**Select one of the following prompts as the focus for your research paper thesis. Please, number your selection at the top of the page and be sure to avoid summary of the text.**

1. A bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, recounts the psychological or moral development of its protagonist from youth to maturity, when this character recognizes his or her place in the world. Select a single pivotal moment in the psychological or moral development of the protagonist of a bildungsroman. Then write a well-organized essay that analyzes how that single moment shapes the meaning of the work as a whole
2. “And, after all, our surroundings influence our lives and characters as much as fate, destiny or any supernatural agency.” Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces*

Choose a novel or play in which cultural, physical, or geographical surroundings shape

psychological or moral traits in a character. Then write a well-organized essay in which

you analyze how surroundings affect this character and illuminate the meaning of the

work as a whole

1. In a novel by William Styron, a father tells his son that life “is a search for justice.”

Choose a character from a novel or play who responds in some significant way to justice or injustice. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze the character’s understanding of justice, the degree to which the character’s search for justice is successful, and the significance of this search for the work as a whole.

1. In *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), novelist Edith Wharton states the following:

“At every stage in the progress of his tale the novelist must rely on what may be called

the *illuminating incident* to reveal and emphasize the inner meaning of each

situation. Illuminating incidents are the magic casements of fiction, its vistas on

infinity.”

Choose a novel or play that you have studied and write a well-organized essay in which

you describe an “illuminating” episode or moment and explain how it functions as a

“casement,” a window that opens onto the meaning of the work as a whole. .

1. Palestinian American literary theorist and cultural critic Edward Said has written that “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.” Yet Said has also said that exile can become “a potent, even enriching” experience.

Select a novel, play, or epic in which a character experiences such a rift and becomes

cut off from “home,” whether that home is the character’s birthplace, family, homeland,

or other special place. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the character’s

experience with exile is both alienating and enriching, and how this experience

illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole.

1. A symbol is an object, action, or event that represents something or that creates a range of associations beyond itself. In literary works a symbol can express an idea, clarify meaning, or enlarge literal meaning. Select a novel or play and, focusing on one symbol, write an essay analyzing how that symbol functions in the work and what it reveals about the characters or themes of the work as a whole.
2. Many works of literature deal with political or social issues. Choose a novel or play that focuses on a political or social issue. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the author uses literary elements to explore this issue and explain how the issue contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.
3. In a literary work, a minor character, often known as a foil, possesses traits that emphasize, by contrast or comparison, the distinctive characteristics and qualities of the main character. For example, the ideas or behavior of the minor character might be used to highlight the weaknesses or strengths of the main character. Choose a novel or play in which a minor character serves as a foil to a main character. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the relation between the minor character and the major character illuminates the meaning of the work.
4. In some works of literature, childhood and adolescence are portrayed as times graced by innocence and a sense of wonder; in other works, they are depicted as times of tribulation and terror. Focusing on a single novel or play, explain how its representation of childhood or adolescence shapes the meaning of the work as a whole.
5. Novels and plays often depict characters caught between colliding cultures – national, regional, ethnic, and religious institutions. Such collisions can call a character’s sense of identity into question. Select a novel in which a character responds to such a cultural collision. Then write a well-organized essay in which you describe the character’s response and explain its relevance to the work as a whole.
6. One of the strongest human drives seems to be a desire for power. Write an essay in which you discuss how a character struggles to free himself or herself from the power of others or seeks to gain power over others. Be sure to demonstrate in your essay how the author uses this power struggle to enhance the meaning of the work.
7. The most important themes in literature are sometimes developed in scenes in which a death or deaths take place. Write an essay in which you show how a specific death scene helps to illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole.
8. Many works of literature are focused around a dream or aspiration, a powerful motivating force that compels and determines the central character’s action. Though this force can be a driving aspiration that spurs and elevated the character to prosperity and prominence, it can just as readily be a seductive illusion that consumes and destroys the character, reducing him to degradation and ruin, or even an artificial world in which the character may escape from reality.

Select a novel or play in which the character’s actions are focused around such a dream or aspiration. Then, in a well-organized essay, discuss the effect this ambition has upon the fortunes of the character and the people around him and show how the pursuit of this dream impacts the meaning of the work as a whole.

1. In many works of literature, a physical journey – the literal movement from one place to another-plays a central role. Choose a novel in which a physical journey is an important element and discuss how the journey adds the meaning of the work as a whole.
2. Critic Roland Barthes has said, “Literature is the question minus the answer.” Considering Barthes’ observation, write an essay in which you analyze a central question the work raises and the extent to which it offers an answer. Explain how the author’s treatment of this question affects your understanding of the work as a whole.
3. Works of literature often depict acts of betrayal. Friends and even family may betray a protagonist: main characters may likewise be guilty of treachery or may betray their own values. Select a novel that includes such acts of betrayal. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the nature of the betrayal and show how it contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.
4. Choose a novel in which a central character leaves home yet finds that home remains significant. Write an essay in which you analyze the importance of “home” to this character and the reasons for its continuing influence. Explain how the character’s idea of home illuminates the larger meanings of the work.
5. In many works of literature, past events can affect, positively or negatively, the present actions, attitudes, or values of a character. Choose a novel in which a character must contend with some aspect of the past, either personal or societal. Then write an essay in which you show how the character’s relationship to the past contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.
6. According to critic Northrop Frye, “Tragic heroes are so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem the inevitable conductors of the power about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass. Conductors may of course be instruments as well as victims of the divine lightning.”

Select a novel in which a tragic figure functions as an instrument of the suffering of others. Then write an essay in which you explain how the suffering brought upon others by that figure contributes to the tragic vision of the work as a whole.

1. It has often been said that what we value can be determined only by what we sacrifice. Consider how this statement applies to a character from a novel. Select a character who has deliberately sacrificed, surrendered, or forfeited something in a way that highlights that character’s values. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the particular sacrifice illuminates the character’s values and provides a deeper understanding of the meaning of the work as a whole.
2. In Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, protagonist Edna Pontellier is said to possess “that outward existence which conforms, the inward life questions. In a novel or play that you have studied, identify a character who conforms outwardly while questioning inwardly. Then, write an essay in which you analyze how this tension between outward conformity and inward questioning contributes to the meaning of the work.
3. In literary works, cruelty often functions as a crucial motivation or a major social or political factor. Select a novel, play, or epic poem in which acts of cruelty are an important theme. Then write a well-developed essay analyzing how cruelty functions in the work as a whole and what the cruelty reveals about the perpetrator and /or victim.
4. Select a novel a novel or play that features a character whose origins are unusual or mysterious. Then write an essay in which you analyze how these origins shape the character and that character’s relationships, and how the origins contribute to the meaning of the work as a whole.
5. Many works of literature contain a character who intentionally deceives others. The character’s dishonesty may be intended either to help or to hurt. Such a character, for example, may choose to mislead others for personal safety, to spare someone’s feelings, or to carry out a crime. Choose a novel or play in which a character deceives others. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the motives for that character’s deception and discuss how the deception contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.
6. In many works of literature the idea of atonement-of making up for a self-serving, even iniquitous, or redeeming a cowardly, indifferent inaction-contributes significantly to the author’s thematic purpose.

Choose a novel or play in which a character endeavors to atone for something he has done or perhaps failed to do. Then, in a well-organized essay, illustrate the method or nature of that atonement, the degree to which it succeeds in redressing the character’s action or inaction, and the measure of closure it brings to the character’s conscience. In responding be sure to show how this atonement relates to the meaning of the work as a whole.

1. Often times in literature a character feels compelled to honor the terms of a vow, a promise, or a contract. However, honoring this commitment, which may be a social, financial, moral or spiritual one, may prove difficult, forcing the character to compromise, even betray the commitment that he feels he must uphold.

Choose a novel or play in which a character is compelled to honor such a vow, promise, or contract. Then, in a well-organized essay, identify the nature of the character’s commitment, the degree to which the character is able to honor it, and the impact that the character’s honoring or reneging on the commitment has upon the work as a whole

1. Many works of literature feature characters who have been given a literal or figurative gift. The gift may be an object, or it may be a quality, such as uncommon beauty, significant social position, great mental or imaginative faculties, or extraordinary physical powers. Yet this gift is often also a burden or a handicap. Select a character from a novel, epic, or play who has been given a gift that is both an advantage and a problem. Then write a well-developed essay analyzing the complex nature of the gift and how the gift contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.