

How to Write an Analysis of Theme

by DR DAVIS on AUGUST 10, 2007

What is it?

Analysis of theme involves working the concept, thought, opinion or belief that the author expresses. It is very common (and helpful) to consider theme when analyzing another aspect of literature rather than on its own. The theme of a work is the main message, insight, or observation the writer offers.

The importance of theme in literature can be overestimated; the work of fiction is more than just the theme. However, the theme allows the author to control or give order to his perceptions about life.

How do you find the theme?

Sometimes the theme can be discovered by reading through the work and looking for topics that show up again and again. When you were reading the work, did you think, "Ah, didn't he already talk about that?" If you did, then you have probably noted a theme.

If you are having trouble picking out a theme, examine the relations among the parts of a story and the relations of the parts to the whole:

Characters: What kind of people does the story deal with?

Plot: What do the characters do? Are they in control of their lives, or are they controlled by fate?

Motivation: Why do the characters behave as they do, and what motives dominate them?

Style: How does the author present reality? Does he habitually use long or short sentences? What kind of paragraphs are there? Are they short and conversational or are they long and involved? Is the work divided up? If so, how and where?

Tone: What is the author's attitude towards his subject?

Values: Does it seem like the author is making a value judgment? What are the values of the characters in the story? What values does the author seem to promote?

Think about how the author conveys his ideas.

Consider:

- o Direct statements.
- o Imagery and symbolism.
- o A character's thoughts or statements.
- o A character who stands for something (e.g. an archetype*)
- o Overall impression/tone/moral of the work

Can you identify major and minor themes?

A short story probably only has one theme.

A novel often has several.

Discovering minor themes

Are there recurring images, concepts, structures OR two contrasting ones?

Motifs often support minor themes.

How can allusions make a difference?

An allusion is a figure of speech wherein a phrase which is culturally recognizable is used as a type of shorthand for something else.

Often allusions are used to make a large point quickly. "He was a Houdini" means he can get out of tight situations. He might even be an actual escape artist.

Are there any allusions? Are these historical, biblical, modern?

You will not be able to recognize allusions if you do not know the cultural reference, so many readers looking at a work will miss the allusions. If you happen to be knowledgeable about the allusions in the work, this might be a good point for you to begin with.

If there are multiple allusions about a particular topic, that is a good indication that the topic is a theme in the work.

*Is there a conspicuous recurring element which appears frequently in works of literature?

This is called an *archetype*: a character, an action, or situation that seems to represent common patterns of human life. For example, in fairy tales the abused person is always good. This lets you know who is good in the story immediately (a character identification) and it helps you to believe that good will triumph over evil (a theme).

An example of the beginning of a theme analysis

A major theme in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is growing up. Throughout the work Alice changes size twelve times. People change size when they grow up. The size change equating to growing up is also a metaphor; in English the description "being bigger" often means "being older." For the purposes of the story, Alice grows both larger and smaller, but with each change, Carroll is symbolizing Alice's maturation process. Each time she grows larger or smaller, she has to deal with a problem related to the change in her size.

The very first size change comes when she has recklessly followed the White Rabbit down the hole and into Wonderland. She found a key which unlocked a door, but she could not go through it because she was the wrong size. This fantastical situation happens often in real life. As children are growing up, they often feel that they are not the right size to do whatever they want to do. One day they might feel that they should be bigger so that they might go wherever they wished and the next day they might feel that they should be smaller so they do not have to do chores. Thus Alice's desire to be a different size in the very first chapter of the book indicates that growing up is a major theme in the work.

Of course, the analysis is incomplete, but it shows how a theme analysis might start.

RESOURCE:

<http://www.teachingcollegeenglish.com/2007/08/10/how-to-write-an-analysis-of-theme/>