

Thesis Idea Helps

Got this off another teacher's site and thought it would be helpful. These are put in the form of one work, but could easily apply to two or more.

[Gender Issues] Consider the gender of the characters in your novel. How are male and female characters portrayed? How does the work portray their roles in society? How does gender influence the choices that are available to the characters and the decisions that they make? Write a paper that explores how gender affects the plot and character development in the novel. **Alternate Topics:** Discuss how the novel would be different if the genders of the main characters were reversed. **OR,** Discuss how the novel would change if the events were to take place today — Compare the influence of gender on the choices and decisions that the characters make in the world of the novel to the influence that gender would have if these characters were here today.

[Positive/Negative Characters] In the novel that you've read, some of the characters are given positive, sympathetic portrayals. Others have negative, perhaps even villainous portrayals. Still others may begin with negative qualities and gradually become more and more positive. Rarely does an author rely on the reader's personal sense of morality to determine which characters are positive and which are negative. Instead, there are details, actions, and characteristics that help define who is "good" and who is "bad." It's easy to know the difference in old westerns — good guys wear white hats; bad guys wear black hats. But even then, there are other details that help you know what it going on, details that even help you construct hierarchies (e.g., slightly bad to fully evil). Think about your novel. How does the author indicate which characters are positive and which are negative? In your essay, explain how you can tell the difference.

[Dreams & Reality] Take a look at the characters in the novel that you've read. Each of the main characters in the novel is introduced to you with certain dreams, plans, and expectations. In the course of the novel, these main characters must come to terms with the difference between their dreams and the reality of the world around them. Write a paper on your novel that examines how the main characters navigate the journey from dreams to reality — What kind of course do they follow, and how are they changed for their journey?

[Realism and the Setting] Do a close examination of the setting in your novel. What are the primary locations? How are these places made realistic — how does the author use extended description, background information, and specific detail to make the setting come alive for readers? How do the main characters fit in the settings — do they seem at home? out of place? How do their reactions and interactions with the setting affect the realism of the locations? In your paper, discuss the way that the techniques that the novelist uses to make the setting vivid and real to readers, and the extent to which these techniques are effective.

[Literary I-Search] Find a single significant detail in your novel. Look for a specific passage, a pivotal event, or an important symbol. Find something that grabs your interest and that you want to examine carefully. For your paper, investigate your detail completely — Make it your own. Learn everything you can about it. Why is it there in the story? How does it relate to the particular scene in the novel? How is it important to the overall theme or plot? Write a paper that explains your personal search to understand the detail, beginning from the moment that the detail grabbed you and working toward your analysis of details and its relationship to the novel. [For this assignment, I'm assuming that the teacher will help students understand what an I-Search paper is. If you're not sure, take a look at Ken Macrorie's *The I-Search Paper* (a Revised Edition of his *Searching Writing*), Heineman, 1988. Note too that you could ask students to do a version of this assignment as simple explication, rather than making it an I-Search.]

[Shaped by Period] Writers can't help but be influenced by the events and people that they see around them. The question is to what extent does that influence become part of the works that they write and how do they communicate their feelings and beliefs about the world around them. For your essay, think about how the characters, setting, and themes in your novel relate to the period in which it was written. How is the novel an analysis of the period? How is it a reflection, and how is it a criticism? And how does the writer make opinions about that world clear to the reader?

[Setting & Characters] Consider the relationship between the characters and the setting for your novel. Think about the way that the characters are described, their characteristics, the conflicts that they face, the actions they take, and their emotional reactions. Compare these qualities to the setting — to the way that it is described, to the particular things that are described, and to the words that are used to describe the place(s) where the novel takes place. In your paper, explain how the setting of the novel is representative (or not) of the characters.

[Title] How does the title of the novel that you've read relate to the novel itself? Is the title descriptive? somewhat of a moral for the novel? a statement of the theme? something else altogether? Why has the writer chosen this title over other possibilities? In your paper, analyze the relationship between title and novel, paying attention to the reasons that the title highlights something that the author wants readers to know or come to understand about the novel. **[Admittedly, this seems like a silly assignment for a novel like *Jane Eyre*. Sure you could write a paper on it, but it's less demanding than a paper on any of the other titles Paulette's students are working with. It's possible for it to be a good assignment for *Jane Eyre*, but I suspect that you'd get a paper on characterization rather than one that really thought about the issue of titling a novel. And it's not really fair to give students a writing assignment that you know they're not able to handle.]**

[Class Issues] Think about the role that social class plays in the novel that you've read. What social classes are represented in the novel? To what extent is each class depicted? Are all the classes given equal representation? How do the classes shown in the novel relate to the classes that realistically existed in the time and place where the novel takes place? As you go through your novel, consider two important questions: how does the author feel about the different social classes, and how can you tell the author's opinion? Write a paper that explores the way that social class and class issues affect the characters and plot of your novel.

[Passion to Write] In *The Tale of the Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu said that the novel "happens because the storyteller's own experience of men and things, whether for good or ill—not only what he has passed through himself, but even events which he has only witnessed or been told of—has moved him to an emotion so passionate that he can no longer keep it shut up in his heart." What is the passionate emotion that is communicated in your novel? Why was the author of your novel moved to write? What is the thing that the novelist had to communicate? In your paper, explain the author's motivating emotion and how it is explored in the novel. **[You might address the fact that Shikibu, a woman writer herself, uses masculine nouns and pronouns to describe the writer in this quotation explicitly in your class — especially if you're reading works written by women. *The Tale of the Genji* was written about the year 1000 — and not in English. The quotation is from a 1956 English translation. You and your students can use the occasion to talk about gender in addition to the topic of the question.]**

Here are a few more thesis statement examples:

“In *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl may appear to a living embodiment of Hester’s sin, but her ultimate fate suggests that she is an embodiment of true love, and that her flaws are caused only

by her father's refusal to claim her.”

Despite its seeming emphasis on love and physical beauty—traits that are often considered fleeting—Shakespeare's sonnet “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?” reveals the ways in which humans, despite our mortality, can triumph over the vagaries of nature. The images that the narrator uses and the structure of the sonnet itself help to privilege the power of narrative as a means of asserting our dominance over nature.

In *The Kite Runner* Hosseini presents the minor character of Assef as a symbol of hegemonic oppression and asserts that its destruction can only be obtained not by the rebellion of the dejected class, but by dutiful aid from the upper class.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare uses the Fool to criticize Lear's foolishness, and the Fool serves as a symbol of Lear's journey to wisdom and understanding through suffering and humility.

(*Catch 22*) Joseph Heller uses the soldier in white to symbolize how the army strips its men of their free will, their identity, and their voice in order to enforce how dispensable every soldier is to the military.

In *Plainsong*, Haruf explores human nature's innate desire for acceptance through Victoria, and addresses not only its destructive capabilities, but also how a community can redeem the broken person through encouragement and unconditional love.

Throughout *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini questions and examines the familial ties forged between people and the traditional definition of family through a constant reference to the motif of blood.

In Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, classical music is a motif that symbolizes the sacrifice of free will, emotions and ultimately, one's humanity which results from losing the power of choice.

True to its namesake, Leif Enger's novel, *Peace Like a River*, uses a motif of miracles centered on a Christ figure to emphasize the power and necessity of faith in the face of hardship.

In his novel, *Atonement*, Ian McEwan uses Briony's manipulation of Lola's rape to symbolize the malleability of truth for selfish reasons to therefore suggest the power of a guilty conscience in preventing restitution.

Peter Straub's *A Ghost Story* and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* are alike in that they both apply characterization in the same ways: they use multiple viewpoints, they use contradictory explanations of the same events, and they emphasize the changeable nature of their characters.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is used by Gilman as a symbol of the social and economic repression of the 19th century woman and her struggle to free herself.