



Theme

“The **theme** of a piece of fiction is its controlling idea or its central insight. It is the unifying generalization about life stated or implied by the story. To derive the theme of a story, we must determine what its central *purpose* is: what view of life it supports or what insight into life it reveals.”

“Not all stories have theme...Theme exists only (a) when an author has seriously attempted to record life accurately or to reveal some truth about it or (b) when an author has deliberately introduced as an unifying element some concept or theory of life that the story illuminates. Theme exists in all interpretive fiction but only in some escape fiction. In interpretive fiction it is the purpose of the story; in escape fiction, when it exists, it is usually an excuse, a peg to hang the story from.

“Whatever central generalization about life arises from the specifics of the story constitutes theme...A rich story will give us many and complex insights into life.

“We must never think, once we have stated the theme of a story, that the whole purpose of the story has been to yield up this abstract statement...The function of interpretive writers is not to state a theme but to vivify it. They wish to deliver it not simply to our intellects but to our emotions, our sense, and our imaginations. The theme of a story may be little or nothing except as it is embodied and vitalized by the story. Unembodied, it is a dry backbone, without flesh or life. “

---Louis Perrine

“Theme is related to the other elements of fiction more as consequence than as a parallel element that can be separately identified. A story’s theme, that is, grows out of the relationship of the other elements. To formulate a story’s theme, we try to explain what these elements collectively suggest. Since the theme of a story derives from its details of character, plot, setting, structure, language, and point of view, any statement of theme is valid and valuable to the extent that it accounts for these details. To explain the theme of “The Prodigal Son,” for example, without accounting for the father’s speech to the elder son would be to distort the meaning of the story.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember about theme is that it is an abstraction from a story’s complex uses of language to describe and chart action, depict setting, and portray character. A statement of theme derives from the particulars embodied in language and action. The very concreteness and particularity of fiction should make us cautious in searching out theme. In fact, it would be more useful to avoid thinking of theme as hidden somehow beneath the surface of the story and instead to see theme as the implied significance of the story’s details. There are a multiplicity of ways to state a story’s theme, but any such statement involves a necessary simplification of the story. In clarifying our sense of a story’s idea, we also inevitably exclude some dimensions of the story and include others. We should be aware that the themes we abstract from stories are provisional understandings that never completely explain the stories.”

---Robert DiYanni



Points to Remember about Theme and Writing the Thesis Statement about Literature

Narrative Technique

- Narrative technique is the method, the process, the system, the scheme, the design of a work of literature; and the term refers to the literal, concrete elements of fiction, poetry, drama, and non-fiction, both globally and singly.
- Technique may be the structure or organization of a plot or drama (chronological, use of flashback, circular, etc) or the structure of an argument in a speech or the verse form in poetry.
- Characterization is technique. An author of fiction or drama may have the primary focus on characterization or on setting, for example. An author of a poem may employ sound devices or particular kinds of images or poetic shifts in the development of the poem.
- Technique is the concrete means through which themes arise organically from the work of literature. Theme is the abstraction, the “mysterious” as Billy Collins explains, a truth about life embodied in the work.

Theme:

- Theme is the central and unifying concept of a story and will account for all the major details of the story.
- Always state theme as a sentence, never as one word (War destroys the lives of the innocent.).
- Never state theme as a cliché.
- Always state theme as a universal truth about life, as a general statement that is true for all people everywhere for all time rather than about a specific character (for Hemingway’s “Old Man at the Bridge”: war destroys the lives of the innocent; *not* war destroys the life of the old man at the bridge)
- Theme always arises from the literary text; for example, in fiction, the climax of the story is a good place to look to think about theme (if the old man at the bridge in Hemingway’s story “Old Man at the Bridge” had survived and recovered his animals instead of being killed by the artillery as foreshadowed, the theme would have been a different one).

A **thesis statement** about a literary work is always a connection between technique and theme.

• Example of a thesis statement about literature:

In “Old Man at the Bridge,” Ernest Hemingway focuses on *the helplessness and downfall of the old man*** to show how war destroys the lives of the innocent†.

****technique**

†theme