

Theme and Thematic Statements

Step One (Choose Two Topics):

Of the Q3 AP prompts from the last fifteen years, these are seven of the most obvious fits for Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*. Choose any TWO of them.

2002a. Morally ambiguous characters-- characters whose behavior discourages readers from identifying them as purely evil or purely good-- are at the heart of many works of literature. Choose a novel or play in which a morally ambiguous character plays a pivotal role. Then write an essay in which you explain how the character can be viewed as morally ambiguous and why his or her moral ambiguity is significant to the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

2003b. Novels and plays often depict characters caught between colliding cultures-- national, regional, ethnic, religious, institutional. Such collisions can call a character's sense of identity into question. Select a novel or play in which a character responds to such a cultural collision. Then write a well-organized essay in which you describe the character's response and explain its relevance to the work as a whole.

2005a. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), protagonist Edna Pontellier is said to possess "That outward existence which conforms, the inward life that questions." In a novel or play that you have studied, identify a character who outwardly conforms while questioning inwardly. Then write an essay in which you analyze how this tension between outward conformity and inward questioning contributes to the meaning of the work. Avoid mere plot summary.

2007a. In many works of literature, past events can affect, positively or negatively, the present activities, attitudes, or values of a character. Choose a novel

or play in which a character must contend with some aspect of the past, either personal or societal. Then write an essay in which you show how the character's relationship to the past contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

2008b. In some works of literature, childhood and adolescence are portrayed as times graced by innocence and a sense of wonder; in other works, they are depicted as times of tribulation and terror. Focusing on a single novel or play, explain how its representation of childhood or adolescence shapes the meaning of the work as a whole.

2009a. Many works of literature deal with political or social issues. Choose a novel or play that focuses on a political or social issue. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the author uses literary elements to explore this issue and explain how the issue contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2012. "And, after all, our surroundings influence our lives and characters as much as fate, destiny or any supernatural agency." Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces*

Choose a novel or play in which cultural, physical, or geographical surroundings shape psychological or moral traits in a character. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how surroundings affect this character and illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole. You may choose a work from the list below or one of comparable literary merit. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Step Two (Plan the Arguments):

First, for EACH of the two choices, label them with the year of the prompt.

Second, for EACH of your two choices, plan a four paragraph essay using Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*. It should be in the following format:

- I. Thesis
- II. Topic Sentence of Body Paragraph I (This does not literally have to be a single sentence.)
- III. Topic Sentence of Body Paragraph II (This does not literally have to be a single sentence.)
- IV. Theme Subject (This should not be the actual theme statement.)

You may wish to refer to the Sample Structures for Four Paragraph Papers handout. This is downloadable from my web-site if you've lost your copy.

Here is an example using Taeko Kōno's "Bone Meat" (I am using a cause/effect structure):

2012 Prompt

- I. Taeko Kōno's "Bone Meat" criticizes Japanese interpersonal relationship norms. She argues that they lock women into adopting self-destructive roles.
- II. Post-war Japanese society privileged male perspectives over female ones. This is mirrored in the relationship dynamic between the two main characters in "Bone Meat."
- III. As a result of these societal expectations, females were actively pushed into accepting subservience. As a consequence, women were pushed into adopting self-destructive roles that denied their agency. This process occurs in "Bone Meat."
- IV. Pessimism about Human Relations (see the Writing About Theme handout for ideas)

Because these outlines are just plans, the thesis statements and topic sentences do not have to be in any kind of finished form. Put another way, they do not have to be particularly well-written; it just has to be clear what the argument is going to be.

Step Three (Determine the Themes):

For EACH of the outlines, fill in the following information: What the Story is About; The Conflict; Resolution and How the Reader is Supposed to Feel about It; What This Suggests; and the Bigger Idea. Refer to the first two pages of the Writing About Theme handout for help.

It should look like this example (which again uses Taeko Kōno's "Bone Meat" as a model):

What the Story is About: relationships

The Conflict: external (man vs. woman)

Resolution and How the Reader is Supposed to Feel about It: The man does not return. This is a mostly negative outcome from the protagonist's point of view. The reader is not supposed to particularly sympathize with this point of view, since the relationship is depicted in such a way as to suggest that it is mostly unhealthy.

What This Suggests: Kōno is pessimistic about the possibility of healthy relationships; she also seems to feel women actively crave these unhealthy relationships (a related internal conflict)

The Bigger Idea: human relations

Step Four (Write Two Conclusions with Two Thematic Statements):

First, write a conclusion for EACH of the two outlines. Each conclusion must sum up the argument from the outline (as if you had actually written the essay), and it must transition to a thematic statement (which is really the point of this activity). Refer to the last two pages of the Writing About Theme handout for help.

Second, indicate in some way at what point the thematic statement begins. In my example, I used bold faced type, but highlighting, underlining, or brackets would work just as well.

It is okay if the first part of the conclusion is a little perfunctory, as I recognize that it is difficult to sum up an argument that you did not actually develop.

Here is a model:

As a document of the times, then, Kōno's "Bone Meat" is suggestive of the way that post-World War II Japanese men and women conceived of their respective roles within a relationship-- true both in the way that male perspectives are privileged over female perspectives and how this ultimately denies the possibility of female agency. In other words, even when post-war Japanese women such as the protagonist in "Bone Meat" seem to make active decisions about their own lives, in reality they just tend to affirm a status quo that undermines their ability to take control of their own lives. **This, in turn, exemplifies Kōno's seeming pessimism about relationships in general. If romantic relationships between men and women are largely defined by the adoption of mutually incompatible goals and mutually incomprehensible points of view, then the most likely outcomes in forming such relationships are unhappiness and dysfunction. Thus, the tragedy becomes the way that the fulfillment of real human needs is undermined by the persistence of inevitable human weakness.**

If you would like a list of conclusion words and transitions, consider the following list:

- ultimately
- hence
- to conclude
- thus
- therefore
- as a consequence of
- consequently
- as a result
- in sum
- it follows, then
- in brief

Do NOT ever use the following transition to introduce your conclusion:

- in conclusion (overused to the point of cliché)
- conclusively (99% of the time, this is an adjective, not an adverb; you are misusing the word if use it as a transition)

Due Dates:

This assignment is due Friday November 2 at midnight. If you miss the midnight deadline but turn in the assignment before eight hours have elapsed, there will be a small point deduction (-3 points). If you turn in the assignment between eight and twenty-four hours late there will be a larger point deduction (-10 points). If you turn in the assignment at any point after that, there will be a substantial point deduction (-20 points; this is a flat deduction, not a cumulative one based on the number of days late). If you turn in the assignment late, but do not want points deducted, you may earn back credit by writing one of the two essays using one of your two essay plans.