

EXAMPLE ARGUMENTATIVE THEME WITH EXAMPLES

Prompt: Sometimes authors surprise us by designing characters who turn out to be unlikely heroes or heroines. Review the novels you have read in the past year, and choose three examples of unlikely heroes (or heroines). Write an Argumentative Theme based on your research to explain why they are unlikely heroes (or heroines) and what they do to deserve the title of hero (or heroine). Include at least two quotations, in-text citations where needed, and a reference list.

TITLE OF PAPER: Unlikely Heroines

Unlikely Heroines
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Unlikely Heroines

Sometimes, authors surprise their readers by creating a heroine out of a character who seems least likely to become a heroine. A heroine can be defined as a female who does something that is especially brave or courageous while risking her own wellbeing. An unlikely heroine, then, is a female who has no special characteristics or resources that would enable her to be or become a heroine, but she acts in brave and courageous ways anyway. Novelists often introduce the reader to a female character who appears to have no special traits or strengths, but, who, in the end, saves the day by acting courageously, with little thought about the risks she is taking. Harper Lee, when she wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Sue Monk Kidd, when she wrote *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), and Markus Zusak, when he wrote *The Book Thief* (2005), did exactly this with their main characters. Scout Finch, Lily Owen, and Liesel Meminger are perfect examples of unlikely heroines because they are girls who have very few resources, yet they surprise the reader because of the way they put themselves in harm's way to help others.

The most unlikely heroine of these three characters is Scout Finch, the six-year-old girl narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). She lives with her father, Atticus Finch, and her ten-year-old brother, Jem, in the Segregated South of the 1930's. She spends her time tagging around after Jem and observing and reporting on everyone else's activities. She seems to be a typical six-year-old except that she knows how to read well and she is willing to say what she thinks. The reader gets an inkling of her pluckiness when she gets into trouble for beating up boys who are older and bigger than she is and when she threatens her friend Dill when he tells her a made-up story about how he can smell death by stating, "Dill if you don't hush, I'll knock you bowlegged" (Lee, 1960, p. 48).

Nevertheless, Scout surprises the reader in a scene where her father has decided to defend the jailhouse when an African American man, Tom Robinson, is jailed after being falsely accused of raping a white girl. Atticus is sitting in front of the jail, when four carloads of white men approach the jail with the intention of hanging Tom. Scout happens to witness this scene when she and her brother are secretly spying on Atticus. She naively and quickly enters the tense ring of men surrounding Atticus. Jem follows her, and, when one of the men picks up Jem, Scout immediately kicks the man with her bare foot. A bit later, she recognizes one of the men. She starts a conversation with him by saying, "Hey Mr. Cunningham, how's your entailment gettin' along?" (Lee, 1960, p. 204) She continues with the one-sided conversation by asking if he remembers her, introduces herself, reminds him that she goes to school with his son, and tells him that his son had dinner at her home. Basically, she is reminding the man that he is Atticus's neighbor and friend. All the men stare at her, and Mr. Cunningham comes to his senses and instructs them all to leave. In other words, in her plucky way, Scout has faced down an angry mob intent on hanging Tom and in the process has saved his life and possibly her father's life. She didn't give a single thought to the risks she was taking; she just was intent on defending her father.

Although she is older than Scout, another example of an unlikely heroine is Lily Owen, a character in *The Secret Life of Bees*. Lily is 14 years old and lives with her father and her black nanny, Rosaleen, in the Segregated South of the 1960's. Her father is abusive toward her and makes her sit all day at the family roadside stand selling peaches. Like Scout, she loves to read, and because no one comes by to buy fruit, she usually passes the time by reading. When her father discovers that she is reading, he takes away her book,

punishes her, and forbids her to read. She describes herself as unpopular and very self-conscious. To describe her intense anxiety, she states,

“I started picking scabs off my body, and when I didn’t have any, gnawing flesh around my fingernails till I was a bleeding wreck. I worried so much about how I looked and whether I was doing things right, I felt half the time I was impersonating a girl instead of really being one” (Kidd, 2002, p. 9).

Thus, Lily is not a character that one would expect to act in courageous ways. Nevertheless, she does so when Rosaleen gets in trouble. In a key scene in the novel, Rosaleen and Lily are walking to town. Some white men ask them where they are going, and Rosaleen replies that she is going to register to vote. When the men start verbally harassing Rosaleen, she pours her snuff mug over the men’s shoes. They attack her a couple of times, and she fights back. In the end, she gets arrested and jailed. Later, Lily’s father tells Lily that he expects the men to kill Rosaleen. Lily decides that she is going to get Rosaleen out of jail and goes there to visit Rosaleen. She finds out that Rosaleen is in the hospital with a concussion, so Lily goes to the hospital even though she is told not to do so by the policeman. She leaves a phone message for the policeman guarding Rosaleen’s hospital door that he is needed at the police station, and, when he leaves the hospital, she helps Rosaleen get dressed and escape. They walk across town to the highway, hitch a ride, and run away, permanently. Certainly, this is a surprising turn of events. The reader would never expect a teenager to act so courageously when faced with the task of breaking someone out of jail to save her life and then running away from her home without much thought of danger to herself.

Similar to Lily and Scout, Liesel Meminger, a character in *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2005), is a young girl and an unlikely heroine in a novel set in Germany before and during the Second World War. She is nine years old at the beginning of the novel when her mother leaves her with a foster family. She never sees her mother again, but her foster father treats her kindly and teaches her how to read. She becomes so enamored with reading that she spends her time reading and rereading the few books she has and steals books when she needs something else to read. Additionally, she reads aloud to the people around her. For example, during the many times that people in her neighborhood go into a cellar to hide during the bombing raids, she reads to everyone in the cellar. She reads to a neighbor woman, and she reads to a Jewish man who lives in the basement of her foster home while he is hiding from the Nazis.

At the beginning of the novel, Liesel is oblivious about the Nazis and their desire to create a perfect race. She becomes a member of the Hitler youth because all German children are required to do so. Gradually, as she gets to know Max, the Jew living in their basement, she understands that his life is at risk because he is a Jew, and she begins to understand the plight of the Jews. She witnesses several parades of Jewish prisoners who are being marched to the death camps nearby. They are a devastating sight:

When they arrived in full, the noise of their feet throbbed on top of the road. Their eyes were enormous in their starving skulls. And the dirt. The dirt was molded to them. Their legs staggered as they were pushed by soldiers' hands—a few wayward steps of forced running before the slow return to a malnourished walk (Zusak, 2005, p. 392).

As time passes, Leisel and her friend Rudy begin to put pieces of bread on the street that the Jews can pick up as they parade by. Even though they know that they are risking being caught

and whipped, Leisel and Rudy defy the authorities. During the final parade in the novel, Leisel watches the Jews as they parade and empathizes with their pain. When she sees Max (who has been captured) among the parading prisoners, she joins him as he marches down the street. When a soldier throws her out of the parade, she gets up and joins Max in the parade again. In the short time that they have together, she quotes from the book that Max wrote for her. Then they are both whipped by a soldier. Thus, although she cannot save Max's life, she joins him in his plight and suffers the same abuse that he suffers. She is a courageous and unlikely heroine.

In conclusion, three best-selling authors chose to use three young girls as unlikely heroines in their novels. All three girls have very few resources on which to rely. Scout and Lily are living without a mother in their lives; Liesel has no parents. All three are living in difficult times like the Depression and World War II. They are facing difficult situations like Segregation and the persecution of the Jews in Hitler's Germany. Nevertheless, they choose to fight these difficult situations in their own way with intelligence, fortitude, and a good measure of pluckiness. In each case, they take on foes who have more strength, power, and weapons than they have. These young girls are excellent examples of unlikely heroines because they support others and save others' lives without a thought about their own wellbeing, and they serve as models for young girls and women everywhere.

References

Kidd, S. M. (2002). *The secret life of bees*. NY: Penguin Group, Inc.

Lee, H. (1960). *To kill a mockingbird*. NY: Grand Central Publishing.

Zusak, M. (2005). *The book thief*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf