

Theme

I. Theme is the most obvious statement of the "truth" of a work.

- A. Theme is the central idea in the work – whether fiction, poetry, or drama. It is the comment the work makes on the human condition.
- B. The theme deals with four general areas of human experience:
 - 1. *the nature of humanity (nature = essential qualities or characteristics)*
 - 2. *the nature of society*
 - 3. *the nature of humankind's relationship to the world*
 - 4. *the nature of our ethical responsibilities*
- C. The theme gives a work its meaning: it makes the work relevant.
- D. A theme exists only when an author has seriously tried to record life accurately or to reveal some truth about life.
- E. Stories which are purely for entertainment or escape often have no theme.

II. Searching for the theme may have pitfalls:

- A. *The theme is not the same as the subject or topic of a work.* The subject is what the work is about. You can state the subject in a word or phrase. In contrast, theme is what the work says about the subject. The statement of a work's theme requires a complete sentence, and sometimes several sentences.
- B. *A work's theme must apply to people outside the work.* Remember, theme is the comment the work makes on the human condition. Therefore, you must state theme in such a way as to include people in general, not just the characters in the story. Stating theme in a work of literature means that you move from concrete situations within the work to generalizations about people outside the work. In this way, literature becomes a form of philosophy – universal wisdom about the nature of reality.
- C. *Many works have more than one subject and thus more than one theme.*
- D. *Some works may not have a subject or a theme.* There may be so many contradictory or incompletely developed elements in a work that it is impossible to say for sure what the work means.
- E. *The subjects and themes of complex works can rarely be covered completely.* Even when the author says what the work means, you cannot exclude other possibilities. To get at a work's theme, you must look for patterns in the concrete world that the author creates. You must extrapolate from the evidence. But you can rarely see all the evidence at once or see all the possible patterns that are inherent in them. The best you can do is support your interpretations as logically and with as much evidence as you can. You may disagree with the author's conclusions about a given subject - with his or her theme. But your job is first to identify and understand the work's theme and then, if you are writing about it, to represent it fairly. To do this, however, is not necessarily to agree with it. You are always free to disagree with an author's world view.
- F. *Theme may be a presentation of a problem rather than a moral or message that neatly solves the problem.* The author may not be offering an answer to a problem. Often an author simply wants to give a greater awareness or understanding of life, not comment on it.

IV. Remember:

1. *the theme must be stated in a complete sentence.*
2. *do not use characters' names.*
3. *the theme is a generalization about life.*
4. *do not overstate the theme. (use words like "some, sometimes, may" rather than "every, all, always.")*
5. *the theme can be stated in more than one way.*

Questions about theme

I. The key questions for eliciting a work's theme are:

- A. What is the subject (that is, what is the work about)?
- B. What is the theme (that is, what does the work say about the subject)?
- C. In what direct and indirect ways does the work communicate its theme.

II. Remember that the theme deals with four areas of human experience.

- A. One strategy for discovering a work's theme is to apply questions about these areas:
 - What image of humankind emerges from the work?
- B. From the way the author presents characters, can you tell if the author thinks people in general are bad, or does the author show people as having redeeming traits?
 - If people are good, what good things do they do?
 - If they are flawed, how and to what extent are they so?
- C. Does the author portray a particular society or social scheme as life-enhancing or life-destroying?
 - Are the characters we care about in conflict with their society?
 - Do they want to escape from it?
 - Are they trapped by it?
 - Do they finally find a secure place in it without sacrificing their dignity or values?
 - What causes and keeps this society going?
 - Revolutionary upheavals?
 - Good people trying to do right?
 - Blind tradition?
 - If the society is flawed, how is it flawed?
 - Does the author show preference for one society by contrasting it with another?
- D. What control over their lives do the characters have?
 - Do they make choices in complete freedom?
 - Are they driven by forces beyond their control?
 - What controls them?
 - Are they aware of these controlling forces?
 - Does fate or some grand scheme govern history, or is history simply random and arbitrary?

E. What are the moral conflicts in the work?

- Is it clear to us exactly what is right and exactly what is wrong?
- When moral conflicts are ambiguous in a work, right often opposes right, not wrong?
- What are the rights in opposition to one another?
- Does right win in the end?
- To what extent are characters to blame for their actions? (Presumably, persons who have no free choice, who are driven by forces beyond their control, cannot be blamed for their actions.)
- Do ethical decisions emerge from situations or do they come from preconceived notions of right and wrong (from the Bible, for example, or from cultural tradition)?
- Is one set of moral values in opposition to another?

III. Another strategy for discovering a work's theme is to answer this question: Who serves as "moral center" of the work?

- The moral center is the one person whom the author gives right action and right thought (that is, what the author thinks is right action and right thought), the one character who is clearly "good" and who often serves to judge other characters.
- Not every work has a moral center; but in the works that do, its center can lead you to some of the work's themes.
- When identifying a work's moral center, answer questions such as these:
 - What does the author do to identify this person as the moral center? (Part of your argument may be simply to show that a character is indeed the moral center.)
 - What values does the moral center embody?
 - Is the moral center flawed in any way that might diminish his or her authority?
 - What effect does the moral center have on the other characters and on us?
 - If a work does not have a moral center, why not? What do we gain or lose from not having one?

IV. Thinking on Paper about Theme

- A. List the subject or subjects of the work. For each subject, state a theme. Put a check next to the ones that seem most important.
- B. Explain how the title, subtitle, and names of characters may be related to theme.
- C. Describe the author's attitude toward human behavior.
- D. Describe the author's attitude toward society. Explain the representation of social ills and how they might be corrected or addressed.
- E. List the moral issues raised by the work.
- F. Name the character who is the moral center of the work. List his or her traits.
- G. Mark statements by the author or characters that seem to state themes.