

Sample Literary Analysis: Essay

In this analysis, student writer Arlo Bakker examines the main argument in an environmental essay by Wendell Berry.

Fast Food and Planetary Problems

The opening paragraph identifies the main point of the essay.

In the essay “Word and Flesh,” Wendell Berry argues that the oil spill that messed up Prince William Sound wasn’t caused by the *Exxon Valdez*. That oil spill was really caused by people in the developed countries (like us) who rely on others for many of our services. For example, we consume tons of convenience food, and transporting this food requires tankers full of oil. If we were more self-sufficient, and produced most of our own food, we wouldn’t have to rely on ships like the *Valdez* to haul oil through Prince William Sound to fuel trucks and other cargo carriers. In other words, our lifestyle causes oil spills, and the solution is to change the way we live.

The middle paragraphs explore different parts of Berry’s argument.

So why don’t we change? Berry says that we don’t change because we lack character and love. It takes character to admit that producing and transporting fast food uses up too much oil. It also takes character to admit that driving a car to school uses up more oil than walking to school or riding a bus. But change also requires love. We won’t change the ways we eat and drive unless we love clean water and healthy sea otters more than we love TV dinners and fast cars.

Instead of changing the way we live, says Berry, we just talk about environmental issues. In our talk, we refer to oil spills as a “planetary problem.” Why? Because the phrase excuses us from having to come up with a solution. Everybody knows that a planetary problem is too big for one person or one group to solve, so no one seems to take personal responsibility for it. But if we admit that an oil spill is a lifestyle problem, then we have to help solve the problem by making changes in our lifestyle.

In closing, the writer assesses the strength of Berry’s argument.

Berry’s argument is strong. Unless we value a healthy environment enough to make changes in the way we live, environmental disasters will remain a planetary problem that we’ll never solve. Producing our own food and cutting back on car travel may seem like impossible steps, but these are the types of things that we can and must do to save the planet. ■