

Themes

Perhaps the single most difficult concept for students of an introductory literature course is the notion of theme. What exactly is a theme, and where can I find it? Fables have morals, biblical parables provide a model for moral behavior. If literature had a Facebook page, it might say "It's Complicated." Themes in fiction and literature are most often not intended to teach, preach, or even have a clear point. It is most often not presented directly; readers have to figure it out for themselves. Still, most writers attempt to find common ground with their readers. For starters, themes are not: subjects, settings, or summaries. If a subject is what the work is about, the theme is what the story has to say about the subject.

While theme, plot, and structure are inter-related-and likely inseparable-there are ways to locate and identify the theme of a work of literature. First of all, trust the text. By that, I mean that you need to pay attention to the parts that make up the whole. Note the title, see if you can find repeating patterns or symbols, and identify those details that seem to have a greater meaning than others. Authors use symbols, characters, plot and more to communicate their themes. Symbols represent something else beyond its literal meaning; characters face conflict and develop over the course of the story; dialogue and setting can provide clues as well.

So, themes are ideas-messages from creative writers about life and the real world. A theme can often be stated in a single sentence. They can be difficult to find and state, but here are some questions to guide you in your attempts to figure out an author's vision or ideas about life:

1. What are some of the subjects of the work?
2. What are some of the themes of the work? (What does the work seem to say about its subjects?)
3. What symbols, if any, does the author seem to use? What do they seem to communicate about the meaning of the work?
4. Are the themes of the work difficult to identify? Do the themes seem contradictory?
5. What worldview does the work represent? Is the work pessimistic or optimistic about the conditions of life? Are the characters happy with their lives? Do they strive for goals they find meaningful? How successful are they in solving their problems? Does the literary work seem to show that life can have purpose and order?

Common Themes in Literature include: the individual in nature and the individual in society, Also, the relationship of the individual to God or the gods, and the relationship individuals to one another. Examples of these may include man's destruction of nature, or the uncontrolled power of technology. Additionally, themes may consider the good or bad influences of society and social structure. Some works present a loving god, others an indifferent higher power, still others a world where there is no divine presence for humans to have faith in. Other often-used themes include: marriage, parenthood, coming of age (male and female character developing into maturity or adulthood), carpe diem (living fully for the moment) death, and alienation. These are a just a few examples; the main thing to remember is that a subject is not a theme: a subject is some aspect of life to be examined by the work; a theme is a statement, direct or implied, about the subject. The preceding examples of themes are

general. As a careful reader discussing a particular story, you'll need to bring your observations about theme closer to the work. In brief, the theme of a piece of fiction is its perspective/viewpoint regarding life and how people behave-towards each other, their environment, the heavens, and more.

Themes Are the Fundamental and Often Universal Ideas Explored In a Literary Work

© Kevin Cook and Indian Hills Community College