

Open Prompts

- One definition of madness is “mental delusion or the eccentric behavior arising from it.” But poet Emily Dickinson wrote that “Much madness is divinest Sense— To a discerning Eye—”

Novelists and playwrights have often seen madness with a “discerning Eye.” Select a novel or play in which a character’s apparent madness or irrational behavior plays an important role. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain what this delusion or eccentric behavior consists of and how it might be judged reasonable. Explain the significance of the “madness” to the work as a whole (a theme). Do not merely summarize the plot.

- 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 a minor character might be used to highlight the weaknesses or strengths of the main character. Choose a literary work in which a minor character serves as a foil for the 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 as a whole (a theme). Do not merely summarize the plot.

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

Choose a character from a literary work 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 as it relates to the meaning of the work as a whole (a theme). Do not merely summarize the plot.

- 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 (a theme). Do not merely summarize the plot.

- In his 2004 novel *Magic Seeds*, V. S. Naipaul writes: “It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world. That’s where the mischief starts. That’s where everything starts unravelling.”

Select a literary work in which a character holds an “ideal view of the world.” Then write an essay in which you analyze the character’s idealism and its positive or negative consequences; explain how the author’s portrayal of this idealism illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole (a theme). Do not merely summarize the plot.