

Theme English Handout

We concern ourselves about the themes of literature for many reasons. According to Michael Meyer, writing in *The Bedford Introduction to Literature, 5th Edition*:

Certainly one of the most important values of literature is that it nourishes our emotional lives...In addition to appealing to our emotions, literature broadens our perspectives on the world...Put simply, people who read literature experience more life and have a keener sense of a common human identity than those who do not...The interpretation of literary texts requires you to deal with uncertainties, value judgments, and emotions; these are unavoidable aspects of life. (4)

In order to understand what we mean by themes, the following definition of **theme** by Hans P. Guth provides insight:

To the extent that the ***moral or philosophical implications of a work*** can be abstractly stated, we speak of the work as having a **theme**. **The theme is a general idea that the writer explores by tracing its manifestations in the lives and thoughts of his characters.** A general statement of the theme is simplified and bare compared with its imaginative embodiment. The critic must [be on his] guard against hasty generalizing and oversimplification...*In concerning ourselves with the theme of a work, we concern ourselves with what it means to us as human beings.* (10)

Guth also has this to say about the author's treatment of a theme:

In looking for the unifying theme, we cannot rely on the author's stating it explicitly for our guidance...The attentive reader will look for thematic passages that complement and illuminate each other, and that can be fully related to setting, plot, character; he (she) will also look for hints that may be contained in the title or in the introductory and concluding paragraphs. (11)

In our analysis of literature and film, we will be looking for theme related to setting or settings, plot or structure, and any personal insight into character revealed by the author or narrator. Note: pay particular attention to the title and introductory and concluding paragraphs of the work you are studying.

For workshop purposes, then, check peer essays (and your own) for these elements of theme:

1. “moral or philosophical implications,” and
2. “what it means to us as human beings,” and
3. “the thematic passages that complement and illuminate,” also
4. “hints that may be contained in the title or in the introductory and concluding paragraphs,” and, finally
5. the items which will help to insure the essay is well-written.

The Elements of Theme

A theme is an **abstract concept** and is the distillation of an author's ideas and feelings about a particular subject developed throughout the written work. It deals with what the author believes it means to be human and with moral and philosophical beliefs and implications for us as members of the reading audience.

When writing about a theme, it is important to remember that the author has taken an entire written work to develop the thought and feeling about a particular subject. **Be very careful about giving a full attempt at analyzing the theme. Avoid simplicity or generalizations.** A sentence or paragraph is not sufficient to present the evidence and development required for thematic explication.

The author rarely announces a theme boldly, rather, themes are discerned by examining the totality of a work and developed by looking closely at all elements such as **title, tone, characterization, setting, irony, timelessness, plot or structure, language and point of view.**

Here are the three most basic concepts to remember about a theme:

First, it is possible to make a generalization which can be called the “theme” of a story. Second, our judgment of the adequacy of this generalization will depend upon the degree to which it harmonizes with all the features of the story in which it is incorporated. Third, the full meaning of the theme—which is to say, the generalization modified and particularized in terms of human experience—can be realized only through the story itself as it stands. (Boynton, Mack 56)

Works Cited

Guth, Hans P. *Literature, 2nd ed.* Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1968.

Meyer, Michael. *The Bedford Introduction to Literature, 5th ed.* New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.

Boynton, Robert W., and Maynard Mack. *Introduction to the Short Story, 3rd ed.* Portsmouth:

Boynton/Cook, 1985.