep. Kiser effectively reveals this vitriol and the details of their former relationship through the metaphorical incarnation of what she calls her “bitch.” As the title of the poem, the term suggests an abrasive, aggressive, or
otherwise socially curt woman. As we learn by line two, however, this “bitch” is “growling”, which provokes the speaker’s conversation with the metaphorical (and apparently quite) vicious dog that serves to guard her and do her bidding. As the speaker’s protector, the “bitch” is dangerous, violent, and aggressive early in the piece; by line six she “...starts to bark hysterically,” an indication of the extreme disdain that lurks below the surface, most likely provoked by a painful or even abusive past. By line 11, however, “The bitch changes her tone; she begins to whimper”, and we soon realize that the dog is at the mercy of the speaker, who, despite the bitterness she obviously possesses toward this man, controls her protector with a “choke chain” and “drag(s) (her) off by the scruff of the neck.” The bitch represents her aggression, but it also symbolizes her strength, her honesty, and her unwillingness to accept less than she deserves. Though she seems to want nothing more than to avenge the pain she endured at his hand, even attack the man for his abuses, she restrains her growling id and falls back into the familiar role of subservience, saying in the last line, “Goodbye! Nice to have seen you again.” Once again, as was apparently the pattern in their relationship, the bitch is defeated and superficial social courtesy wins out.

**Bitch**

Now, when he and I meet, after all these years,
I say to the bitch inside me, don’t start growling.
He isn’t a trespasser anymore,
Just an old acquaintance tipping his hat.
My voice says, “Nice to see you,”
As the bitch starts to bark hysterically.
He isn’t the enemy now,
Where are you manners, I say, as I say,
“How are your children? They must be growing up.”
At a kind word from him, a look like the old days,
The bitch changes her tone; she begins to whimper.
She wants to snuggle up to him, to cringe,
Down, girl! Keep your distance
Or I’ll give you the choke-chain.
“Fine, I’m just fine,” I tell him.
She slobbers and grovels.
After all, I am her mistress. She is basically loyal.
It’s just that she remembers how she came running
Each evening, when she heard his step;
How she lay at his feet and looked up adoringly
Though he was absorbed in his paper;
Or, bored with her devotion, ordered her to the kitchen
Until he was ready to play.
“It’s nice to know you are doing well,” I say.
He couldn’t have taken you with him;
You were too demonstrative, too clumsy,
Not like the well-groomed pets of his new friends.
“Give my regards to your wife,” I say. You gag
As I drag you off by the scruff,
Saying, “Goodbye? Goodbye! Nice to have seen you again.”

-- Carolyn Kizer