**Analyzing Theme**

Overview

The theme is the central idea or statement about life that unifies and controls the total work. It is the author’s way of communicating and sharing ideas, perceptions, and feelings with his or her readers. While we as readers cannot judge a work solely on theme, it is nevertheless true that one of the marks of great literature is the significance of its theme.

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| ***What a theme is NOT:*** | ***What theme IS:*** |
| * It is not the “moral” of the story. A *moral* is a piece of practical advice gained from a work to apply to our own lives. Works with morals are said to be “didactic”. * A themeis more complex than a moral and may have no direct advice or philosophical guidance for a reader. * It is not the **subject or topic** of the story and *not* a one-word label. * It is not a “hidden meaning” that needs to be pulled out of the story. | * Theme is a meaning released by the work when we take all aspects of the work in its entirety into account. * It is a comment on an aspect of human experience that the author expresses. * A theme is expressed in a full sentence that tells in some detail  what the work says about the topic. * Great works of literature have multiple themes. |

Important Points Concerning Theme:

1. **A theme does not exist as an intellectual abstraction that an author superimposes upon the work like icing on the cake.** It must emerge from the interplay of the various literary elements, and the reader’s interpretation.
2. **The theme may be less prominent and less fully developed in some works of fiction than in others.** Mystery, gothic, or detective fiction may not contain a theme at all because the author wants the reader to focus on another aspect entirely. Not all pieces of literature will contain a theme.
3. **It is entirely possible that intelligent readers will differ on what the theme of a given work is.** As long as a reader supports his or her opinion concerning theme, they can never be wrong.
4. **The theme of a given work need not be in accord with the reader’s particular beliefs and values.** The reader is not required to agree with or support the theme presented by the author if he or she feels it is not viable to his or her own experience.
5. **The importance of theme in literature can be overestimated**; the work of fiction is more than just the theme. However, the theme allows writers to control or give order to their perceptions about life.

Discovering Theme:

We discover theme only by becoming aware of the relations among the parts of a story and of the relations of the parts to a whole:

1. **Characters**: What kind of people does the writer create?
2. **Plot**: What does the writer have the characters do? Are they in control of their lives, or are they controlled by fate or something else?
3. **Motivation**: Why do the characters behave as they do; what motives dominate them?
4. **Tone**: What is the author’s attitude towards the subject? What is the narrator’s attitude? Are the two different?
5. **Values**: What values does the writer have the characters build? What values does the writer promote?
6. **Style**: How does the author express reality?

Some Additional Tips for Identifying Theme:

1. It is important to avoid confusing a work’s theme with its subject or situation.
2. We must be as certain as we can that our statement of theme does the work full justice.
3. The test of any theme that we propose is whether it is fully and completely supported by the work’s other elements.
4. The title an author gives a work often suggests a particular focus or emphasis for the reader’s attention.

Questions for Analyzing Theme:

1. Does the work have a theme? Is it stated or implied?
2. What generalization(s) or statement(s) about life or human experience does the work make?
3. What elements of the work contribute most heavily to the formulation of the theme?
4. Does the theme emerge organically or naturally, or does the author seem to force the theme upon the work?
5. What is the value or significance of the work’s theme? Is it topical or universal in its application?

**32 Master Topics**

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| ***Alienation—***creating emotional isolation  ***Betrayal—***fading bonds of love  ***Birth—***life after loss, life sustains tragedy  ***Coming of age—***child becomes adult  ***Conformity—***industrialization and the conformity of people  ***Death—***death as mystery, death as a new beginning  ***Deception—***appearance versus reality  ***Discovery—***conquering unknown, discovering strength  ***Duty—***the ethics of killing for duty  ***Escape—***escape from family pressures, escaping social constraints  ***Family—***destruction of family  ***Fortune—***a fall from grace and fortune  ***Generation gap—***experience versus youthful strength  ***God and spirituality—***inner struggle of faith  ***Good and evil—***the coexistence of good and evil on earth  ***Heroism—***false heroism, heroism and conflicting values | ***Home—***security of a homestead  ***Hope—***hope rebounds  ***Hopelessness—***finding hope after tragedy  ***Individualism—***choosing between security and individualism  ***Isolation—***the isolation of a soul  ***Journey—***most journeys lead back to home  ***Judgment—***balance between justice and judgment  ***Loss—***loss of innocence, loss of individualism  ***Love—***love sustains/fades with a challenge  ***Patriotism—***inner conflicts stemming from patriotism  ***Peace and war—***war is tragic, peace is fleeting  ***Power—***lust for power  ***Race relations—***learned racism  ***Sense of self—***finding strength from within  ***Suffering—***suffering as a natural part of human experience  ***Survival—***humans against nature |

*Theme List: M. Wood, Patriot High School, Riverside, CA https://sites.google.com/a/patriothighschool.com/english-­‐10-­‐2011-­‐12/assignments/themes  
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