

WHAT and SO WHAT Statements

WHAT: a DESCRIPTION of a pattern that we've observed in imagery, theme, figurative language, form, context etc.

SO WHAT: a statement that tells our reader what is important about our observation, how that observation illuminates the text on a more general level

ANALYSIS of these patterns reveals the underlying system of values that shapes the work, and helps the author/speaker/text **make sense of the world** (or issue, or idea etc.)

So, our goal is always to move from the WHAT (a good observation) to a SO WHAT (a statement about why that observation is important and what it tells us about the issue/topic/text as a whole).

ANALYSIS vs. OPINION

Sometimes, we may begin with a SO WHAT or a general statement about a text, issue, idea etc. This statement is only an intuition or a "hunch" or an opinion (or in science, a "hypothesis") until we go back and find the WHAT that made us come to that conclusion; in other words, until we articulate clearly **what in the text made us think that**, our SO WHAT will remain at the level of opinion and is not an analysis.

WHAT and SO WHAT statements together ARTICULATE the RELATIONSHIP between the PARTICULAR and the GENERAL and constitute a THESIS.
The DEMONSTRATION of this thesis constitutes an ESSAY.

AN EXAMPLE: W. B. Yeats' "The Second Coming"

WHAT: I notice a pattern of diction in the poem:

- Abstractness of the language
 - "*Things* fall apart" (3, my emph.), "vast image" (12), "somewhere in sands" (13), "A shape" (14), "shadows" of birds (17): it's hard to call to mind a single, concrete image beyond a vague sense of space or looming shapes.
- Q: Does this particular pattern seem to link up with anything else in the poem in terms of abstractness? What other ideas come to mind when I think of "abstractness?" "Vagueness?" "Disorientation?" "Ideals" such as "God" which are difficult to define concretely? Is this abstractness good or bad in tone?
 - "widening gyre" (1), the "blood-dimmed tide" that is "loosed" (5) and "everywhere" things are "drowned" (6) = the tone is foreboding and brings to mind vagueness that is closer to being lost or adrift than it is to the elevation of an abstract ideal (like God or country etc.)
 - "passionate intensity" (8) describes "the worst" (7): the worst what? Passionate about what? The phrase is descriptive but vague, without an object or a goal.

SO WHAT: I start asking questions that begin with the more concrete and particular and then broaden to take in the poem and its context in a more general way:

- Q: Is it a good thing to be passionately intense but without any kind of goal or idea to be passionately intense *about*, and to be so in an environment that is without landmarks, where you might feel lost or adrift?
 - It seems rather **dangerous** and **lonely**; an image comes to mind of a person in a rage swinging blindly in a dark room or thrashing in a bloody tide.
- Q: What has made the speaker/world this way? What are the consequences of such a state? What does this pattern tell us about this state of affairs? Is it regrettable? Avoidable? Inevitable? What makes it so?
- When was the poem written? What is its CONTEXT?
 - Post WWI, which was so horrifying that it stripped away all the former certainties about how the world worked and what human beings were capable of.

SO: The **THESIS** articulates, to varying degrees of specificity, the **RELATIONSHIP** between the **WHAT** and the **SO WHAT** (note the cue words that indicate relationship):

WHAT: The pattern of diction **is a reflection of**

SO WHAT: the speaker's sense of the state of the world or of humanity. (**Good, but too general. You could say this about any number of poems, so there needs to be more indication of how this relationship works in THIS PARTICULAR poem.**)

WHAT: The vagueness and foreboding of the abstract language **reveals**

SO WHAT: a sense of groundlessness and lost-bearings where landmarks such as "ceremony" (6) that had helped people to know who and where they were are lost, "drowned" by anarchy. (**Better, but still need a bit more So What in the So What. What's the cause or effect of this loss? How does it fit into the Big Picture?**)

WHAT: The image of the falcon in his "gyre" (1) **illustrates** a cycle that is determined by the falcon's nature and of his environment, which, lost in a flood of "anarchy," is itself devoid of landmarks by which to navigate. The abstract diction of the poem **defines**

SO WHAT: this "anarchy" as a loss of ideals or "landmarks" that leaves us at the mercy of a dangerously "passionate" but objectless "intensity." The poem, therefore, articulates humanity's inevitable entrapment in the cycle of anarchy. We cannot escape, since, like the falcon's "gyre," it is part of both our nature and of our environment. (**Now we're talkin'. Okay, so walk me through it. SHOW ME how we got here. Write me an essay.**)

For every **WHAT** there is a **SO WHAT** to explain it.
For every **SO WHAT** there is a **WHAT** to back it up.