

AP Literature Research Topics 2012

As we prepare for the AP Literature and Composition Exam, we must learn to trace themes across literature and discuss the commonalities within that scope.

You will need to choose three works of literary merit that relate to the topic.

For each topic there are also possible works considered to be of "literary merit" that you should explore in your research paper. We may need to have further discussions about what is and isn't literary merit.

1. **Accepting Death:**

Choose works of literary merit that explore death in their writing. Then write a carefully nuanced research paper that examines the attitudes or traditions that affect how society views death. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

2. **Adapting to Change:**

Some writers seem to advocate changes in social or political attitudes or in traditions. Choose works of literary merit that advocate some kind of change. Then write a carefully nuanced research paper that examines the attitudes or traditions that the writer wishes to modify. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

3. **Alienation (Problems of Assimilation) because of Gender, Race, Class, or Creed:**

Select works of literary merit in which a conflict exists because the will of the majority opposes the will of an individual. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

4. **Conflict / Adversity / Courage:**

"The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. I love the man who can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink, but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death." Thomas Paine

Choose works of literary merit in which the characters are forced to act courageously in times of adversity. Then, using these readings, develop some conclusions about the way these characters "can gather strength from distress and grow brave by reflection" even in cases where their actions may not be perceived by the public to be courageous. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

5. **Dreams/Ambition/Worry/ Regret:**

Select works of literary merit in which the characters' dreams/ambitions cause an attempt to recapture or reject the past. Then, using these readings, develop some conclusions about how the feelings of reverence, bitterness, or longing affect the characters' ability to achieve these dreams. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

6. **Family Relationships:**

Some works depict a conflict between a parent and a child. Choose works of literary merit that explore this conflict. Then write a carefully nuanced research paper that examines the sources of the conflict and their thematic implications. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

7. **Hopefulness:**

An effective literary work does not merely stop or cease; it concludes. According to British novelist, Fay Weldon, "The writers . . . who get the best and most lasting response from readers are those who offer a happy ending through moral development--some kind of spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation, even with self, even at death." Choose works of literary merit that have this element of hope. Then write a research paper which analyses how some kind of "spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation"--even though it may mean adjusting to or abiding with ambiguity and uncertainty--can imply hopefulness. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

8. **Illusion / Wooden headedness / Absurdity:**

"Wooden headedness, the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. It consists of assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts." Tuchman, Barbara, from *March of Folly*. Some would say this behavior is exhibited in all human affairs. Present a logical argument for or against this assertion. Choose works of literary merit to support your conclusions. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

9. **Independence:**

Based on the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assembled to petition the government for a redress of grievances." Choose works of literary merit that address the concepts of independence. Then write a research paper which develops a stance on freedom vs. responsibility. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

10. **Knowledge/Wisdom:**

"For in much wisdom is much grief, and increase of knowledge is increase of sorrow." Choose works of literary merit that address gaining knowledge through adversity. Then write a research paper that traces the various ways characters gain knowledge. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

11. **Language as a Key to Identity**

It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden. This is true in France, and is absolutely true in England: The range (and reign) of accents on that damp little island make England coherent for the English and totally incomprehensible for everyone else. To open your mouth in England is (if I may use Black English) to "Put your business in the street": You have confessed your parents, your

youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and also, your future." James Baldwin (1979)

Some would say speech can tell someone all about your upbringing and personality. Present a logical argument for or against this assertion. Choose works of literary merit to support your conclusions. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

12. Love / Infidelity / Friendship / Distrust / Jealousy / Loneliness:

Love and infidelity, friendship and distrust, jealous and loneliness--these are the oxymorons that define the ambiguity of human experience. The eighteenth century British novelist Laurence Sterne wrote, "No body, but he who has felt it, can conceive what a plaguing thing it is to have a . . . mind torn asunder by two projects of equal strength, both obstinately pulling in a contrary direction at the same time."

Choose works of literary merit with characters who struggle with two conflicting desires, ambitions, obligations, or influences. Then write a well-organized research paper that develops a stance on how happiness or unhappiness is created by the choices made as a result of life's dilemmas. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

13. Money and Class in America / The Nobleness of Work / Owning Property/ Destruction of the American Dream:

"I think it is fair to say that the current ardor of the American faith in money so easily surpasses the degrees of intensity achieved by other societies in other times and places. Money means so many things to spiritual as well as temporal that we are at a loss to know how to hold its majesty at bay"

Henry Adams in his autobiography remarks that although the Americans weren't much good as materialists they had been so "deflected by the pursuit of money" that they could turn "in no other direction." The national distrust of the contemplative temperament arises less from an innate Philistinism than from a suspicion of anything that cannot be counted, stuffed, framed, or mounted over the fireplace in the den. Men remain free to rise or fall in the world. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

14. Nature: (example the moors representing Heathcliff)

Many science and nature writers describe important encounters they have had with unfamiliar aspects of nature. Their changing responses to these observations develops a philosophy of respect for nature. For instance, Ralph Waldo Emerson developed this philosophy: "A life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and virtue, will purge the eyes to understanding her text." Choose works of literary merit that address these concepts. Then write a research paper which, upon examination of differing philosophies on the same subject, develops nature's power to affect characters.

15. Passion versus Responsibility:

A recurring theme in literature is the classic war between passion and responsibility. For instance a personal cause, a love, a desire for revenge, a determination to redress a wrong, or some other emotions may conflict with moral duty.

Choose works of literary merit in which the characters confront the demands of a private passion that conflicts with his or her responsibilities. Then write a carefully reasoned research paper

which explores the nature of this conflict, its effect on the characters, and its application to the universal human experience. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

16. Pleasure and Disquietude:

A critic has said that one important measure of a superior work of literature is its ability to produce in the reader a healthy confusion of pleasure and disquietude. Choose works of literary merit that have this effect. Then write a carefully nuanced research paper that examines the sources of the pleasure and disquietude and their thematic implications. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

17. Self Confidence/Ego Disease/Pride Appreciation (Recognition of Worth) Perfection/ Self Delusion:

Some works examine the universal problem encountered in a decision that many times has to be made between two ways of living. Choose works of literary merit that emphasize how getting to know yourself and living true to that perception is a theme for those works. Then write a carefully nuanced research paper that analyzes how self-knowledge leads to some kind of happiness or how the lack of self-knowledge leads to some kind of unhappiness. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

18. The Limitations of Society Ridicule/Satire:

Some works are written to criticize some limitation implicit in today's society. Choose works of literary merit that are critical of a specific cultural value. Briefly define the common limitation implicit in the works chosen; analyze how the characters in the works respond to or are affected by this similar standard; then write a carefully reasoned research paper that argues for or against the validity of the implied criticisms. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

19. Violence/ Cruelty/ Fear/ Revenge/ Punishment/ Hatred/ Evil:

Violence is a predominant thread in the setting of many works of literary merit. Choose works of literary merit in which the reader is confronted with a scene or scenes of violence. Then write a carefully nuanced research paper which explores the nature of this violence, its effect on the characters or the reader, and its application to the universal human experience. How does your topic enhance the meaning of the work as a whole?

There are other possible topics you can select. Think about the literary essays you have read. Think of the AP Essay topics we have written. Come talk to me if you have ideas.

- Romantic heroes in literature - Heathcliff, Darcy, Byron's poems
- Christ figures in literature - Simon, Victor Frankenstein, Mustapha Mond, Santiago
- unreliable narrators - someone other than Poe or most first person narratives
- obsession in literature - other than Poe
- paradox of independence - Flies, Frankenstein, Portrait of the Artist
- loss of innocence - Mockingbird, Salesman, Flies, Portrait

- father son relationships - Metamorphosis, Death of a Salesman, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
- non conforming female protagonists- why they don't fit their society's conventional standards and why? - Awakening, Heights, Pride and Prejudice, Their Eyes Were Watching God
- Monsters in Literature - Cathy from East of Eden, Creature from Frankenstein, Heathcliff from Wuthering Heights
- (different view of monsters) Monsters in Literature - Beast from Lord of the Flies, Gregor from Metamorphosis, Creature from Frankenstein
- Dysfunctional literary families - Pride and Prejudice, Wuthering Heights, King Lear
- Destructive power of a dreams - intro with Langston Hughes poem "Dream Deferred"
Death of a Salesman (wants Biff to be a salesman), Wuthering Heights (wants Catherine)
- Use of diaries and journals in literature - Frankenstein, Wuthering Heights, ??
- Loneliness - Wuthering Heights, Metamorphosis, King Lear
- Use of multiple narrators - Ozymandias, Wuthering Heights, Frankenstein
- Flawed search for happiness - Oedipus Rex, Death of a Salesman, King Lear
- effects of nature/nurture in literary characters- Victor Frankenstein, Heathcliff, King Lear
- use of tree/ Garden of Eden image in literature- Lord of the Flies, Frankenstein, Waiting for Godot
- The Search for Self - Waiting for Godot, Creature from Frankenstein, ??
- Devalue of Life - Frankenstein, Heart of Darkness, ??
- Letting Evil in - Christabel by Coleridge, Victor creating the monster in Frankenstein, ??
- Wandering Characters - Jane from Jane Eyre, Creature from Frankenstein, ??
- Questioning Existence - King Lear, Waiting for Godot, and The Metamorphosis