

Honors 9 Summer Reading Assignment 2017-2018

A Few Words about the Texts

You will be required to get the text on your own. There is no requirement that you purchase the text; you are more than welcome to check it out of the library or borrow it from previous students; however, I recommend you buy the book so you are able to take notes within the pages. Below I have provided you with a recommended time frame for reading the book so you are not scrambling at the end of August to complete the assignment.

The Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman

Summer Contact

If you have questions during the summer, please contact me at tfilpi@hotmail.com

The Assignment

You will complete the following assignments and turn them in on the first day of school.

As you read, annotate the text with what you find to be significant while you read. Focus on important character traits, the use of particular literary devices like metaphor or symbolism, and the development of the work's themes.

You will be asked to write a literary analysis essay that compares a single theme that is presented within the novel. The essay will be composed during the first days of class, and it will serve as our introduction to essay writing. It is imperative that you have completed the reading AND that you have compiled enough notes to write the essay.

Themes, Theme Statements, and Thesis Statements about Themes to Consider While Reading and Annotating

Theme Statements are complete sentences and consist of more than a single word like "love" or "friendship," "loyalty" or "growing up." Such words, by themselves, often merely identify the subject(s) of the novel or poem. The good news is that you are headed in the right direction. Such subjects necessarily serve as the basis or seed of a theme. Most themes are based on some observation of the human condition. Here are a series of questions to ponder.

What is the "human condition"?

Essentially, the discussion of the human condition is any thematic concern about human nature, human society or how we live our lives. In other words, it's about the fundamental issues of human existence. One of literature's central concerns is to comment on these issues. If you are asked to make a theme statement or thesis about a piece of writing, the easiest way to identify a **theme** is to look for some challenge to the human condition. Look for common problems that any person - you included - might face sometime in his or her life. So let's be more specific. What kind of issues connected to "human nature, human society or how we live our lives" are we talking about? Well, it can mean MANY different things! Here are a *few* examples that come to mind:

How We Live Our Lives

- What is the good life?
- How do parents act towards their children?
- How do we deal with death?
- How do we deal with alienation from those around us?
- Should we conform or be original?
- How do we become adults? What is the process of maturation?
- What is the relationship between different generations or genders?
- How do we deal with excessive poverty or wealth?

Human Nature

- Are we naturally evil or good?
- Are we born with inherited traits or are we a "blank slate"?
- What's more important for human beings? Law and order or freedom?
- Are we determined by our genetic structure, environment, etc., or do we have free will ?
- Are we naturally social beings or are we individuals first?
- Can we know universal truths?
- Are we selfish or altruistic?

Human Society

- What's the best way to live together?
- Should we care for the weak and poor, or let them fend for themselves?
- What is a natural society: equality or hierarchy?
- Is civilization positive or negative?
- How should society treat the environment?

Some authors will merely describe these issues, while others will provide their particular perspective and beliefs. So, when looking for a commentary on the human condition in your readings, look for these central thematic issues.

Keep in mind, books and poems may have several themes, and they may not be of equal importance. As you read, try to gauge the emphasis given to various themes or ideas. How much of the author's effort is devoted to a particular theme or idea? How do plot, character development, the use of metaphor and symbols feed the theme and grow the idea? Do several themes dovetail into one, overarching theme?

Here is an example of how you might pursue theme. The excerpt is from Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street*. Esperanza, a young Hispanic girl who has moved from one dilapidated rental to another in poor neighborhoods, has been dreaming of a new home with plenty of space and a white-picket fence. Finally, her parents purchase a house on Mango Street. Imagine you come across this passage – a single image, really, and it catches your eye:

But the house on Mango Street is not the way they said at all. It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath.

This is what one might call a theme-seed: An idea encased in an image that is also a metaphor. We might break this short passage down like this:

Subjects suggested by the image: deception, poverty, suffocation,
Qualified subjects: parental deception, unrelenting poverty, spiritual suffocation
Metaphor and potential theme: unrelenting poverty is spiritually suffocating

By itself, this may not be enough to constitute a significant theme, not yet, but should the author expand upon or further emphasize the idea through repetitions and additions (other images, metaphors, or plot elements) a full-fledged theme will emerge. It might even converge or dovetail with other themes, so that I may end up with a thesis statement of:

In her novel, *House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros shows us that while the culture of poverty is spiritually suffocating, it can be overcome by imagination, education, and courageous acts.

Here, we've chosen a theme that we think is significant (and well-supported within the text). However, even this statement will not be all-inclusive as it represents only one of several key ideas or themes Cisneros explores in her work.

I know this is not easy. I do not expect you to magically master the thesis statement this summer; however, I do expect you to work at it: trial and error, and more trial and error. With a little practice, you'll come back in August well-prepared to succeed in our writing endeavors and ready to make the most of your Honors 9 experience.

Good luck and see you soon.

Mr. Filpi
Mr. Baxter
Mrs. McCay