Critical Analysis Thesis Statements: Summary versus Interpretation

**Summary** describes what is obvious or readily apparent in the text:
In “A & P,” Sammy spontaneously quits his job and feels bad about it.

**Interpretation** offers an insightful opinion about the text:
In “A & P,” after Sammy spontaneously quits his job, he realizes that, in life, heroism won’t be rewarded.

**What’s the difference?**
The first statement communicates what is obvious upon just reading the story. However, the second statement goes a little further. It ferrets out the specific reason why Sammy regrets quitting. The text only tells us that Sammy thinks life will be hard after that episode. It is the reader’s job to interpret the why of that passage, to determine why life will be hard or what specifically will be hard.

Critical analysis thesis statements should...
- Form an interpretation about the work: in others words, try to derive some meaning from the work. Why does a character act the way he/she does? What literary elements help make this story's meaning? How does the setting reinforce the characters? What meaning should the reader take away from the story? Why did the writer write the story the way he/she did? Does the character learn a valuable lesson?
- Be an opinion, not a fact. Don't tell the reader something obvious. Example: In “The Storm” a woman has an affair with a man but it all turns out okay.
- Not be a question
- Be your own words
- Not be an announcement. Example: I am going to show why Sammy quits.
- Be specific. Not: In “A Haunted House,” Woolf writes in a stream of consciousness style to have an effect on her readers. Yes: In “A Haunted House,” Woolf writes in a stream of consciousness style to try to make her readers really feel as if they are haunted by the ghostly couple also.
- Be artistically, socially, or politically relevant
- Be able to be supported through direct quotations and summaries of the text
- Be able to be supported for 3-4 pages

Words that may be useful in your composition: the author reveals, this shows, _______ is motivated by _________. ___________ is significant because ____________.

Examine the sample thesis statements below. Even if you haven’t read the story, try to evaluate whether each statement is more summary or interpretation.

1. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a play about a young man who seeks revenge.

   Hamlet experiences internal conflict because he is in love with his mother.
2. In “The Lawsuit,” the main character finally feels compassion for his father's wife and is able to have peace even if he doesn't think there will be justice.

In “The Lawsuit” a man is unfairly sued by his father's wife and it causes a lot of grief to him and his family.

3. In 24, Jack Bauer is a CTU agent whose patriotism sometimes requires him to break the law for the good of the law.

In 24, Jack Bauer is a CTU agent conflicted by his devotion to the American government and his desire to do what is right.

4. In “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” the author uses conflicting images of light and dark to illustrate the waiters' different perspectives on life.

In “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” the author uses conflicting images of light and dark.

5. The waiters in the story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” say a lot about how younger and older people are different.

The waiters in the story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” represent how many people see life different when they are young as compared to when they are old.

Questions that might help you get started thinking:

- What annoys you in the story? [Start a thesis working with, “Annoyingly, . . .”]
- What pleases you in the story? [Start a working thesis with, “I was pleased that. . .”]
- What real life situations does it remind you of? [Start a working thesis with, “The situation of X in “X,” is similar to. . .”]
- What does the story reveal about X (X being human nature, race issues, gender issues, class issues, religious issues, etc.) [Start a working thesis with, “’X’ reveals that. . .”]
- What does the setting, point-of-view, or plot reveal about the characters?
- What does the setting, point-of-view, or plot reveal about the theme?
- What is the author’s attitude toward X? (X can be a type of person, situation, current event, etc.)

Sources:
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/618/01