12.6: Literary Thesis Statements

The Literary Thesis Statement

Literary essays are argumentative or persuasive essays. Their purpose is primarily analysis, but analysis for the purposes of showing readers your interpretation of a literary text. So the thesis statement is a one to two sentence summary of your essay’s main argument, or interpretation.

Just like in other argumentative essays, the thesis statement should be a kind of opinion based on observable fact about the literary work.

A strong literary thesis statement should be

- Debatable
  - Ex: "While most people reading Hamlet think he is the tragic hero, Ophelia is the real hero of the play."
    - This thesis takes a position. There are clearly those who could argue against this idea.
- Rooted in observations about literary devices, genres, or forms
  - Ex: Hawthorne’s use of symbolism in The Scarlet Letter falters and ultimately breaks down with the introduction of the character Pearl, which shows the perceived danger of female sexuality in a puritanical society.
    - Look at the text in bold. See how all the strong thesis statements emphasize literary devices?
- Specific
  - Ex: Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain’s Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American ideals, one must leave ‘civilized’ society and go back to nature
    - Through this very specific yet concise sentence, readers can anticipate the text to be examined
(Huckleberry Finn), the author (Mark Twain), the literary device that will be focused upon (river and shore scenes) and what these scenes will show (true expression of American ideals can be found in nature).

A literary thesis statement should NOT be

- Overly broad or generalized
  - Ex: "I am going to be writing about "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe."
    - While we know what text and author will be the focus of the essay, we know nothing about what aspect of the essay the author will be focusing upon, nor is there an argument here.

- More about society than the work of literature
  - Ex: "Gender roles are bad and should be abolished."
    - This may be well and true, but this thesis does not appear to be about a work of literature. This could be turned into a thesis statement if the writer is able to show how this is the theme of a literary work (like "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid) and root that interpretation in observable data from the story in the form of literary devices.

- A summary or obvious statement about the text
  - Ex: "Hamlet is about a prince whose father dies."
    - Yes, this is true. But it is not debatable. You would be hard-pressed to find someone who could argue with this statement. Yawn, boring.

- A judgment about the quality of the work
  - Ex: "'La Migra' by Pat Mora is a really good/powerful poem"
    - This may very well be true. But the purpose of a literary critic is not to judge the quality of a literary work, but to make analyses and interpretations of the work based on observable structural aspects of that work.

Thesis Examples

SAMPLE THESIS STATEMENTS

These sample thesis statements are provided as guides, not as required forms or prescriptions.

The Literary Device Thesis Statement

The thesis may focus on an analysis of one of the elements of fiction, drama, poetry or nonfiction as expressed in the work: character, plot, structure, idea, theme, symbol, style, imagery, tone, etc.

Example:

In "A Worn Path," Eudora Welty creates a fictional character in Phoenix Jackson whose determination, faith, and cunning illustrate the indomitable human spirit.

Note that the work, author, and character to be analyzed are identified in this thesis statement. The thesis relies on a
strong verb (creates). It also identifies the element of fiction that the writer will explore (character) and the characteristics the writer will analyze and discuss (determination, faith, cunning).

**Further Examples:**

The character of the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet serves as a foil to young Juliet, delights us with her warmth and earthy wit, and helps realize the tragic catastrophe.

The works of ecstatic love poets Rumi, Hafiz, and Kabir use symbols such as a lover’s longing and the Tavern of Ruin to illustrate the human soul’s desire to connect with God.

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**The Genre / Theory Thesis Statement**

The thesis may focus on illustrating how a work reflects the particular genre’s forms, the characteristics of a philosophy of literature, or the ideas of a particular school of thought.

**Example:**

“The Third and Final Continent” exhibits characteristics recurrent in writings by immigrants: tradition, adaptation, and identity.

Note how the thesis statement classifies the form of the work (writings by immigrants) and identifies the characteristics of that form of writing (tradition, adaptation, and identity) that the essay will discuss.

**Further examples:**

Samuel Beckett’s Endgame reflects characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd in its minimalist stage setting, its seemingly meaningless dialogue, and its apocalyptic or nihilist vision.

A close look at many details in “The Story of an Hour” reveals how language, institutions, and expected demeanor suppress the natural desires and aspirations of women.

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**The Historical/Cultural Context Thesis Statement**

The thesis may draw parallels between some element in the work and real-life situations or subject matter: historical events, the author’s life, medical diagnoses, etc.

**Example:**

In Willa Cather’s short story, “Paul’s Case,” Paul exhibits suicidal behavior that a caring adult might have recognized and remedied had that adult had the scientific knowledge we have today.
This thesis suggests that the essay will identify characteristics of suicide that Paul exhibits in the story. The writer will have to research medical and psychology texts to determine the typical characteristics of suicidal behavior and to illustrate how Paul's behavior mirrors those characteristics.

**Further Examples:**

Through the experience of one man, the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, accurately depicts the historical record of slave life in its descriptions of the often brutal and quixotic relationship between master and slave and of the fragmentation of slave families.

In "I Stand Here Ironing," one can draw parallels between the narrator's situation and the author's life experiences as a mother, writer, and feminist.

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