

# Topic and Interpretation of Theme

## Topic

When we use the word **topic**, we are simply referring to a **broad subject** of a literary work, expressed **just a word or short phrase**. In any given work of literature, there are dozens of topics. For example:

- *trust, loss, the power of words, nostalgia, unrequited love, inner conflict, stereotypes, emotional exile, survival techniques, charity*

More specifically, think of Gish Jen's "Who's Irish?"

In broad terms, this story deals with *immigration, assimilation, identity, mother-daughter relationships, child-rearing in America, intergenerational conflict*, just to name a few topics. You will find other topics embedded in the story as well.

Here is the main idea of this week's lesson:

A topic is NOT a theme. A theme, however, is *born* of a topic.

## Interpretation of Theme

This week, while we formally encounter them --a key element of fiction—it is actually a part of the stories we've been dealing with indirectly all along. 😊

The **theme** of a story, in the simplest terms, is its underlying message, or "big idea." In other words, when we ask ourselves what the theme of a work of fiction might be, we are really probing his question: *What critical **belief** about life does the story, play, or poem convey?*

We could ask ourselves, what does "Who's Irish?" suggest *about* mother-daughter relationships, or *about* child-rearing in America? This is how you get to theme.

This belief, or big idea, transcends cultural barriers. It is usually *universal* in nature. When a theme is universal, it touches on the human experience, regardless of race or language. It is what the story *means*. Most often, **a piece of writing will have more than one theme**. This is crucial to understand! If you ever go online or into an English class and are "told" what the theme of a work of fiction is, do not take that at face value. Theme, thankfully, is more elusive than that. Read on!

Literature earns its value in the cultural landscape *because* of theme. Think about some lighthearted television sitcoms you have seen that you have found trite and boring. Was there a significant problem in the show that needed to be solved? Often not. In much the same way, if a piece of writing doesn't have deeper meaning than we can just see on the surface, it is just as shallow as the tv sitcom. [Of course, not all tv sitcoms are trite, but many are!] In order for a creative work to be meaningful and lasting, it needs to have a *theme* or *themes*—some message that resonates among humans, usually in a universal way.

Of course, a story, poem, or play can simply entertain, but **those that make the reader aware of some aspect of the human condition** are the ones that tend to be most valued across generation, cultures, and geography.

## How Does a Writer Develop Theme?

How does a writer develop a theme for a story? It really comes down to what the writer believes about life. If a writer has a belief system or feels strongly about certain things - and most people do - then those strong life views will be reflected in their writing. For a work to last, it needs depth, and depth in writing reflects depth in the writer.

Universal themes developed in a story ultimately expand the reader's knowledge of being human by the expression of experiences through different perspectives. Common topics in literature can include loneliness, oppression, repression, transformation, good versus evil, struggle and accomplishment, death, rebirth, initiation, redemption, and free will.

**What the story ultimately suggests ABOUT that topic, is what we call a *theme*.**

For example, maybe one main topic in a story is marriage. To find theme, ask yourself, "What does this story ultimately suggest to me *about* marriage? Your answer to that question gives you the theme. Maybe the answer is something like, *Marriage requires individuals to sacrifice aspects of their own freedom in order for the marriage to be successful.*

See? That's a possible theme!

## Literary Analysis

With a specific purpose in mind, the author carefully crafts theme using literary tools. By employing literary tools, the author embeds the theme or meaning into separate elements that make up the totality of the literary piece.

The common tools of the author's craft include all those you've been studying this semester: character development, setting, mood, plot, point of view, symbolism, and irony. An author might also use metaphor, simile, onomatopoeia, personification, and motif (or repetition). You have been learning about these terms all semester.

As you have already gleaned from this course, the careful examination of these tools is a part of literary analysis. By observing how the tools are being used individually, and by critically thinking about how they relate to one another to construct the expression of theme, the reader pushes beneath the surface details to discover the literature's deeper meaning.

### **Many students make the mistake of never moving past the surface details.**

Focusing only on the surface details results, in a summary, for example, is *not* literary analysis. Just as a scientist examines a specimen to prove a hypothesis, the literary analyst has a thesis to *prove*. Like a scientist who methodically examines separate aspects of a specimen, such as its appearance, movements, and responses to environmental factors, the student is expected to make careful observations of the individual parts of a literary piece.

This examination takes time and concentrated effort. To uncover themes and meanings, begin the analysis by making verifiable observations, like a scientist, through careful reading. Observations that are verifiable are those that can be pointed out and agreed upon by others. These observations are the raw data of literary analysis; they are objective facts. Objective facts are the third person accounts that indicate who is doing what in the story. They establish the when; they confirm the where. They recognize interesting key words and repetitions. They record character dialogue, and they note specific devices used by the author. Keep in mind that the author made a decision about each of these objective elements.

Your role as a reader/analyst is to determine why these creative decisions were specifically made.

### **How Readers Also "Create" Theme**

Interestingly, while an author likely has one or several main theme in mind, you as the reader may also uncover a theme the work that has little to do with authorial intent; in other words, maybe a message percolates to the surface for you, based on the nexus of the text itself and your own lived experience and personal values.

It is very important to pay attention to the *personal thoughts and emotional reactions* that surface when reading the details of the story. This type of information is **subjective**. Subjective information arises while experiencing the literature. Subjective information is the thoughtful first person “I think, I feel, I know” responses that come from your own rich background of knowledge and personal experience.

These subjective responses are valuable for making initial critical connections to the details within the author’s work. Your probing “I wonder why” questions initiate from subjective responses. Just like the tendency to focus only on surface details—don’t make the mistake of only reporting your subjective impressions, reactions, and opinions.

To conduct a thorough analysis which results in the identification of themes—surface details, subjective information, objective data, and inferences must all be reintegrated to reveal the big picture of theme and deeper meaning. Most importantly, repeatedly ask probing *how* and *why* questions while reading.

**For example:**

- Why did the character always wear red?
- How does the winter setting relate to the inner qualities of the character?
- Why is that answer important? What is the significance of the open window?
- How is the open window helping to express the idea of freedom?
- What other details are working with the window to develop the theme?
- What specific details created the depressing mood?
- If . . . happened. why did that occur? What caused it?
- Do elements repeat? Why are the repetitions noteworthy?
- Do similarities or differences exist between characters? What are they? How do they contribute to the development of a unified theme?
- What assumptions about society, race, gender, beliefs are inherent in the work or in the minds of individual characters?

## **Dig Deep!**

Look even closer as you continue to read this semester, and move beneath the surface details. Shift further into the analysis by asking *how* and *why* the answers above are working together to construct a particular theme.

These probing questions create the critical connections that are needed for a comprehensive understanding of the author's literary material.