

THESIS STATEMENTS

Theme English Handout

Definition of **theme** from *Literature* by Hans P. Guth (1962):

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 concerns himself with the implications of theme as related to fictional or poetical works. In our studies for composition, we will be concerning ourselves with the implications of theme as related to fiction and nonfiction and film. Thus, we will explore "...the manifestations in the lives and thoughts of his characters," as well as the manifestations of a general idea in the lives and thoughts of the people an author chooses to write about, including him- or her- self.

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:

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.**

Your **TOPIC** statement, or **thesis statement**, is to be stated in terms such as these.
The due date for your typed, MLA formatted topic (thesis statement) is **TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2004.**

The following examples, taken from *Writing Themes about Literature, 2nd Edition*, by Edgar V. Roberts (1969) are examples of thesis statements to help you give evidence of a **“sophisticated, ambitious thesis...characterized by critical thinking.”** They are presented here by type of analysis.

Central Idea or Theme:

“Jane Austen’s idea [in *Northanger Abbey*] is that human nature and human drama are best found in incidents of everyday life, not in imaginative fantasies.”

or

“Jane Austen’s idea is that the true qualities of heroism are stability and common sense.”

Character Development:

“The key to understanding Jim’s character [in Conrad’s *Lord Jim*] is that he is a man capable of imagining the best in himself and in men generally—a man whose action at any given moment is controlled by an idea of the best.”

“She [Miss Brill] is made worthy of sympathy because of her harmless character, because of her loneliness, and because of Katherine Mansfield’s skillful treatment of her plight [in *Miss Brill*].”

Writer’s Style:

“Just as Hightower’s vision is affirmative and grand, so should Faulkner’s style be affirmative and bold. It should illustrate the power of language, and my belief is that it does.”

“John Steinbeck’s story, ‘The Snake’ is a mystery story, not in the detective sense but in the sense that it creates perplexity, bafflement, mild thrills, and final satisfaction.”

A Specific Problem:

“In the Poem ‘Desert Places’ (1936), is Frost Successful in Shifting the Meaning of the Term ‘Desert Places’? This question is another way of asking whether the poem itself is successful, for Frost’s shift of meaning is both the emotional climax and the physical end of the poem.”

Generic and Sloppy Words and Terms to Remove
Change these to more specific and appropriate diction!

A lot, or worse, a lot, or even allot (if used incorrectly)

You

Your

You're

Thing(s)

People

Someone

Anyone

Everyone

Basically

Certain

Nowadays

It

Reason being

Due to the fact that

KEEP THESE OUT OF YOUR PAPERS!