For interpretive arguments about literature, a thesis is an arguable statement about a text that draws a conclusion about what it means. A thesis for an interpretive argument about literature must explain what a story means; it must make a generalization about what the story says/implies in larger terms.

Ask Yourself: What is the text saying, and to what end? How does the text say what you say it says?

The task of the interpretive argument is to come up with a plausible and well-crafted research question, and developing a case for seeing a text in a particular way using relevant evidence and valid reasoning. It doesn't need to be the best case out there, or the final word on the topic. When you put together an interpretive argument, you're trying on a well-crafted idea to see how it fits.

A critically engaged essay is not one in which you share the thoughts of others on a topic, but a process of thinking through a question for yourself. Good essays have the spark of genuine inquiry, of someone trying to understand better something they are curious about.

Interpretative arguments don't just argue that a character is good or evil; they don't just argue that certain factors caused a character to behave in a certain way; nor do they argue for how a character should deal with a problem.

Because you are advocating a particular perspective, you'll need to take note of alternative points of view and explain (using valid argument and pertinent evidence) why you choose this perspective he or she does over such alternatives.

Assessing why one argument is weak while another is strong is part of the task at hand. Some interpretations are more plausible than others, some arguments are more valid than others, some treatments of evidence are more reasonable than others, and some are simply inaccurate or objectionable.

Minimum Words: 1300

Minimum of at least 3 additional sources (besides the text), one of which must be scholarly.

Citation Requirements: MLA page formatting, MLA parenthetical (in-text) citations, and MLA Works Cited page.

You must upload your own paper to Safe Assign before submitting a hard copy.

Here are some helpful words from Jack Lynch at Rutgers:

A good thesis has to be controversial. That means you have to make a case that can be either right or wrong, that people can argue about.

Neither, however, can you really argue about matters of opinion. Controversial isn't the same as subjective. If your paper is simply about a matter of taste or preference, there's no way to argue about it. So: if you can't argue about facts, and you can't argue about opinions — what's left? Matters of interpretation, things that (at least in principle) can be right or wrong, but aren't obvious on first glance.

Here's a tip: write on something you don't understand on the first reading, because it almost forces you to come up with a controversial thesis. By “don't understand” I'm not talking about “don't understand the words.” I assume you've made at least a minimal effort to get the literal meaning. What I mean is that you should find things that puzzle you, that don't seem to fit into your understanding of the book, because the best theses are always lurking there.

Once you've got a puzzle, something that bothers or confuses you, you're on the trail of a good, controversial thesis. Try to answer it to your own satisfaction, probably by resorting to close reading.

(2 optional essay-writing resources are attached below)
Think of your thesis as a project. It might be easiest to think about this project as having two parts: the first where you say something about the work at hand (a reading), and a second where you explain what the consequences or uses of this reading are. This approach can be structured as a brief formula:

"I want to show you [something in the text] in order to say [something you should care about]."

Your thesis should apply specifically and exclusively to the works at hand. If your thesis could apply to several other works in addition to the one(s) you are writing about, you need to narrow it down.

The story of Kate Swift in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio tells us that communication is important.

This thesis is so vague that you could plug in nearly any story and it would still work.

Your thesis must not invoke or rephrase a cliche.

The story of Louise Bentley is a perfect example of "once bitten, twice shy."

Your thesis must not make any kind of claim about Society, The History of Mankind, People Since the Beginning of Time, All the People of the World, Everyone Who Ever Lived, etc.

Your thesis must do more than express judgments about the characters in the texts. They are not human beings. They do not exist outside the text. They cannot change, no matter how much you may want them to. You may talk about them as having a psychology with motivations and feelings and the like, as long as this discussion is in service of a larger point and shows awareness that the character is a carefully constructed representation inside a carefully and deliberately constructed work.
What gives an essay its critical force is how well it constructs its central question and thesis which should be:

1) Focused. A well-focused central question is neither too broad nor too narrow, so that the length of the essay is appropriate to the case being made. It is acceptable, however, to mention how one’s thesis forms part of a broader argument which goes beyond the scope of the essay. It is also acceptable to have a multi-part thesis, each part of which takes a portion of the essay to establish.

2) Interesting. A good essay avoids stale formulations of the question and clichéd pros and cons in the thesis. It offers a personal conception of the problem, promising a fresh appreciation of the issues at hand.

3) Motivated. The question should be introduced and/or stated in such a way that its importance is clear. The motivation is what answers the challenge: “but, what hangs on this question?”

4) Controversial. A well-formed central question admits of at least two plausible, conflicting answers. If the thesis is a truism, the essay has nowhere to go. Indeed, essays tend to be engaging to the degree that they push against conventional wisdom, taking the less popular or seemingly less plausible side of an issue. Establishing the controversy is what answers the challenge: “but, who would disagree with this?”

What gives an essay its interpretive richness is how well the author carries on a dialogue with the text(s) in question.

1) Dialogue requires a balance between two extremes.

At one extreme, dialogue fails when one judges the views of another before taking the time to fully understand them. In interpretation, listening carefully to the other means quoting and working with quotes. It means seeking out the strongest version of each argument under consideration, not looking for weak points to exploit. At the other extreme, dialogue fails when we completely withhold criticism, accepting the other’s ideas wholesale, as if they could not stand up to scrutiny. Note that at both extremes we find a similar failure of respect. Whether one cuts the other off, or backs away and lets the other talk in a vacuum, one fails to give the claims of the other their due. In interpretive dialogue, you must not let either your voice or the voice of the author drop out. Another way to put this is that a successful dialogue with a text involves a balance between trust and doubt, a stance that is at once open-minded and critical.

An essay that blindly trusts its sources is not compelling. Never accept a claim simply on authority and don’t ask your reader to. The point in citing a text is never merely to say that someone said this or that, but rather to show what that author was able to show and how this advances your inquiry.

We cannot understand what a text establishes unless we test its claims in some way. Is the text asking the right questions? How well does it answer them? How does it compare to rival positions? Are there gaps in the argument? How might we restate its central claims more clearly and fully than it itself does?

On the other hand, this critical spirit must be combined with a certain generosity towards the text, a presumption that the text has something important to say to us.

One of the rewards of interpretation is precisely to learn new criteria by which to judge ourselves and our world. If you do not respect a particular text, write about another one. Condescension is anathema to good criticism.