Writing Exercise: Thesis Statements for Literary Analysis

Today I want you to focus on writing/drafting a thesis statement for your essay.

This is just a draft and is not set in stone; this exercise is designed to get you thinking about how to structure your thesis and your claims. Until the final draft of your essay, your thesis is really just a (hypo)thesis!

Before Writing a Thesis

- What is a thesis statement?
    - A thesis statement is the central claim, the primary argument, of a paper. It is what you are trying to prove with the paper.
- Before writing a thesis, you need to know what you are planning to argue in your paper.
    - Your thesis statement is the answer to an (implied) analytical question about a text
        - You are asserting an interpretation of the text or some aspect of the text
    - To develop your claim, close read the text, annotating it, and posing interpretive questions such as "Why did the author do X?" or "How does the imagery/diction/etc. here shape how we read this text/passage?"
    - Assemble evidence from the text (and outside sources when applicable) that you believe will support your claims
        - Be sure to anticipate how someone else might disagree with your claims and prepare responses to those disagreements to be included in your essay
    - Other things to consider in posing and answering questions:
        - Look up words from the text in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to see if there are interesting or useful meanings to the words that might apply
        - Consider what the text/author might be communicating—is there noticeable heteroglossia? Is there irony? Do we see tensions between different structures of feeling?
        - How do we know how we are supposed to read a text?
- A thesis statement should:
    - Convey some sort of claim or argument that the rest of the paper is designed to support;
    - Be contestable—i.e., people can argue with your claim—it is not a fact, but an assertion;
    - Generally, include a **plan of development**, a roadmap of how the paper will support the main claim
        - A plan of development lays out the reasons for accepting your thesis/claim, which in turn will be the topics of each section of your essay

Writing a Thesis Statement

While there are tons of ways to write a good thesis statement, a thesis generally contains three elements: a **qualification**, a **plan of development** demonstrating why your thesis is valid, and a **claim** presenting the exact position you are presenting.

1. Write out your **claim**—the interpretation you are making about the text in your essay
    a. If you do not yet have an interpretation, close read the text and brainstorm possible ideas.
    b. Another good way is to begin a free write, "I think this poem is about_____. . ." and see where it takes you.
    c. *Example: In Marie De France's lais Bisclavret, the werewolf is a metaphor for domestic violence to a highlight the tenuous position and danger posed to women*
2. Write a **qualification** to your claim—are there exceptions to your claim?
    a. Is your claim always accurate? Are there exceptions?
    b. Are there good reasons why your position may have a downside?
    c. How can you make your position have a reality check?
        i. To make absolute statements usually causes your essay's thesis to seem foolishly simplistic.
    d. What general reasons why your position may have problems can you admit up front?
    e. *Tip: begin your qualification with a word like "although" or "It is accurate that. . ." Don't worry if it's not a complete sentence.*
    f. *Example: Although on its surface it appears the poem is about a wife's betrayal of her husband. . .*
3. Write a **plan of development** for your claim—what are the major reasons to accept your claim?
    a. In general, what reasons (i.e., what in the text) led you to believe your position to be correct in spite of your qualification?
    b. Develop two-four good reasons to include
    c. *Example: the werewolf is a metaphor for domestic violence because of the diction of fear used to describe the wife's reactions, the opening warning about werewolves, and the violence the wife suffers in the end.*
4. Put it all together: Write your thesis statement by combining/revising these elements together into a sentence (or two)!
    a. *Example: Although on its surface Marie De France's lais Bisclavret appears to be about a wife's betrayal of her husband, the poem uses the werewolf as a metaphor for domestic violence to a highlight the tenuous position and danger posed to women. This is apparent when we examine the opening warning about werewolves, the diction of fear used to describe the wife's reactions, and the violence the wife suffers in the end.*

Note: This is just an exercise to think about how to structure and write a thesis. Not every thesis will necessarily include all of these steps (although most will), nor should they always follow this exact same order. This is meant merely as a possible and helpful model, not as a required template.