

Formal Essay 1: Analyzing and Evaluating a Decision

Draft Due September 16th (bring three copies to class)

Final Due September 23rd

Assignment

Choosing one of the following stories—Updike’s “A&P,” O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried,” Walker’s “Everyday Use,” or Faulkner’s “Barn Burning”—write an essay in which you analyze and evaluate a main character’s decision (Sammy’s decision, for instance, to quit, Jimmy’s to burn Martha’s letters, etc.).

Approach

Readers often have widely different interpretations of why Sammy quits his job in “A&P,” or of why Sarty decides to tell on his father in “Barn Burning.” What this means is that your interpretation of a character and his or her motivations is one that the readers of your essay may or may not share. Your job, then, is to not simply assert your interpretation but to dig into the text and lay out plenty of evidence that justifies your reading.

To thoroughly analyze a character’s decision, you first want to establish what the character’s central conflict is. What competing pressures or desires place the character in a position in which a decision has to be made? Be careful not to summarize the story; instead, lay out the sides of the conflict and then pull out significant textual details that would support your reading.

Next, you will want to illustrate why a character chose as he did—again, using the text. Given the context we find her in, what motivations and reasons can we discern from the text that lead, on some level, to the decision made? Look for moments in the text that might foreshadow the decision and illustrate that character’s bent (a telling word choice, for instance, or a revealing moment in narration). These first two sections of analysis should constitute the bulk of your essay.

Finally, you will want to evaluate the character’s decision (this should be no more than a third of the body of your essay). Is this what you would have chosen if you were facing that conflict? Why or why not? What does this tell you how you respond to those same competing pressures or desires? You will want to think here, too, about whether or not you can detect how the character feels about his decision after the fact (or in the moment of doing it), and how that colors your evaluation. Do you detect any regret on the character’s part about what she chose? Any desire to undo what had just been done? How does the character’s own response to his action influence your response to it?

Requirements

The essay should be three (full) to five pages in length and adhere to MLA format (double-spaced, 1” margins, 12 point Times New Roman or an equivalent, proper headings, parenthetical citations, etc.). Improper formatting will affect your grade, so please come see me if you have questions.

You will be workshopping two of your classmates’ drafts out of class as an informal assignment. On September 16th, then, you should bring two copies for your group and one for me. I will not respond individually to your draft, but I will read them all and post on ICON suggestions that could benefit the papers as a whole. I will notify you by e-mail to let you know when those suggestions are posted.

I will primarily be grading on the sophistication of your analysis and the thoughtfulness of your evaluation. This is not to say, however, that a comprehensive thesis statement, logical structure, appropriate transitions, and clean grammar and mechanics are less important. On the contrary, all of these elements are essential in the most effective academic writing, and I expect that you pay careful attention to them while you work toward the specific goals of this essay.