

Amsterdam Ethical Analysis

This semester we are going to be looking at many situations in which human beings must make complex choices that have many effects, good and bad, on those who make the choices, other people involved directly, and even people not directly involved, both at the time of the decision and in the future. Choices are complex, I think, when it is possible to make rational arguments for very different decisions, and throughout this course we will be examining such reasoning.

Amsterdam, a novel, gives us a number of difficult situations and their consequences, and allows us to see the thinking of the characters through the literary device of an omniscient narrator. Fate, of course, plays its part, but arguably the characters can be held responsible, so to speak, for their ethical choices. One such example is Clive's choice to ignore the attack on the woman in the Lake District.

To prepare for this essay, read the novel carefully, marking and annotating situations that present complex choices. Think about the different choices that a character could make and the potential benefits and disadvantages of those choices. Think about the characters' decisions and the reasons for those decisions. What are the conflicting goods in any particular situation? What goes wrong, and why?

For your essay, choose one situation that involves one character's decision. Your essay will take a close look at the ethical choices involved and attempt to explain the complexities of the situation.

Your introduction will prepare the reader for your analysis, perhaps with a short discussion of the conflicting goods you've identified—personal achievement vs. helping a stranger, for example. You could also give a short summary of the novel or tell a short personal anecdote that relates to the choice you're discussing. Be certain that you include the title and author of the novel, so the reader will know what you're talking about. Your thesis, at the end of the introduction, will give your judgment about the decision the character made.

You will probably need a short body paragraph to explain the context for the decision you are examining. This paragraph will consist mainly of plot summary, but keep it as brief as you can. The rest of the paper should avoid plot summary and focus instead on the character's reasoning and your own ethical reasoning about the situation. You might devote one paragraph to a discussion of another choice (or other choices) the character might have made and how you would explain and defend that choice (or choices). Then, in another paragraph or so, you might focus on the choice that the character did make. How do the consequences affect your understanding of the choice? Were the motives admirable, despite ensuing bad luck? Or should the character have weighed the alternatives differently? Try to clarify the ethical issues involved and avoid just telling what happened.

Your conclusion should bring the essay to a satisfying close, perhaps by relating your discussion to larger, real-life issues or by returning to an idea raised in your introduction.

Remember, this essay should demonstrate, above all, your own thinking about the issues raised by the story. Stay away from book reviews and on-line analyses!