

More Help with the *Yerma* Symbolism Essay

The assignment is to practice reconciling and/or exploring contradictory ideas within a text, rather than pretending that contradictions do not exist. The reason for this is fairly straightforward: life contains paradoxes and contradictions that have to be navigated in order to survive, and while there certainly is a literature of black and white heroes and villains engaging in epic battles of pure good and evil, most sophisticated literature is not of this type-- instead trying to capture a more realistic depiction of what it means to be human.

Since literature is usually engaged in the business of describing this complex reality, then, it would be a good idea if you were actually trying to write about it in such a way that does not oversimplify its message. Certainly your grades will improve if you learn to write intelligently about these sorts of embedded contradictions. More than this, though, it trains you to stop evaluating life in simplistic ways. Literature is complex because life is complex, so stop pretending otherwise.

Two concepts may help here. Neither is a literary element *per se*, but they're useful descriptors that can help you write about a variety of literary elements. The first is *ambiguity* (adjective form: *ambiguous*), and it simply means an idea that is uncertain or inexact in its meaning or interpretation. The second is *ambivalence* (predicate adjective form: *ambivalent*, as in, "I am ambivalent about it"), and it means the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone.

As a text I will use Audre Lorde's 1976 poem "Coal." Lorde was a Caribbean-American writer, radical feminist, lesbian, and civil rights activist.

I
is the total black, being spoken
from the earth's inside.
There are many kinds of open
how a diamond comes into a knot of flame
how sound comes into a word, coloured
by who pays what for speaking.

Some words are open like a diamond
on glass windows
singing out within the passing crash of sun
Then there are words like stapled wagers
in a perforated book-- buy and sign and tear apart--
and come whatever wills all chances
the stub remains
an ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.
Some words live in my throat
breeding like adders. Others know sun
seeking like gypsies over my tongue
to explode through my lips
like young sparrows bursting from shell.
Some words
bedevil me.

Love is a word, another kind of open.
As the diamond comes into a knot of flame
I am Black because I come from the earth's inside
now take my word for jewel in the open light.

Here is the sample essay, using the Idea/Qualification structure (with a transition paragraph in between the two body paragraphs):

Audre Lorde's 1976 "Coal" is often read as a statement about black identity and the rejection of external labels to claim a unique political voice. Echoing the Black Consciousness rhetoric of the 1960s that "Black is beautiful," in 1979 Lorde famously wrote how survival of marginalized identity groups is a matter of learning to "take our differences and make them strengths." This idea, anticipating the intersectional identity politics of two decades in the future, makes imperative a rejection of society's view of what is and is not of value. At the same time, though, "Coal" is not content with simply flipping the narrative to claim that what society rejects is actually worthwhile, as that would necessitate adopting the evaluative criteria by which society assigns worth in the first place. Instead, the poem understands personal identity in a more nuanced and complicated way.

One way to read the poem's coal to diamond symbolism is to see the two minerals as both binary and unity, depending on who describes it. In this view, how we value things depends largely on point of view. For example, at the beginning of the poem, the speaker identifies herself with the "total black" (2), a label that is "spoken / from the earth's inside" (2-3)-- significant in that the one speaking (the one *creating*) the "I" of the first line is ambiguous, as she is "*being* spoken" (2, emphasis mine) as opposed to a more clearly defined self-identification. This ambiguity is clarified, however, by the end of the stanza, as Lorde notes how the sound that comes into a word is "coloured / by who pays what for speaking" (6-7). Labels, in other words, are commodifications: price tags affixed to concepts by those in positions of privilege. In this way, though coal and diamonds are one substance, they become a binary when defined and assigned value. Thus, in this reading Lorde explodes this opposition in the last stanza by working out a strategy of liberation (in the poem, the quality of being "open") by a speaker who is explicitly claiming for herself a black identity-- the personal affirmation of "I am Black" (25) instead of the earlier "total black" that is "being spoken" (2). Coal is diamond and diamond is coal, rather than one being the apotheosis of the other. Given this, the speaker can coherently entreat the reader to "take my word for jewel in the open light" (26)-- to accept her words, her identity at face value, instead of assigning those words a value on the basis of their origin. In this way, the symbols of the coal and diamond help to suggest that value is based in perception more than reality-- an obvious analog to a society that similarly assigns more value to some people, based solely on the color of their skin.

There is, however, an underlying complexity to the symbolism that this reading is not addressing. Coal, for example, the "total black" (2) of the poem, resides deep within the earth, connoting fuel and heat; whereas the diamond that comes "into a knot of flame" (5) suggests luxury and affluence. Thus, the line that follows (linking the openness of words to the value assigned to them) is a sort of figurative restatement. However, in the second stanza, this image is subverted when the sound of words is again compared to a diamond (this time explicitly in a simile), since, "Some words are open like a diamond / on glass windows" (8-9). This, however, is not an image of

openness at all, given that the diamond is sealed off behind a window (closed), even though it obviously mimics the appearance of openness. Instead, it is the “stapled wagers” (11), seemingly sealed in a “perforated book” (12), that are ripped free (albeit painfully, since “the stub remains / an ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge” [14-15]). Given that the “stapled wagers,” like coal, must be forcibly extracted-- both leaving behind a wound (in the notebook and earth respectively)-- the identification between the two is fairly straightforward. What is not straightforward, though, is why the diamond’s openness is more apparent than real, nor why Lorde still uses the language of commerce to describe the relative openness of coal, (for, after all, what are poems if not a kind of “wager” on the part of the author?).

These puzzles are partially explained, though, if the reader ceases to think of coal and diamonds as either contiguous minerals or as a simple binary. Similarly, the idea of openness is much richer than a reductive political expression. In the second stanza, in fact, words can be both closed and open. The first type, “breeding like adders” (17) is associated with coal given the image’s connotation of earth, its relative negativity (poisoned snakes compared to the soaring birds that follow), and its suggestion of subterranean spaces; whereas the second type “know[s] sun” (17) and “explode[s]” outward “like young sparrows bursting from shell” (19-20)-- recalling the diamond in its display (out of the earth) and brilliance. However, Lorde does not straightforwardly assign value to either type of words. When she writes, “Some words / bedevil me” (21-22), significantly she fails to identify which ones. Thus, both open and closed words are *potentially* valuable, and both coal and diamond are distinct, though *potentially* contained within the same substance (as Lorde synthesizes the two ideas in the last two lines, claiming her blackness, but offering the jewel to the reader). Identity--like words, like liberation-- is not simply a matter of *this* or *that*, nor, for that matter, is it a blending of seeming opposites. Rather, it is the embodiment of an unreconciled ambivalence on the part of a speaker who recognizes that she contains within herself a multitude of contradictions that cannot be so easily defined.

What, then, had seemed a straightforward celebration of black identity becomes something more complicated-- an idea developed through the connotations and associations of the various ways that Lorde uses the metonyms of coal and diamond. This is true because “coal” is not simply a metaphor for the continuum between “that which not valued” and “that which is valuable;” rather, it is a symbol that both contains this reading, but expands it to meditate on what it means to be valued at all. What the poem argues, in this view, is the idea that labels (e.g., coal or black) tend to reduce even as they define. Instead of accepting this reduction, then, the speaker suggests that “coal” and “diamond” are aspects of the same idea, and not necessarily the greater or lesser form of the other. Seeing “blackness”, in other words, as the inverse of “whiteness” is to accept the notion that identity is both simple and defining, as well as to accept the idea that there is a stable criterion by which to define. In the words of Lorde (again in that 1979 essay): “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Black may indeed be beautiful, in the poem’s view, but it is not necessarily beautiful in the same manner that white views it.

You will notice I did this in three paragraphs instead of two. This wasn’t deliberate, but the poem turned out to be more complicated to write about than I had initially planned. What I had to do, then, was use the second paragraph as a sort of transition to the synthesis I was attempting to make between the seemingly contradictory portions of the poem. However, I am still using the Idea/Qualification structure (albeit with modification).

If you have a more general thesis (as I do: essentially, “the idea is complicated”), make sure that your conclusion actually answers the implied question of *How it is complicated?* The other thing to remember about conclusions is that, before you connect your essay to the bigger idea (here, a theme), you need to recap what you’ve accomplished in the body paragraphs of the essay (the first two sentences of my conclusion).