

More Paper 1 Ideas

REMINDER

I will gladly give feedback on self-designed topics, or your own refinements on suggested topics, up to two days before the due date.

JOYCE

No biggie. Woolf: “Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.” Use this idea to illuminate the way Joyce’s novel handles trivial details and unimportant happenings, particularly in contrast to its handling of more obviously weighty matters. To what extent does the novel privilege the small scale over the big deal—and why? Develop an argument around a few chosen moments of triviality, explaining both why they are trivial and why they are especially revealing.

Priests, suave and otherwise. Priests are everywhere in *Portrait*, from Stephen’s earliest school days to his university life. Joyce himself wrote in a letter in 1904 (a decade before he finished *Portrait*) that at age 16 he “left the Catholic Church, hating it most fervently” and waged “open war upon it by what I write and say and do.” Develop an argument about the representation of priests in the novel. How do the priest figures vary? Do they all represent bad forms of authority? To what extent does the priest remain a model for Stephen through the end of the novel? And to what extent are Stephen’s own final attitudes ironized? A good argument will select particular depictions of priests for interpretation, avoiding broad generalizations about religion, and being careful to take the representations of Catholicism in the novel on their own terms; you do not need to introduce your own views of this or any other religion.

Composition of place. Develop an argument about the meaning of particular kinds of setting in *Portrait*, explaining the significance of environments and of movement through space for the novel. To be effective, an interpretation of setting has to show that setting itself matters to the themes: it is not enough to say that certain plot events happen somewhere (e.g., Stephen has an epiphany on the beach; but why the beach?). You might focus on city streets, for example; or on spaces of privacy and confinement; or on the way the novel compares locations; or on the difference between lived-in spaces and imagined ones for the novel.

FAULKNER

Not all in the family. Most of Faulkner's novel is narrated by the Bundrens, but not all. What is the cumulative effect of those moments when the narrator is a non-Bundren? A good argument must sample over the whole of the novel, but a short paper cannot cover all the possible examples. Think carefully about the contrasts among (say) Cora, Whitfield, and MacGowan, and develop an interpretation that makes sense of *how* the shift to a point of view outside the family works. What do these shifts let us see—about the Bundrens, about the society they inhabit, about the world Faulkner creates—that we could not otherwise see? Consider carefully about *when* the outsiders take over; think about how their biases are similar to or different from the main characters'; compare repeated narrators (e.g., Tull) with the one-offs (Samson).

Beasts of the field. The Bundrens are a farming family, and the novel pays a great deal of attention to the farm animals around them—horses, cows, mules—and to other fauna as well (vultures, fish). Develop an argument about the representation of non-human animals in the novel. For example: what do interactions between humans and animals reveal? Most conspicuous of all is Jewel and his horse, but this case is best placed in comparison to others. Or, bearing in mind that people are in fact animals: how does the novel compare people to animals, and with what effect? Consider the importance of figurative language as well as literal representation; consider animal and human labor; being owned and being free; animal bodies as against human bodies.

Ha ha, only serious. *As I Lay Dying* is a funny novel. How does Faulkner's humor transform the novel's treatment of its serious themes: death, grief, poverty, family conflict? Develop an argument that identifies one or more specific *kinds* of humor in the novel, paying close attention to the workings of language. Consider both laughing *with* and laughing *at*, mockery of outsiders as well as shared delight. How does humor reveal the ridiculousness of people who deserve to be brought low, and how (more disturbingly) does Faulkner get us to laugh at people who are already abject? A successful paper will carefully explain all the jokes it discusses.