

Writing about an idea or a theme in a literary work

Thinking about the *ideas* (or *concepts, thoughts, opinions, principles*) in a work of literature gets us involved in *meaning, interpretation, explanation, and significance*.

To state an idea, you must make an *assertion*. Until you make an assertion, you haven't expressed a thought. "It's a nice day," is not a thought. "A nice day requires blue sky and sunshine" is a thought, although not a very big one.

Until you state a clear assertion, you won't have much to write about. It may be true that *A River Runs Through It* is a story about love, but saying only that doesn't express enough of an idea to develop into an essay. Saying "we feel love most strongly in its failure" is much better. Similarly, for Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, you might make this assertion: "Society is held together by a network of lies, such as that successful people are wiser than unsuccessful people or dukes and kings really are better than common people."

Most novels are woven together of many different ideas. When one of the ideas seems to be the main one for the book, it is sometimes called the *theme*.

Ideas in Literature

Ideas are important in literature because they concern people in their lives—they way they *actually* lead them, *should* lead them, or *ought* to be allowed to lead them. Usually, ideas are intertwined with *values*. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain clearly puts a great value on seeing through the lies that people tell themselves and the charades they play. To talk about Twain's ideas is also to talk about his values.

Summaries are not ideas

As you make assertions about a work of literature, avoid falling into the trap of just retelling the plot or the main action: *Huckleberry Finn* and Jim float down the Mississippi on a raft, trying to escape from society. This describes the story's major action, but it doesn't express an *idea*. In fact, it may interfere with understanding because it *focuses on what happens* and doesn't introduce an idea that makes sense of the patterns that emerge in the story.

Having Ideas

The main work of writing is having ideas. Ideas do not just leap out from the page and announce their presence. To form them, you need to think about what you have read and develop assertions that explain *why* things unfold as they do. The ideas you form may not be at all the same as those others form. People notice different things, and they have different experiences and believe in different principles, so they see things differently.

How do literary works develop ideas?

Direct statements by the author

"One of life's quiet excitements is to stand somewhat apart from yourself and watch yourself softly becoming the author of something beautiful, even if it is only a floating ash," says the author of *A River Runs Through It*. He thus states directly one of the story's important themes: "An important part of life is to create something beautiful." In *Huckleberry Finn*, this observation states one of the important ideas in that book: "It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened." Time away from the corruption and pettiness of society, in nature with a friend or two, is as good as life gets.

Figurative language

Sometimes meaning is conveyed through metaphors. In "A River Runs Through It," the river itself is a metaphor for the changing, timeless and mysterious way meaning courses through our lives. The way we see the big ideas in life may be communicated through the metaphor of seeing a fish in the river: "'You wouldn't even have seen the fish in all that foam if you hadn't first thought he would be there.' But I couldn't shake the conviction that I had seen the black back of a big fish, because, as someone often forced to think, I know that often I would not see a thing unless I thought of it first" (17). Flyfishing may also be understood as a metaphor for writing: "It is not fly fishing if you are not looking for answers to questions" (47).

Characters who stand for ideas

Sometimes characters stand out as representative of certain ideas and values. Neal, in *A River Runs Through It*, comes to stand for the outsider who doesn't understand the values of native Montanans and flyfishermen—the "bait-fishing b*****" who comes to the river without skill and with the wrong things on his mind. Sherburn in *Huckleberry Finn* stands for the strong-willed man who bends a mob to his will. Though he's a bad man, he gets his way with the mob through courage and self-assertion. He laughs at them and tells them they don't have enough guts to lynch a "real man" and they back down, letting him get away with murder.

Writing about an idea

An idea is like a key in music—a continuous thread tying together actions, characters, statements, symbols, and dialogue. As writers, we can trace such a thread, explaining all the variations the author works upon it.

To begin, you need to make notes and a plan of attack. List all the statements, images, events, characters, and dialogue that shine light upon your idea.

In your early drafts, try to answer these questions: What is the best wording of my idea? Is the

idea personal, social, political, economic, scientific, ethical, esthetic, or religious? How pervasive in the work is the idea? How can character, action, dialogue, statement, description, scene, structure, and plot development be related to the idea? Are there statements that contradict the idea? What are the implications of the idea? What value or values are embedded in the idea?

Introduction

In your introduction, you need to state the central idea for your essay. Your *thesis* should state the particular parts or aspects of the story that you will examine.

Body

In the body, you should (1) define your idea, and (2) show its importance in the work. There are various strategies for *development* you can use:

1. *Analyze the idea as it applies to character.* Example: "Presbyterian Minister John Norman is an embodiment of the idea that salvation comes only through hard work and self discipline."
2. *Showing how action brings out the idea.* Example: "Norman's and Paul's attempts to help Neal don't work out, because Neal is unwilling to make changes in the way he thinks and lives. We cannot really help someone who does not want to change."
3. *Showing the idea operating in dialogue.* Example: "The way Norman and Paul are unable to talk clearly about the troubles they face illustrate the idea that ultimately they are both alone, unable to help one another."
4. *Demonstrating how the story's structure is determined by the idea.* Example: "The structure of Maclean's novel illustrates how much the story happens in his own mind rather than in the world 'out there.' The story begins and ends with the meditations of an old man, for whom all these events are memories from long ago. He does not even claim that things happened just as he told them."
5. *Treating variations or differencing manifestations of the idea.* Example: "The idea that the bad son is, through some mystery of grace, still the favored son is shown in the way Norman's father admires his beauty, his mother fixes chokecherry jelly for him, and everyone feels the party is over when he leaves the room."

Conclusion

Your conclusion might start with a summary, along with your evaluation of the force of the idea. If you have been persuaded by the author's ideas, you might say the author has expressed the idea forcefully or convincingly, or you might show the relevance of the idea. If you don't like the idea, it isn't enough to state your disagreement; you should give reasons and should demonstrate the shortcomings of the idea.

Sample Essay about Literature

Quilts and Art in "Everyday Use" (480 words)

With her story, "Everyday Use," Alice Walker is saying that art should be a living, breathing part of the culture it arose from, rather than a frozen timepiece to be observed from a distance. To make this point, she uses the quilts in her story to symbolize art; and what happens to these quilts represents her theory of art.(thesis)

The quilts themselves, as art, are inseparable from the culture they arose from. (topic sentence) The history of these quilts is a history of the family. The narrator says, "In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell's Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece . . . that was from Great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore in the Civil War." So these quilts, which have become an heirloom, not only represent the family, but are an integral part of the family. Walker is saying that true art not only represents its culture, but is an inseparable part of that culture.

The manner in which the quilts are treated shows Walker's view of how art should be treated. Dee covets the quilts for their financial and aesthetic value. "But they're priceless!" she exclaims, when she learns that her mother has already promised them to Maggie. Dee argues that Maggie is "backward enough to put them to everyday use."

Indeed, this is how Maggie views the quilts. She values them for what they mean to her as an individual. This becomes clear when she says, "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts," implying that her connection with the quilts is personal and emotional rather than financial and aesthetic. She also knows that the quilts are an active process, kept alive through continuous renewal. As the narrator points out, "Maggie knows how to quilt."

The two sisters' values concerning the quilt represent the two main approaches to art appreciation in our society. Art can be valued for financial and aesthetic reasons, or it can be valued for personal and emotional reasons. When the narrator snatches the quilts from Dee and gives them to Maggie, Walker is saying that the second set of values is the correct one. Art, in order to be kept alive, must be put to "Everyday Use" -- literally in the case of the quilts, figuratively in the case of conventional art.

Alice Walker is using the quilts, and the fate of those quilts, to make the point that art can only have meaning if it remains connected to the culture it sprang from. Her story itself is a good example: Walker didn't write it to be observed under a glass case, judged aesthetically, and sold to the highest bidder; she meant it to be questioned, to be explored, to be debated -- in short, to be put to "Everyday Use."