English IV AP  Introduction to Stylistic Analysis of Prose

As we read and examine literature this year, we will focus some attention on analyzing style. These four terms are important: diction (word choice), imagery, syntax (sentence structure), and tone (author’s attitude). To begin learning how to analyze style, we’ll look at some sample passages and answer appropriate questions. Later you will write analysis of a passage from a summer reading book.

The following material is taken from Advanced Placement English: Practical Approaches to Literary Analysis, A Center for Learning Publication, 1992.

Passage 1
Money is the most important thing in the world. It represents health, strength, honor, generosity and beauty as conspicuously and undeniably as the want of it represents illness, weakness, disgrace, meanness and ugliness. Not the least of its virtues is that it destroys base people as certainly as it fortifies and dignifies noble people.
From “Preface” to Major Barbara, George Bernard Shaw

Passage 2
And I remember that on the afternoon of Christmas Day, when the others sat around the fire and told each other that this was nothing, no nothing, to the great snow-bound and turkey-proud yule-log-crackling holly-berry-bedizened and kissing-under-the-mistletoe Christmas when they were children, I would go out, school-capped and gloved and mufflered, with my bright new boots squeaking, into the white world on to the seaward hill, to call on Jim and Dan and Jack and to walk with them through the silent snowscape of our town.
From “Memories of Christmas,” Dylan Thomas

Passage 3
The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will. There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord.
From The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin

Passage 4
Liberty? The true liberty of a man, you would say, consisted in his finding out, or being forced to find out, the right path, and to walk thereon. To learn, or to be taught, what work he actually was able for; and then by permission, persuasion, and even compulsion, to set about doing of the same! That is his true blessedness, honour, liberty and maximum of wellbeing; if liberty be not that, I for one have small care about liberty.
From “Democracy,” Thomas Carlyle
Passage 5
The stretcher-bearers come back from the lines, walking in off-step, so that the burden will not be jounced too much, and the blood dripping from the canvas, brother and enemy in the stretchers, so long as they are hurt. And the walking wounded coming back with shattered arms and bandaged heads, the walking wounded struggling painfully to the rear. 

From “Battle Scene,” John Steinbeck

Questions for Stylistic Analysis

For each section, try to discover the author’s purpose: why does the author use particular devices? What effect does the author want and how does it relate to what the author says?

General
1. Describe the impression the whole passage makes upon you: its mood and tone.
2. What is the most striking part of the passage?

Diction
3. Are most of the words concrete or abstract? List some examples.
4. Are there any unfamiliar or unusual words or usages? List them.
5. Does the passage use either first or second person pronouns?
6. Are verbs or verbals especially noticeable? List vivid examples.
7. Are adjectives or adverbs especially vivid? List examples.

Syntax
8. Are the sentences especially long (over twenty words) or short (under eight words)?
9. Are more sentences simple or compound? Are most sentences complex or compound-complex? Are there many prepositional or verbal phrases?
10. Are there parallel series of three, four, or more than four?

Poetic Devices
11. Does the passage use any symbols, i.e. simile or metaphor?
12. Does the passage have any strong images not already discussed? What senses are appealed to by the images?
13. Does rhythm or pace reinforce meaning?
14. Is there alliteration, consonance, assonance, onomatopoeia, or repetition?