

MPC English & Study Skills Center

Literary Analysis—Sample Essay

The purpose of writing about literature is to say something about the reading rather than retell the story, so make sure that your essay is not just a summary. Literature is, by convention, written about in the present tense. Note: This is single-spaced to save paper, but it would correctly be double-spaced and have a Works Cited page. British spelling is maintained in quotations.

Comments:	Essay: Woman as Slave
<p>General Introduction</p> <p>Always identify the title and the author of the work and give a brief summary in the introduction.</p> <p>Thesis—main point of paper</p> <p>Topic sentence that supports thesis</p> <p>Evidence to support the topic should always include explanation and direct quotations from the text as well as discussion.</p> <p>Ellipses may be bracketed if instructor prefers [. . .] or if ellipses already occur in literary text in order to differentiate.</p> <p>Long quotations are indented one inch. Indenting means quoted; the quotation marks are here</p>	<p><u>Webster's New World Dictionary</u> defines "slave" as "a human being who is owned by and absolutely subject to another human being." The idea that a woman is someone without control and subject to others is a current that runs through the novel <u>The Joys of Motherhood</u> by Buchi Emecheta. This book chronicles the trials of Nnu Ego, a chief's daughter in Africa. She is born after the chief's senior wife dies and her female slave refuses to jump willingly into the grave with her. The slave is struck down but utters a curse and is, supposedly, reborn as Nnu Ego. This joining of the slave and the woman is real from many perspectives, and there is a clear analogy between the slave's life and that of Nnu Ego.</p> <p>Like the slave, who has no choice but to serve and who is not allowed to complain or defend herself, Nnu Ego has no control over her own destiny. One might think that, as a chief's daughter, Nnu Ego would have the power to decide for herself, but she is forever under the control of the men who surround her. Her father arranges her first marriage, and she is fortunate that she is pleased with her mate, but "as the months passed, she was failing everybody. There was no child" (311). Nnu Ego is increasingly berated by a husband who blames her alone for her failure to produce a child: "I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile" (32) Nnu Ego has no power to stand up for herself as her husband takes another wife and essentially shuns her. When Nnu Ego is returned to her father, again it is he who decides whom she will marry a second time. His decision to send her to Lagos breaks her ties with her people and tears her from the security of the tribal system. That she finds Nnaife, her second husband, revolting is not considered by her or others as something over which she has control: "She felt like bursting into tears, like begging the senior Owulum to please take her home, but she knew that even though her father was the best of fathers, there was such a thing as overstaying one's welcome" (43). This domination by first her father and then her husband sets Nnu Ego onto a path of life from which she has no escape, and none of the choices are her own. Near the end of the story, when she appears to support her husband in court, she explains her position in simple terms: "Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us . . ." (217). Even though she is able to question the fairness of her position, she still accepts it as the way things are.</p> <p>In addition, like the slave, whose existence is sanctioned by tribal tradition, Nnu Ego's existence as a mother is also sanctioned. She is, first and foremost, a producer of children: "All she wanted was a child to cuddle and love" (34). When her children finally do begin to come, one after another, they drain her of energy and resources, leaving her in poverty. When she has to face the news that Nnaife's brother has died, leaving him responsible for his brother's wives and children, Nnu Ego despairs of being able to feed and clothe all of them with no money. Even then, she is restrained by the thought of what her father would say:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">"Please don't disgrace the name of the family again. What greater honour is there for a woman that to be a mother, and now you are a mother—not of daughters who will marry and go,</p>

<p>because they were in the original text.</p> <p>The parenthetical citation is placed before the ending punctuation with inline quotations.</p> <p>Use transitions (in addition, last, etc) to signal a new topic, and try to maintain parallel structure—“like the slave.”</p> <p>The parenthetical citation is placed after the ending punctuation with indented quotations.</p>	<p>but of good-looking healthy sons, and they are the first sons of your husband and you are his first and senior wife.” (119)</p> <p>Nnu Ego is defined by her ability to produce children. Since her husband provides her with the children that she must have, then she must suffer all other indignities: “Yet all because she was the mother of three sons, she was supposed to be happy in her poverty, in her nail-biting agony, in her churning stomach, in her rags, in her cramped room. . .”(167). Despite the years she spends rearing children to carry on their father’s name and provide for her in her old age, “[s]he died quietly there, with no child to hold her and no friend to talk to. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been in building up her joys as a mother” (224). The irony of sacrificing everything of herself for her children and then dying alone at the side of the road like a lowly slave isn’t resolved by the outpouring of money spent for her funeral so that her children can show their belated devotion.</p> <p>Last, like the slave, who toils endlessly for no personal reward, Nnu Ego spends her life in backbreaking labor, trying to provide a living for herself and her family. From the time she marries her second husband until the end of her life, she never really knows anything except poverty and work: “She learned early in their married life to economise, since Nnaife earned little” (48). Her burdens increase when Nnaife loses his job and is unable to find another. When he goes away, she is left in desperate conditions. Even when she is weak from childbirth, she has to find a way to survive and sets up a stand to sell goods, but she is edged out by others:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">So she took to selling firewood. This did not require much capital, simply a great deal of energy. One had to carry the wood from the waterside, break it into pieces with an axe, then tie the pieces together into bundles for sale. Many other women found it too tiring. (161)</p> <p>Nnu Ego doesn’t do this work because she is stronger than the “other women” but because she has no alternative. She has to do what is within her resources to do—physical labor. In her village, as a chief’s daughter in a position of honor, she would never have lowered herself to menial labor, but as a wife--a slave--in the city, she has no other choice, except to starve along with her children. She sacrifices her beauty, health, and pride to survive:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">[She] stretched out her work worn hand to help Adim, who noticed with horror how bony his mother’s hand was. . . .And her teeth, those teeth that used to be her pride, had been badly neglected and were beginning to have black smudges round some of their edges. He knew his mother was not old in age, but she had never looked this old to Adim. She looked like a woman in her seventies. (213)</p> <p>Her sons feel pity for the woman that Nnu Ego has become without really accepting that it is to provide for them that she has become this pitiful old woman before her time. While the slave woman who is sacrificed at the beginning of the story dies quickly, this slave woman, Nnu Ego, dies slowly over the years until the woman she was is no longer evident.</p> <p>It is clear throughout this novel that Nnu Ego and the slave are forever one because Nnu Ego’s life mirrors that of the slave; the slave’s curse has condemned Nnu Ego to relive the slavery of the one first sacrificed. Nnu Ego is a slave to men, a slave to tradition, and a slave to economic necessity. She has little control over her own life. Her only revenge is to cause suffering after her death, the same revenge as the slave woman.</p>
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