

EXAMPLE SHORT INFORMATIVE THEME

Prompt: Many moral issues arise during a political campaign. Choose at least one of the moral issues that arises during the campaign depicted in *Primary Colors*. Then write an Informative Theme to describe how at least three of the characters deal with this moral issue (or these moral issues). Include quotations from the novel to bolster your description. Please be sure to include a reference list and in-text citations. Use APA Style.

TITLE OF PAPER: To Quit or Not to Quit

To Quit or Not to Quit

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To Quit or Not to Quit?

Moral dilemmas face the people working on any political campaign, and they definitely face the characters in the novel *Primary Colors* (Anonymous, 1996). *Primary Colors* provides insight into the world of a southern governor who is running for the Democratic nomination for President. The story chronicles several primary races that take place in the time before the Presidential election. While the novel is purely fiction, it provides a glimpse into the world of modern politics that is realistic but that portrays politics as corrupt and degrading. Jack Stanton is the candidate running for the nomination; he is one of the most truly gifted politicians who ever graced a podium. Stanton's story is told through the eyes of his most trusted aide, Henry Burton. Henry is an African American who describes himself as the "...only black face in [Stanton's] entourage" (Anonymous, 1996, p. 5). He has been hired to "take care of" the candidate (Anon., 1996, p. 21); his formal title is Associate Campaign Manager. Libby Holden is another staff member. She has been hired to do research on Jack Stanton to determine what information that opposing candidates might be able to dig up about him and use against him. Two basic moral questions are faced by these characters: How far does one go to protect a candidacy?; and How far does one go to degrade a political opponent? The characters' decisions and actions related to these questions take very different forms.

Henry Burton focuses on the first of the two moral questions for the duration of the story; he takes on the second question later in the story. Unfortunately, Stanton has more dirty laundry than anyone could hope to keep out of the press. Burton witnesses Stanton's infidelity to his wife on the first day that he meets Stanton; later, Stanton is publicly accused of many instances of infidelity. However, the times when Burton alone knows of crimes committed by Stanton are the ones that really test his moral standards. The best example of this is when Burton finds out that

Stanton could be the father of a teenage black girl's child. This causes a dilemma for him because while his job is to hide the information, he does not believe that hiding the information is right. He knows that his candidate is the best potential president, but he questions whether by helping Stanton succeed he is really hurting others such as the black girl and her family. In the end, he does cover up the scandal, but he feels terrible about it. He emphasizes this when he tells his girlfriend, "...you cannot imagine how ashamed I was" (Anon., 1996, p. 250).

Later in the novel, Henry learns that Stanton's opponent, Fred Picker, a man who portrays himself as pure and upstanding, has his own dirty laundry. He is rumored to have been a cocaine addict 20 years ago and to have had at least one gay affair. Again, Henry Burton struggles with this information. He knows his candidate is the best candidate, but he also does not want to destroy another man's career. He decides not to give the information to the press.

Like Henry Burton, Libby Holden ends up dealing with both moral issues, even though she has been hired to focus solely on Jack Stanton's dirty laundry. Her job is to do what she refers to as "dustbusting." This means that she is responsible for taking care of the mistakes of her candidate so that his mistakes do not destroy his chances of being nominated. For example, when she finds out that William McCollister's teenage daughter is possibly pregnant with Stanton's child, she arranges for the McCollister family to leave town, and she practically moves in with them to ensure that they do not tell others about the potential scandal. After Burton secures William McCollister's assistance in getting an amniocentesis test on the baby to determine paternity, Holden arranges for the test.

When Stanton learns about Fred Picker's potential dirty laundry, he asks Burton and Holden to go to Florida, interview witnesses, and gather information. After Libby expresses her reluctance by saying "I bust dust. I protect you." (Anon., 1996, p. 309), Stanton tells them,

“Think of it as dustbusting for the Democratic Party, for all of us” (Anon., 1996, p. 310). On the way to Florida, Libby tells Henry, “We are... *outside the mainstream*. We are... *in purgatory*. We are... *lost*. We are...*testing our limits*. You remember the song, ‘Limbo Rock’? You remember the words? ‘How *loooooowwwwww* can you *gooooo*?’ That’s us, Henri. We are moral submariners.” (Anon, 1996, p. 310). While in Florida, Henry and Libby verify that Fred Picker was a cocaine addict and had a gay affair.

Upon their return, Libby struggles with what should be done with this information, understanding that its release will destroy Picker and his family. Not surprisingly, Stanton wants to release the information to the country and tell Libby to do so. Shockingly, this is the situation that pushes Libby over the edge to suicide. She could not justify to herself why she would devastate the campaign and the life of an opponent, when her original job was to defend her candidate. She could see the moral justification for defense, but she could not justify an attack on another person for personal gain. Unlike Henry, who is just ashamed of himself, she could not live with what she and her job had become.

Unlike Libby and Henry, through most of the novel, Jack Stanton wants to win the nomination regardless of what he needs to do. When the news about the teenager’s pregnancy surfaces, he pursues ways of covering up the scandal, even though he knows he is guilty of having sex with her. When he learns that Libby and Henry have verified the information about Freddy Picker, he wants to release it to the press. Unlike Libby and Henry, he does not worry about the morality of what he is doing; he just makes a decision and expects the staff to comply.

Nevertheless, sometimes the moral questions posed by situations cause a turning point in peoples’ lives. A turning point never really came for Henry, who at the end of the novel is where he began. In his heart, he is a moral idealist, but he is so wrapped up in politics that he does not

always do the right thing. Although he decides to quit his job after Libby's suicide, he remains undecided at the end of the novel and has not quit. The turning point for Libby comes when, despite her reluctance, Stanton tells her to release the information to the press. It results in her death, which becomes a turning point for Stanton. After Libby's funeral, Stanton resolves the Freddy Picker dilemma himself by going to Picker, explaining that the damaging information is easily available, and allowing the candidate to drop out of the campaign in such a way that he can protect his family and reputation. Thus, at the end of the novel, Stanton appears to have faced his own personal moral question. He has chosen between taking advantage of the power that he can wield and compassion. Compassion won.

Reference

Anonymous. (1996). *Primary colors: A novel of politics*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.