



Learning Centre

Discovering Themes in Literature

A theme is a central idea in a work of literature; however, the theme is not only focused on the work of literature itself but on what the work of literature suggests about people and/or society in general. Thus, when we talk about the theme of a work, we are also talking about its relevance to life. An author rarely states themes directly; instead, the reader must discover underlying themes based on the plot, characters and other elements in the work.

Themes often focus on one of these issues:

- The nature of humanity
- The nature of society
- The relationship between humanity and nature
- Ethical responsibility

A theme is a statement about how things are in the world.

Examples of Themes

Seeing examples of themes in a story can help you gain a stronger understanding of theme.

The short story “The Necklace” by Guy de Maupassant tells about a woman in 19th century France who tries to pretend that she is richer than she is by borrowing a necklace from a rich acquaintance. Unfortunately, she loses the necklace and ends up spending years doing backbreaking labour to earn money to replace it. Ironically, after all her hard work, she learns that the necklace she borrowed was not real. It was just a cheap copy. That is the plot of the story.

In writing about this story, students have identified the following themes:

1. In “The Necklace”, de Maupassant shows that when people strive for what they can’t have, they often lose what they do have. (nature of humanity)
2. De Maupassant suggests that the class system in 19th century France was insurmountable. (nature of society)
3. De Maupassant suggests that dishonesty can hurt most the person who is dishonest. (ethical responsibility)

4. “The Necklace” shows how personal tragedy can lead to strength of character.
5. De Maupassant shows how chance can often play a role in people’s lives.
6. De Maupassant presents false pride as the road to loss of freedom.
7. According to de Maupassant, women are inferior.

These examples show a number of key points about theme:

- A work can have many themes.
- A theme is a complete sentence, not just a topic or subject.
- A theme dramatizes ideas about life.
- A theme does not describe specific characters in the story; it describes people in general.
- A theme does not describe the work of literature; instead, it notes an important comment the work makes about life.
- A theme is not an opinion of the student; it is an idea that the student sees revealed in the work.
- A theme may not have been consciously put forward by the author; it may simply be something that a reader infers based on what the author says in the work.

Analyzing for Theme

When analyzing a work for theme, make note of the following:

1. What are some real life issues reflected in the work? Make a list.
2. What does the author say about those issues, directly or indirectly?
3. Why did the author write this work? What point is the author trying to make through writing this novel/poem/etc.?
4. What does the work tell us about how people behave?
5. What does the work tell us about how the society affects the individual?
6. What does the work tell us about the relationship of people to nature?
7. What does the work tell us about right and wrong?
8. Which of these subjects and themes seem most important in the work?
9. Which of the themes seem most meaningful and interesting to you?
10. For these important, meaningful, or interesting themes, identify things in the work which suggest these themes. Look at titles, chapter headings, names, plot, characters, settings, imagery and symbolism, and at things people say and do.
11. Consider if there is anything in the story that contradicts these themes.

For more information about analyzing literature, consult:

Learning Centre Handout RS4.10 Elements for Analyzing Fiction or the XE section on the bookshelf.