

Guidelines for Writing a Character Analysis Essay

Characters are the essence of a work of fiction. Fictional characters are portrayed through the characters' actions and reactions as well as other characters' actions and reactions to them. You develop a character by telling the reader about that character, what he is doing or thinking. You reveal fictional characters by the way they appear, by what they say, by what they do, and by what others say about them.

In developing a character analysis remember that a character analysis presents the reader with a critical view of either the protagonist or antagonist, and evidence to support your view must come from the work itself.

To organize your prewriting and draft your analysis:

1. Survey all the details you have collected and group them in clusters that reveal some similar qualities in the characters.
2. In a single sentence, sum up what the character is like. This summary sentence is the thesis or the controlling idea for your entire essay.
3. Look again at those details that, once combined, make a single point. Divide the details into groups with each group making a separate point. Select all of the details that help support, explain, and illustrate your thesis.
4. Pull from your prewriting exercise the specific details from the story that explain, illustrate, and support your topic sentences. Use only the most effective quotes and examples, selecting details that relate to your topic sentences and thesis statements.
5. Plan your introduction and conclusion (see below).

Introduction

Writing the lead-in to any thesis takes a certain skill because it must be a smooth and logical method of introducing your main point. Generally, the simplest way of doing this is to write several sentences of introduction and to make your thesis the last sentence in the first paragraph. There are numerous ways you can lead into your thesis. The following four samples illustrate different lead-in ideas to your "Introduction."

The short story on which the samples are based is Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods;" the protagonist is Mrs. Jack Grimes.

Thesis: Mrs. Jack Grimes is a woman who has been denied any love or tenderness; she exists only to be used.

Lead-in – 1: Make some general comments about the subject matter of the thesis.

The value a person places on him-herself is largely determined by the value others give to the person. Those who grow up loved and cherished, learn to feel worthwhile and develop a healthy sense of self. Such a background of love and caring can sustain a person through periods when he or she feels unloved and insignificant. Those who have never known love, and who never have been given any human warmth, soon come to see themselves as worthless. Such an emotionally starved person is Mrs. Jake Grimes of Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods," for she is a woman who has been denied any love or tenderness; she exists only to be used.

Lead-in – 2: Mention personal experiences and attitudes you and your readers might share.

Sometimes we meet people who seem so shut off from the world and from other people that we begin to wonder how they survive. We are tempted to judge these people as hard or unfeeling because they are difficult to know. It takes insight for us to realize that such people may have grown up without the care and love necessary for human development and to recognize that a lack of caring can permanently distort personality. Sherwood Anderson describes a closed-in, distorted personality in the character of Mrs. Jake Grimes in "Death in the Woods." She is a woman who has been denied love or tenderness; she exists only to be used.

Lead-in – 3: Begin with a few general sentences about the author. You may draw this information from an instructor's lecture, from introductory material in a literature anthology, or from some of your own research.

Sherwood Anderson's short stories often focus on characters we would hardly notice in real life. He writes about insignificant people, people who are often shy or unattractive, lacking in manners, confidence, or charm. Frequently, Anderson reveals the hidden value of such insignificant people, their true nature, and worth. Such characters have to struggle to maintain their inner worth because the world has not given them much love or compassion. A good example of this type of character is Mrs. Jake Grimes of "Death in the Woods." She is a woman who has been denied any love or tenderness; she exists only to be used.

Lead-in – 4: Write a few general sentences about the story.

Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods" is a story about different kinds of coldness. Most of it is set in a lonely woods in winter, and the freezing weather and snow add to the chill. The inhabitants of the small town at the edge of the woods and those on the neighboring farms seem equally cold hearted, remote, and unfeeling. The chief victim of this frozen world is the story's protagonist, Mrs. Jake Grimes. She is a woman who has suffered all her life from a lack of human warmth. She has been denied any love or tenderness; she exists only to be used.

Using Transitions

When you work through a plot summary, you work on time transitions. In this essay you will be working on another type of transition; the links are not only within paragraphs but between them as well. This type of transition requires you to use a pattern of repeated words, phrases, or ideas to keep the reader on track.

For example, if you want to stress that Mrs. Grimes was used by others, repeat the phrase several times within one paragraph. You can also reinforce the idea of “used” with a synonym, like “exploited.”

As you begin each new paragraph, try not to startle your reader by jumping right into a new idea. Instead, begin the new paragraph with a word, phrase, or an idea from the paragraph you just completed. This repetition not only reinforces the last point you made, it is a way of linking that point to the new one you are about to make.

Using Quotations

This analysis requires that you quote from the story to support your points. Be sure that the context of your quote is clear. That is, if you quote dialogue, be sure that the reader is told who said it, and to whom, and under what circumstances it was said. If you quote description, identify who or what is being described, and under what circumstances.

You can incorporate short quotes – pieces of the author’s sentences – into your own sentences like this:

To the narrator, Mrs. Grimes seems somehow transformed into “the body of some charming young girl.”

You can incorporate a complete sentence and attribute it to a speaker:

As the narrator says, “Whatever happened she never said anything.”

If you use a long quote from the story, a quote of more than fifty words which is approximately four typed lines, indent the quote ten spaces from your left-hand margin, double space it, and eliminate the quotation marks.

Be careful not to over use long quotes or your essay will merely repeat the words of the story and you might lose the reader’s attention. Generally, the short quotes integrated into your own paragraphs are better.

Writing the Conclusion

The final paragraph of a short essay, the conclusion, should not introduce a new idea because it can not be developed. The conclusion should not state, “This paper has just shown...” On the contrary, the conclusion should smoothly and subtly ring the reader back to the thesis of the essay. It is the final comment you make, your last chance to drive home your main idea.

The conclusion, as in the sample essay, can remind the reader of the three ideas of the three main paragraphs, and then move the reader back to the thesis that summarized them.

Three ideas:

1. She grew up and lived as a thing.
2. She never fought back because she expected nothing from the world
3. She got attention too late.

Thesis:

She was denied love and she lived to be used.

The following is a sort, sample conclusion that incorporates these ideas with the key ideas underlined.

Mrs. Grimes died as she lived – exploited, for “even after her death [she] continued feeding animal life.” Her sack of scraps ripped open by her dogs. Treated not as a person but as a thing, Mrs. Grimes died without expecting much or even seeing he own value. Her tragedy is not so much the account of her death as it is the story of her life, lived without love or even respect, and of attention finally paid, too late.

Biays, John Sheridan and Carol Weshoven. Responding to Literature: A Step-by-Step Guide for Student Writers.
New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988. pp. 29-36.

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A Character Analysis of Mrs. Jake Grimes in Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods."

The value a person places on himself or herself is largely determined by the value others give to that person. Those who grow up loved and cherished learn to feel worthwhile and develop a healthy sense of self. Such a background of love and caring can even sustain a person through periods when he or she feels unloved and insignificant. But those who have never known love, who have never been given any human warmth, soon come to see themselves as worthless. Such an emotionally starved person is Mrs. Grimes of Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods." Mrs. Grimes is a woman who has been denied any vestige of love or tenderness, she exists only to be used.

From her childhood on, Mrs. Grimes has been trapped in a cycle of exploitation. As an orphan, she became a "bound" girl, legally contracted to work as slave labor for a farmer who terrified her with his lust, and for his wife, who frightened the girl with her jealousy. The girl's only escape from this prison was marriage to Jake Grimes, a shiftless farmer who beat her and expected her to work the farm alone. When the couple's son grows up, he joins the father in abusing the mother. They demand that she feed them, and somehow she must also sustain the animals of the farm:

How was she going to get everything fed? – that was her problem. The dogs had to be fed. There wasn't enough hay in the barn for the horses and the cow. If she didn't feed the chickens how could they lay eggs? Without eggs to sell how could she buy things in town, things she needed to keep life on the farm going?

Her life is nothing but an endless battle to meet the demands of the animals – and men – who devour her strength and youth, turning her into an “old woman when she isn’t even forty yet.”

Trapped by life, Mrs. Grimes never thinks of fighting back. Because she had always been brutalized by the world, she learns to expect nothing from it. Life, to her, is merely survival. As the narrator says, “Whatever happened she never said anything. That was her way of getting along.” Even her death is not a conscious suicide; it is just a surrender to circumstances that dominate her, as events have always dominated her. She dies, dreamily fading into the cold, “softly and quietly.” Even her dreams could have provided no escape, for she had no happy past to dream of because “not many pleasant things had happened to her.” In dying, as in living, Mrs. Grimes knows of no way but to give in, because she has never seen herself as someone worth fighting to save. Deprived of the love that teaches one she is valuable, Mrs. Grimes places little value on her life.

As the narrator of the story says, Mrs. Grimes was “one of the nameless ones,” the insignificant ones, but, after her death, others began to notice her, to see her value. Lying frozen in the snow, the body of Mrs. Grimes seems somehow transformed into “the body of some charming young girl.” The townsmen who cover her body regard it with a kind of respect and awe, and they want to avenge her mistreatment at the hands of her husband and son. The sight of the dead woman creates a “strange mystical feeling” in the minds of the adolescent narrator and his brother. Too late, someone sees the beautiful person inside of the mistreated, broken woman.

Mrs. Grimes died as she lived – exploited, for “even after death [she] continued feeding animal life,” her sack of scraps is ripped open by her dogs. Treated not as a

person but as a thing, Mrs. Grimes died without ever seeing her own value. Her tragedy is not so much the account of her death as it is the story of her life, lived without love or even respect, and of attention paid, too late.