

FOCUS ON THEME

A THEME is a *central underlying meaning* of a work of literature. Themes are written as *generalizations*, for example, “No matter how people like to think of themselves as unique, we are all part of the herd”, or “Some aspects of culture are lost from one generation to the next.”

A theme may provide insight into human nature, relationships, humanity’s relationship to the world or the universe, ethics, philosophy or to life in general. There is MORE than ONE WAY to state a theme & a story may have more than one theme. Themes may be MAJOR or MINOR depending upon the evidence available to the reader.

Some themes are *didactic*, and are intended to convey a lesson about life.

You may AGREE or DISAGREE with a theme because it is an IDEA. The idea is there whether or not you agree. For example, if a story implies that human nature is basically evil, you may disagree, but in explaining theme you have to address the idea as is demonstrated by the story.

To determine a theme, consider:

1. The protagonist and other characters.
2. The conflicts presented in the story.
3. The resolution of the conflict.

RULES FOR STATING THEME:

1. Write the theme as a complete sentence.
2. DO NOT refer to the characters or events in the plot.
3. DO NOT use the word you in your theme.

When writing about theme:

1. State the theme and follow with examples from the text .
2. Discuss how characters, plot, setting or POV establish the theme.
3. Have the ideas presented in the text affected your thinking. What insights may a reader take from the text? Do you have new attitudes or beliefs as a result of reading the material? Etc.
4. Our personal experiences, expectations, beliefs and biases may influence how we interpret or state a theme. Remember to report what the writer appears to be suggesting, not just what we *want* to see.

FOCUS ON CONFLICT

CONFLICT, the clash of opposing forces or ideas, is a major element of literature. Note that there may be MAJOR or MINOR conflicts *and* there may be more than one conflict in a literary work to provide *contrast*.

There are five major styles/types of conflict:

1. Person vs. Self (This is called ***internal conflict***.)
2. Person vs. Person
3. Person vs. Society (These are **external conflicts**.)
4. Person vs. Nature
5. Person vs. the Supernatural.

The majority of external conflicts may also be defined as *Person vs. their Environment* so long as you define the environment: e.g. Person vs. Technology. A society, family, city, nature or fantasy world may all be called *environments*.

Conflicts may be further *identified* by their effects on the protagonist and other characters as:

Ethical or Moral - involves questions of right or wrong behavior.

Physical – requiring physical struggle or achievement.

Mental – requiring logic, strategy or planning.

Emotional – a struggle of feelings (love/hate, fear/courage etc.)

Spiritual – involves faith and beliefs.

Philosophical – involves an understanding of the nature of truth.

Psychological – involves the struggle between reality and the mind.

This is only a partial list, but it *identifies* most styles of conflict.

Conflict may also be described in ABSRACT or SYMBOLIC TERMS. In a Person vs. Person conflict, the characters may represent good and evil.

A DILEMMA is a type of conflict in which two choices of action are open to the protagonist BUT both are undesirable.

To discuss conflict consider the basic style and what causes the conflict. Is it believable? Realistic? To what type of person is it relevant? Is the RESOLUTION (or lack of one) realistic? Satisfying? Indeterminate?

Note that the point at which a conflict is RESOLVED is often called the climax of a story. The RESOLUTION of a minor conflict is called an anticlimax because it draws attention away from the main conflict. In a novel, there may be several *episodes*, each with its own minor conflict. These build to the main climax of the work.

DESCRIBE CONFLICTS in a sentence or sentences that give the type, identify it, and provide a descriptive example from the plot. It does not hurt to include the protagonist by name.

FOCUS ON CHARACTER

A character is similar to a person: name, personality, beliefs, life situation, physical description and other traits make up the complete character. We may never fully know a character since a piece of literature, most often, does not tell us *every last detail* about a character. Instead, we take what the narrator tells us and INFER the rest based on our knowledge, beliefs, biases, expectations and experiences.

Characters fall into two basic categories: MAJOR and MINOR. There are numerous ways of labeling character types.

CHARACTER TYPES (CONVENIENT LABELS)

Loose Definitions

Protagonist	Main Character (NOT necessarily a hero)
Antagonist	Character or force opposing the PROTAGONIST
Round character	Complex and well described personality
Flat character	Lacking description or DEVELOPMENT
Dynamic character	One who undergoes significant change
Static character	One who does not change
Realistic	A ROUND character, one who is believable
Stereotype	A FLAT character representing a <i>type</i> , “the Jock”, “the Geek”, “the Bully” etc.
Stock character	Similar to a STEREOTYPE; a FLAT character such as a hippie, bartender who gives advice, a mobster etc.
Foil	A character whose behavior or attitudes contrast with the protagonist.
Confidant(e)	A character in whom the PROTAGONIST confides. Since the word is from French, we may add an “e” for a female.

Consider the following terminology whenever you write about characters:
DEVELOPMENT – the description and changes in character.

MOTIVATION – why characters do the things they do (related to conflict).

DIRECT PRESENTATION – readers are told what to think of a character by the narrator or another character.

INDIRECT PRESENTATION – readers see what a character does, thinks or says and then we decide what to think of the character.

CHARACTERIZATION – the method of presentation of character used by the narrator (direct, indirect) , action, description, dialogue etc.

CHARACTER SKETCH – a description of a character’s personality, life situation, and behavior backed by quotations that demonstrate our assertions. Character type, motivation and conflict are all important aspects of a sketch. Physical appearance may or may not be relevant to this description of character.

NOTE: A CHARACTER SKETCH IS NOT A DRAWING! THE TERM “SKETCH” IS USED METAPHORICALLY.

Questions that help to direct our responses to characters.

What *type* of character is this?

What are the character’s *motivations*? *Conflicts*?

Is the character *consistent, believable and fully developed*?

What *changes* does the character undergo?

What aspects of the character are left for the reader to infer?

What does the character *say*? *Do*? *Think*?

What do other characters say about the character?

Do the character’s thoughts or beliefs match her or his actions?

Is the character puzzling? Maddening? Irritating? Admirable? Why?

What styles of *presentation* have been used? How well do they work?

DO NOT attempt to answer all of the above questions in writing! They are to get you thinking in your rough work before you write.

DO USE word webs lists and T-charts too plan a character sketch before you write.

FOCUS ON POINT OF VIEW

The phrase POINT OF VIEW (POV) refers to the relationship of the narrator to the events/characters in the story. The NARRATOR is the person telling the story. When you identify point of view, you recognize how much the author is allowing you to see about the thoughts or actions of characters. Consider whether the narrator is RELIABLE or UNRELIABLE; that is, is the narrator as truthful as possible? Narrators may deceive/delude themselves, or they may lie. The narrator may be just as surprised by events as the reader.

THE FOUR MAJOR LITERARY POINTS OF VIEW

1. *First Person*
 - The “I” POV, showing what the narrator thinks & feels.
 - Reader sees, hears what narrator hears/sees.
 - A “lifelike” POV.
 - Tends to involve the reader in the story, often as a confidant or listener.

2. *Omniscient*
“all-knowing”
 - The narrator is usually OUTSIDE the fictional world.
 - Characters are referred to in third person (he/she/they).
 - The narrator can see into the minds of all characters and report what happens simultaneously in different places.
 - The narrator can intrude into the story and comment on events/actions.

3. *Limited Omniscient*
 - Allows us to see into the mind of ONE person – ie, is “limited” to *omniscient* knowledge of one character.
 - Lifelike, because there is one perspective of events (similar to first person but refers to characters in third person).
 - The narrator knows all but does not reveal all.
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4. *Objective*
(aka “*dramatic*”)
 - ONLY INDIRECT PRESENTATION of what the characters SAY and DO.
 - Uses third person to refer to characters.
 - Like a play or film in which characters’ thoughts are NOT revealed.

Second person POV may be **logically** impossible. Some stories are told in a form in which the writer frequently uses the word “you” to address the reader. It is debatable whether this is truly “second person”.

In novels, the POV may shift from one to another. This is not common in short fiction, where one POV usually dominates. A story *mainly* in limited omniscient should be identified as such.

FOCUS ON SETTING

SETTING is, essentially, TIME and PLACE. The place may be specific, such as Stanley Park or general, eg, a forest. The season, date, weather, time of day, or proximity to historic events can influence/enhance the meaning of the setting. The readers' backgrounds & experiences (or PRIOR KNOWLEDGE) may affect their understanding of the setting.

Setting may:

- cause conflict
- motivate characters
- create mood or atmosphere
- reveal character
- be a symbol
- contain philosophical ideas.

Pay attention to whether the setting is vividly described or general, familiar or strange, constant or changing. MOOD or ATMOSPHERE (below) may also be considered as part of the setting. A haunted house on a dark and stormy night will likely have a "creepy" atmosphere.

FOCUS ON MOOD/ATMOSPHERE

The feelings or emotions a book evokes from the reader may be called either MOOD or ATMOSPHERE. Mood may be related to GENRE, eg horror stories and thrillers have tense, suspenseful or mysterious moods.

Use a variety of words to describe MOOD or ATMOSPHERE: *serious, somber, poignant, melancholy, black, dark uneasy* – as opposed to just "sad". Or consider *warm, light-hearted, relaxed, tender or dreamy* – as opposed to "nice". A story may be "scary", but also *tense, suspenseful, frightening, horrifying, exciting, terrifying*; a story may be "funny", but also *whimsical, irreverent, bitingly witty, uproarious, or sly*.

A narrative may also contain light (amusing) sections alongside serious or sad sections. These MOOD SHIFTS are planned by the writer. Consider their effects. The writer has a PURPOSE in manipulating the atmosphere that may be tied to THEME, CHARACTER or CONFLICT.

In discussing MOOD or ATMOSPHERE consider the following:

- What is the dominant MOOD? Does the MOOD shift? How?
- How do settings, characters, POV or events affect MOOD and vice versa?
- Describe particular scenes that have powerful effects.

FOCUS ON STYLE

STYLE is a combination of elements which are intentionally manipulated by writers to generate an overall effectiveness in their narratives (stories).

1. DICTION.

This is the vocabulary and word usage of the story. It may be learned (educated) or full of street slang. It may be in the best Standard English or in a dialect. It may be formal or colloquial (conversational).

Does the writer try to lull the reader, shock the reader etc? Does the diction say about the setting, mood, characters, narrator or writer? Is the diction appropriate or fitting to the story?

2. SENTENCE STRUCTURE.

Are the sentences easy to read? Do they require re-reading? Is dialogue realistic? Are there fragments?

3. TONE.

Is the writer/narrator serious? Playful? Humorous? Ironic? Satirical? Remember that the TONE may be at odds with the ATMOSPHERE. The TONE also affects the PERSONA (the type of personality or person we imagine as the voice or personality of the narrator). If the tone is opposite to our expectations it may be referred to as an IRONIC MASK – the narrator is only pretending Her or his tone.

4. ORGANIZATION.

Is the story chronological or does it involve FLASHBACKS? Is it in sections? Does it all happen at one time? Is the organization easy to follow? Clear?

5. LITERARY DEVICES.

Does the writer use figurative devices such as metaphor, simile, analogy, allusion, symbols or irony? Are there repetitions? Contrasts? Vibrant description of sensory images? Is the use of figurative devices excessive? Or too minimal? Is symbolism obvious (overt) or unclear or obscure?

6. POINT OF VIEW.

Is the narrator objective (detached) or subjective (involved) in the story? Name the specific POV. Is it consistent? What PERSONA is suggested by the voice of the narrator? Is the narrator reliable?

7. GENRE.

Genre is the category of a piece of writing – ghost story, drama, thriller, tragedy etc. Readers have certain expectations of genre, although these expectations may be turned on their heads from time to time to suit the writer's purpose.

FOCUS ON SYMBOLISM

A SYMBOL is usually a *concrete object* that represents an *abstract idea*. Another way of saying this is to say a person, place, thing, or action represents something greater than itself. One could argue that an abstract idea can also be a symbol. Some of the most common examples include hearts or red roses to *represent* love.

There are common national symbols such as a maple leaf or beaver to represent Canada, and we are all probably familiar with visual symbols for religions (cross, star of David, khalsa, crescent moon and others). Regions, ethnic groups, neighborhoods and even teams use symbols to represent themselves. It would not be too difficult to find *hundreds* of examples (it would also be quite educational).

In literature, however, we are dealing with text so we have to look for symbols with our minds' eyes as well as with our intellect. This is because we may have to do some interpretation to pick up on symbols. A word ***by itself*** may be considered as what we may call a SIGN, that is, a definitive thing like, a lion. **BUT** if the LION represents the quality of COURAGE, *then* it is a SYMBOL.

USEFUL TERMS:

SYMBOLISM - The use of symbols to try and demonstrate ideas outside of the plot.

SYMBOLOLOGY – A system of symbols that are inter-related.

ALLEGORY – Symbolic narrative in which a system of symbolic elements and characters are presented to represent not only themselves, but also a larger picture or story. Notably, in high school, we often encounter the allegory *Animal Farm* by George Orwell.

HINTS FOR FINDING & DISCUSSING SYMBOLS:

Colors, animals, characters and their habits, repeated actions, time of day, locations, dates, etc. (This in by no means a full list of possibilities.)

Clearly state (quote) where the symbol is in the text, and explain what it means in one or two sentences. Look for related symbols and explanations that are evident in the text. Always have the text as backup before venturing into speculation on the importance of the symbol outside the text.

Symbols are great for helping us to discuss or decide upon themes.