

***We Were the Mulvaney* Extra Credit Essay**

Choose one of the following topics and put together an intelligent essay of 1,500 words or longer in which you analyze the novel and help us appreciate the novel's impact and meaning more fully.

Requirements:

1. The goal of your analysis is to illuminate the novel's impact and meaning for your audience. Everything you say about the novel—from generalizations to specific, textual details—should be clearly relevant to that goal.
2. Incorporate significant quotations from the novel into your body paragraphs to illustrate your claims.
3. The essay is due to turnitin.com by Tuesday, February 27th.

Main Analysis Prompt:

What is the importance of ____ in *We Were the Mulvaney*, and how does this aspect of the story contribute to the novel's impact and meaning?

Assignment:

Choose any element or dimension of the novel—anything specific that you find intriguing and that contributes to your appreciation of the work's artistic impact and meaning. Discuss your chosen topic in an essay in which you support your ideas with detailed references to the text and clearly-explained reasoning.

Possible Topics:

- 1) The unique form of the novel—including Judd Mulvaney's purpose in writing it—and the way the novel's larger sections and shorter sections relate and contribute to this form.
- 2) One significant character in the novel and how that character contributes to the novel's impact and meaning. Consider any of the following: the character's main conflict or struggle, a central image that illuminates the character, the character's chosen career and its symbolic implications, any key relationships that character develops, how the character changes or is transformed in the course of the story, or a key illuminating scene that helps us fully understand that character.
- 3) A pair of characters who serve as foils for each other and whose juxtaposition illuminates the novel's impact and meaning
- 4) Oates's choice of narrator and narrative point of view, as well the complexities and nuances of this choice
- 5) Oates's depiction of Marianne Mulvaney not just as a complex and unique human being, but also as a victim of sexual assault struggling to survive and heal
- 6) The ways in which animals are central both to the Mulvaney family and to the larger novel (there is a lot of complexity and nuance to this topic—including the contrast between animals' endearing or loving qualities and their darker instincts).
- 7) This specific dichotomy that is developed in the course of the novel:
Darwin's theory of evolution & natural selection vs. Religious faith and belief in God

8) The 2003 Open Question essay topic: According to critic Northrop Frye, “Tragic heroes are so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem the inevitable conductors of the power about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass. Conductors may of course be instruments as well as victims of the divisive lightning.”

How does this topic apply to *We Were the Mulvaney*s? Which character best fits the above quotation?

9) The 2011 Open Question essay topic: In a novel by William Styron, a father tells his son that life “is a search for justice.” Choose a character from a novel or play who responds in some significant way to justice or injustice. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze the character’s understanding of justice, the degree to which the character’s search for justice is successful, and the significance of this search for the work as a whole.

How does this topic apply to *We Were the Mulvaney*s? Specifically, why is it Patrick — the scientist, the cold rationalist — who acts to “execute justice” on Marianne’s rapist? What explains his transformation by the novel’s end, and what is the significance of his transformation?

10) Time, Impermanence, and Mortality

11) See me if you want to develop your own topic. You may also choose any specific element of the novel that makes a significant contribution to its impact and meaning, such as the following:

- a key scene or group of scenes;
- a recurring idea, image, or other motif;
- an important character (including what makes the character “round” or multifaceted, as well as what makes the character “dynamic” or changing in the course of the story);
- a foil character or a pair of characters who function as foils for each other;
- a specific object, place, action, or event whose literal role in the story suggests that it also functions as a symbol;
- an allusion (either direct or indirect) to another literary work;
- any element or combination of elements that you choose because you find it intriguing and potentially meaningful—or at least worth studying and considering more closely.