WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE: THEME ANALYSIS

To analyze means to break something whole into its constituent parts in order to understand or explain. We analyze theme in a piece of fiction in order to better understand a story, drama, novel, television show, etc. This analysis takes a close look at the theme of a story and how the characters, symbols, setting and plot function to **reveal the theme** of that story.

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, noted literary critics and authors of Understanding Fiction, explain the notion of “theme” in this manner:

The theme is what a piece of fiction stacks up to. It is the idea, the significance, the interpretation of persons and events, the pervasive and unifying view of life embodied in the total narrative. It is what we are to make of the human experience rendered in the story—always involving, directly or indirectly, some comment on values in human nature and conduct.

SAMPLE ORGANIZATION OF A THEME ANALYSIS

1. Introduction

A. Title of story, author(s) name(s)

B. Setting of story, basic situation of character

1. Aspects of the story that give the story meaning; here make explicit the elements of fiction (characters, symbols, setting and plot) that are unified to reveal the theme.
2. Your claim/thesis. This statement will answer the question “What is the theme of this story?”
3. Body

A. Point-by-point discussion of the subject. Remember that each paragraph has a topic sentence that forecasts the contents of that paragraph. Additionally, each topic sentence is logically related to the thesis/claim statement.

B. Direct quotations and passages from the story will support both the topic sentences and the thesis/claim.

1. Conclusion

A. A summation of the effectiveness of the techniques the author uses.

B. A statement about how the elements of fiction help to unify the story and give it meaning.

*DO NOT PROVIDE JUST A SUMMARY OF THE PLOT. YOU MAY ASSUME YOUR READERS HAVE ALREADY READ THE STORY. You will, of course, need to cite evidence from the story, but this material will* ***support*** *a particular point you are making about the theme. You probably won’t at any point retell the story in the order you read it.*

SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

# “The Grave,” written by Katherine Ann Porter, is set in the rural south during the early 1900’s. A typical play day for two young siblings turns into a not-so-typical exploration of their farm and the family graveyard. The characters’ youth and sex, the setting of a graveyard, the activity of a rabbit hunt, and a variety of rich symbols all unite to embody the theme of the story. In this story, beautiful in its brevity, the theme is that life and death are cycles and that within that cycle turning points are reached, in this case a young girl’s initiation into the mysteries of womanhood.