

# The Question Paper

As we've seen, asking questions about what we read can help us explore every aspect of even the shortest piece of literature. Questioning often helps us make connections within the work as well as to our own personal lives, and helps us to understand what we read. Whenever you read, try to keep these things in mind:

1. **From what point of view is the story told?** Can you speculate on the appropriateness of that point of view? How would the story you are writing about be changed if the viewpoint were changed?
2. **Who are the principal characters in the story?** What functions do the minor characters serve? Do any of the characters change during the course of the story? How, and why?
3. **What is the plot of the story?** Do the events that constitute the plot emerge logically from the nature of the characters and circumstances, or are the plot elements coincidental and arbitrary?
4. **What is the setting of the story?** Does the setting play an important role in the story, or is it simply the place where things happen? What might the consequences of some other setting be for the effectiveness of the story?
5. **What is the tone of the story?** Read the first several paragraphs of the story to see how the tone is established. Does the tone change with events, or remain fixed? How does the tone contribute to the effect of the story?
6. **Do you find ambiguities in the story?** That is, can you interpret some element of the story in more than one way? Does that ambiguity result in confusion, or does it add to the complexity of the story?
7. **Does the story seem to support or attack your own political and moral positions?**
8. **When was the story written?** Bring your knowledge of history and contemporary events to bear on your reading of the story. Does the story clarify, enhance, or contradict your understanding of history?
9. **What is the theme of the story?** All the elements of fiction, tone, setting, plot, theme, characterization, and point of view have been marshaled to project a theme — the moral proposition the author wishes to advance.

**ASSIGNMENT:** Create a cogent, persuasive, and thought-provoking discussion question about the readings you have just completed, not unlike the questions you brought to class today. Address issues that we have already discussed, or bring up issues that you see in the readings that you would like to explore. [A sample question is on the back of this sheet.]

Then, in a 1- to 2-page typed and double-spaced response paper, attempt to answer your own question. Don't worry about coming up with a "right" or "wrong" answer; remember, analyzing literature depends more on your own investigation and interpretation.

When developing your question and exploring your responses, try to use textual evidence (quotations, paraphrases, and the like) to help create and support your ideas. Cite the passages and quotations that prompted your question, and be sure to note the page numbers.

## Sample Question

In Toni Morrison's works, many questions have been brought up about her use of particular symbols and images. For instance, one of the dominant images in her novel *Beloved* is water. Traditionally, water is often associated with birth (*i.e.* in the womb), cleansing, purification, and life in general. This holds particularly true in this novel, especially in regards to the Ohio River. For Baby Suggs, the river meant life: "[her] heart...started beating the minute she crossed the Ohio River" (147). Denver was born on the Ohio River, in a "useless boat" (83) that nonetheless served as a birthing area. Sethe and the newborn baby were then helped across the Ohio to freedom — to Baby Suggs' house, where she and her baby were cleaned and taken care of, and where her three other children waited for her anxiously. And when *Beloved* "returned," there was the implication that she had been resurrected from the river, from under the bridge.

But for the male characters in *Beloved*, water literally meant pain, suffering, mutilation, and even death. When Stamp Paid went down to the river to gather blackberries, he was "scratched, raked and bitten" by insects in the brush, and he returned with "shredded clothes, bleeding hands, welted face and neck" (137). Another time, Stamp was by the Licking River; he saw something in the river, and picked it up, finding "a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging to its bit of scalp" (180). And Denver believed that her father Halle had not returned home because "the river flooded; the boat sank" (207), blaming the delay of Halle's return on the unpredictable river.

**Why does water symbolize birth and life for the women, while representing pain and death for the men?**

