

1. Ted Wisniewski

October 16, 2022 at 3:39:03 PM

I'd like you guys to format the first page as I have. Full Name and student number (I don't have a student number, of course); class and date. Under that — identify the topic — 1, 2, or 3. And then — your own title, and then start the paper. Note I have page numbers as well. Please include page numbers.

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2. Ted Wisniewski

October 16, 2022 at 3:56:06 PM

Please DO NOT FORGET TO INDENT PARAGRAPHS.

Ted Wisniewski
ENGL 113W — sample paper
October 16, 2022

3. Ted Wisniewski

October 16, 2022 at 3:41:07 PM

You might want to note how I transition into paragraphs - how I try to keep the logical thread of continuity running. This takes time and thought.

Topic #4 (Sample topic)

A Consideration of Appropriate Responses to Flawed Characters in *A Doll's House*, *Death of a Salesman*, and in our own Personal Lives

4. Ted Wisniewski

October 16, 2022 at 3:41:59 PM

I like rhetorical questions. But don't feel forced to use them because I do. Not how the rhetorical question connects directly to the preceding paragraph. Sometimes students just toss in rhetorical questions simply do do it - and the logical thread gets lost.

1

2

In the two plays we have read we encounter characters who have serious shortcomings. Because of their flaws, they negatively impact the lives of the people around them. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora never really grows as an individual due to the condescending, paternalistic way Helmer relates to her. In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, the entire family suffers due to Willy's inability to come to terms with himself. Happy Loman is in some ways more flawed than his father: he is selfish, narcissistic, and cruel, especially when it comes to women. How should we readers respond to such characters? Should we assess them critically and hold them accountable and leave it at that? Or should we pity them and feel compassion towards them?

3

I believe that it's helpful to locate our responses on a spectrum, with harsh judgement on one end, and compassion on the opposite end, with pity somewhere in the middle. Pity involves genuinely feeling sympathetic towards and sorry for someone. Compassion includes pity and surpasses it: it involves a deep appreciation for and empathy towards someone, a feeling of respect and admiration— despite the flaws.

When is it appropriate to respond to flawed characters with pity, with

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compassion, or with simply a rational sort of judgement that involves neither? I think we should feel neither pity nor compassion towards a character if that character

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October 16, 2022 at 3:43:31 PM

Note how I work up to my thesis. I try to lead into it. And it's bold-faced. It's not simplistic; nor is it a rambling paragraph. Sometimes students bold face an entire paragraph. Too much.

6. Ted Wisniewski

October 16, 2022 at 3:44:35 PM

Note the transition into this paragraph. I make it clear how this relates to and helps develop my thesis statement.

7. Ted Wisniewski

October 16, 2022 at 3:45:39 PM

I've cited the page number here, because he really does use the word "ruin." You only need to cite pages in this paper when you are quoting or partially quoting from the text — whether it's a word, a phrase, or a passage.

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October 16, 2022 at 3:47:40 PM

Note how I transition into this paragraph. Relevance to my thesis statement is clear - it's obvious that I'm continuing to develop my thesis.

2

remains stuck in their arrogance and self-smugness, lacking any sense of struggle and suffering on account of their own shortcomings and cruelties. Flawed characters, on the other hand, who have been humbled by life, who experience and suffer serious loss, merit pity, but not necessarily compassion. I feel compassion is merited to the extent that a character has suffered from a painful sense of his own inadequacies, while still striving to do well by himself and those close to him. **Based on these considerations, I argue that Helmer merits pity, and that Willy Loman merits pity and compassion. A character like Happy, meanwhile, merits neither. I also feel that considering how to respond to characters in appropriate ways is important, as it helps us with our own moral maturity and intelligence.**

Happy Loman is clearly one of these characters who merits neither compassion nor pity. He has no awareness of how self-centred and shallow he is, and no concern whatsoever for the effects of his actions on others. Consider his behaviour towards his supervisors. He "ruins" the women to whom they are engaged and then shows up at the weddings, and he feels no genuine guilt or remorse about that. (25) His behaviour to his father is also odious: he abandons his father at the restaurant simply to flirt with two women he has just met, and he never expresses the slightest bit of guilt about that afterwards. How can one feel compassion towards such a character? Happy doesn't even merit our pity at the end of the play. He's still arrogant. He hasn't been humbled by life at all. Puffed up with a sense of his own self-importance, Happy wouldn't want our pity or support, and so we needn't give him any.

Helmer is clearly someone we *should* pity. Unlike Happy, Helmer IS devastated at the end of Ibsen's play. Whereas Happy's eyes are still closed, Helmer's eyes have

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October 16, 2022 at 3:48:33 PM

OK — when quoting the back and forth dialogue, block it off like I have. Format it the way I have. And only quote the dialogue, not the italicized parts.

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October 16, 2022 at 3:49:42 PM

You should note how I'm developing my thesis here, bit by bit. Transitions are important.

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been opened and his whole world has been turned upside down. He is desperate at the end; he does not want to lose his wife and actually tells Nora he is willing to change:

HEL. I have it in me to become a different man.

NORA. Perhaps — if your doll is taken away from you.

9 HEL. But to part! — to part from you! No, no, Nora; I can't understand that idea. (70)

Why should we not pity someone like this, who is clearly suffering? He wants to change — but Nora, like we readers, knows that such change is hard and takes time, and then there's always the possibility that he might not be capable of such transformation. Helmer is an extremely insecure man terrified of being seen by others as weak; one doubts whether he'll really muster up the strength and courage to grow into the sort of individual Nora would accept as a husband. What's also sad is the fact that Helmer formerly was under the illusion that he was strong and courageous. Earlier in the play he tells Nora: "Come what will, you may be sure I shall have both courage and strength if they be needed. You will see I am man enough to take everything upon myself. " (36) I think it's very hard for someone like Helmer to be humbled like this, and to lose the respect and love of his own spouse. Pity, therefore, is appropriate.

Compassion is another matter: one needs to struggle and suffer to merit

10 compassion. Helmer has never really struggled or suffered in this way. In the course of the play he never confronts his own insecurities and weaknesses. In fact, he dodges them and will do anything to protect his public image. He's willing to fire Krogstad, a "good worker," from the bank, because he feels insecure around this man with whom

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I did NOT block of these separate quotes, because I'm not quoting actual back-and-forth dialogue. And what I am quoting - is brief. Just one or two lines or even less.

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was friends back in his student days. (35) The fact that firing Krogstad would plunge that man and his sons into destitution doesn't trouble Helmer at all. This sort of cruelty makes it hard for us to feel much compassion towards him. And then the way he treats Nora when her "secret" is revealed is inexcusable. After assuring her that he has the strength to help them weather through any crisis, he throws her under the bus as soon as a crisis appears. And when Nora tries to explain that what she did she did out of love, he shuts her down and dismisses her. Such a character does not merit compassion. To elicit compassion, he would have to agonize over his hypocrisy and inadequacies and strive to grow as an individual. He has yet to do that.

Willy Loman *does* agonize over his inadequacies, while still struggling to do well by himself, his wife, and his sons, and that fact that he suffers, struggles and fails make him a tragic character worth of pity and compassion. The poor guy really *did* struggle. He wasn't cocky and arrogant like Happy and Helmer. He was painfully aware of his lack of inner strength. He tells his wife: "I'm fat. I'm very foolish to look at, Linda." (37) He admits to Ben (and to himself) — that he lacks confidence and is not sure he's raising his boys in the right way: "Because sometimes I'm afraid that I'm not teaching 11 them the right kind of — Ben, how should I teach them?" (52) And then of course there's his guilt concerning his wife. Yes, he has cheated on her but he feels terrible about it and the guilt is overwhelming. When he contemplates his suicide with Ben towards the end, it's not just Biff he has in mind, but Linda: " 'Cause she's suffered, Ben, the woman has suffered." (125) This capacity for guilt and remorse merits, in my view, pity and compassion. Helmer has never agonized like this until the end, when Nora confronts him, and Happy never agonizes like this at all.

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I'm transitioning into my personal experience here, and note the continuity to the thesis statement. This connects to the last part of my thesis.

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This is not a dialogue, but I still blocked it off - because I want to emphasize it and I think it's better to block it off. Were it shorter than three lines I would not block it off.

5

I personally feel that responding to characters in the right way, by considering how much they have struggled and suffered, helps us with our own powers of moral

12 observation and intelligence. It makes us more sensitive, more observant, and perhaps more mature. I have to say I have to thank some students for these recent insights.

In one of my ENGL 112W sections recently we were discussing a short story called *The Swimmer*, by John Cheever. The main character of that story is flawed, just like the characters we've encountered this semester. In the past I'd always regarded this character as unsympathetic, because from the story we know that for much of his life he has been arrogant and narcissistic and that he's used people in the past. But this semester a student pointed out to me that we should pity the character because the character has lost everything in the end: his wife has left him, he has lost his job, and is now bankrupt and shunned by people. The student really got me thinking about responding appropriately to devastation and loss. And thanks to the student I also realized that the one character in this story who *does* feel pity for the main character is a sympathetic character. She's a kind, caring individual. I suddenly realized — if SHE pities the main character, then why shouldn't I? To not pity him at all would make me more similar to all the unsympathetic characters in the story who couldn't care less how much the main character has lost and suffered.

With this in mind, I found myself more attentive to *Death of a Salesman* while teaching it recently, specifically to the part where Biff defends his father at the restaurant to the woman who makes a patronizing comment about him:

13 Biff: Miss Forsythe, you've just seen a prince walk by. A fine, troubled prince. A hardworking, unappreciated prince. A pal, you understand? A good companion. Always for his boys. (114)

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You do want a conclusion that sort of briefly yet thoughtfully sums up the whole paper.

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You can just copy my formatting here. There are the editions that you used for this class.

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Biff is clearly a sympathetic character, someone we're supposed to appreciate and admire. If Biff is able to feel such compassion for his father, than why would I not want to? We might have a lot to learn from sympathetic characters like Biff. It makes me wonder about people with whom I've had issues in my own life: I feel I'm more conscious now about how I respond to them or should respond to them. I have a clearer sense of where pity is appropriate, or pity and compassion, or neither.

To conclude, I think it's good to consider how we should respond to flawed
14 characters in plays and stories - and in our own lives. 15 Cruel, arrogant, complacent individuals might merit neither pity nor compassion. Suffering should always call for pity. And the suffering that accompanies a hard, desperate, futile struggle to be strong and do well by one's self and others cries out for compassion.

15 Works Cited:

Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. Dover Publications, 1992.

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. Penguin, 1976.