

Mouthing the Message: *An Approach to Articulating the Theme Statement of a Literary Work*

Theme: statement about life or a universal truth that the writer communicates through a literary work. A phrase that has the ability to take the form of a sentence (e.g., the fleeting nature of life → life is fleeting in nature).

🌀 Template for articulating Theme

NB: **note** keep in mind that this is merely a starting point. There are many other configurations to phrasing the theme statement (see catalogue of themes below).

General Concept + *is/are* + adjective/adjectival phrase,
especially when one considers (more focused, related idea).

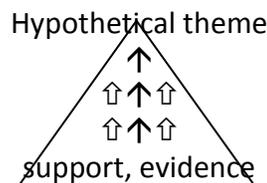
eg: Discrimination against the poor is unjust, especially when one considers the prevalence of classism in privileged communities.

Two Methods:

1. Induction: starting with an educated guess, finding supports

- a) Read the piece once through, **making note of Larger topics** and striking subject matters that arise.
- b) Devise a **hypothetical theme**, an educated *guess* at what the theme *might* be about (review the catalogue of common themes if you're searching for a starting point)
- c) Read the piece again, this time **scouring the text** for any **evidence** (literary device, character development or relations, dialogue) that supports your hypothesis.
- d) If you are successful at finding enough support, then keep your proposed theme. You may need to rework your theme or change it, however, if you are unable to find evidence to support your initial claim.

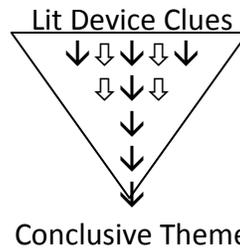
Fig. 1: Induction



#2. Deduction: gathering clues that lead to a conclusive message

- As you read through the piece, **gather clues** (devices, use of language, tone) that may lead to a larger message (for fiction analysis: focus on the six other elements of the story: narrative structure, conflict, character, voice, literary device, setting).
- Group similar ideas together and formulate *Larger topics* (see ⇔ below). Convert that larger topic into a more specific theme by using the *Theme Template* (see ☯ above) to arrive at a succinct theme statement.

Fig. 2: deduction



Some key strategies that writers may use to develop themes:

Motif - recurring images, symbols (e.g., In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the prevalence of images in nature may point to some relationship between humans and their surroundings)

character relationships (e.g., in *MSND*, the pursuit and rejection of love between various couples)

central conflicts - what internal and external struggles are encountered by the protagonist(s)?

Catalogue of Archetypal Themes (add to this list with ones you have encountered)

⇔ Converting Larger topics to more Focused Themes¹

Larger topic: *Taking Action to Care for Others*

More specific themes:

- * It is sometimes hard work to care for others, so you must be persistent, confident, patient and determined.
- * No matter what your age, you can still take action if you believe in yourself.
- * You may have to give something up even if you don't want to, and people might not agree with you.

Larger topic: *Finding a Place to Belong*

More specific themes:

- * Challenges shape people, and make them stronger.
- * Having a place to live isn't the same as having a loving home.
- * Many problems occur as a result of not having a place to belong.
- * Things we take for granted others may need.
- * People need to be resourceful in order to survive when they face challenges.

Larger topic: *Drawing on Inner Strength*

¹ from <http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/web/TLU/gens.html>

More specific themes:

- * People draw on inner strength to help them persevere through tough times
- * When we draw on our own inner strength we make a conscious decision to act out of courage rather than fear
- * Fostering inner strength is a life-long process
- * Sometimes it is difficult to find inner strength.

Larger topic: *Building New Friendships*

More specific themes:

- * When we are in a new situation, we can make new friends.
- * Friends enrich our lives and can help us in times of need.
- * Friends share with one another to express their appreciation of the friendship.

Larger topic: *Facing Change with Courage*

More specific themes:

- * Everyone has internal courage to help them face change.
- * Others can help us gain courage to face change.
- * Being courageous means overcoming change in spite of the odds.
- * Different people have different reasons for needing to be courageous.

Larger topic: *What Carries Us Through Hardship?*

More specific themes:

- * Hardships come in many forms and can happen to anybody.
- * To get through hard times, we need to have faith in our own worth and our own power to act.
- * To get through hard times, we need to be willing to try new things.
- * One thing that can carry people through hardship is concern for someone or something outside of themselves.
- * Sometimes family, community and the strength of cultural traditions can carry people through hardship.

Larger topic: *Taking a Stand*

More specific themes:

- * Taking a stand means to stand up for what you believe in, even if it goes against popular opinion.
- * There will come a time when we need to stand up for what is right.
- * Standing up for what we believe in is not easy.
- * Sometimes we do not know what values we hold dear until we are confronted with a difficult situation.

More Common Themes in Literature²

1. The Individual in Nature

- a. Nature is at war with each of us and proves our vulnerability.
- b. People are out of place in Nature and need technology to survive.
- c. People are destroying nature and themselves with uncontrolled technology.

2. The Individual in Society

- a. Society and a person's inner nature are always at war.
- b. Social influences determine a person's final destiny.
- c. Social influences can only complete inclinations formed by Nature.
- d. A person's identity is determined by place in society.
- e. In spite of the pressure to be among people, and individual is essentially alone and frightened.

² <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/patten/theme.html>

3. An individual's Relation to the gods.

- a. The god(s) are benevolent and will reward human beings for overcoming evil and temptation.
- b. The gods mock the individual and torture him or her for presuming to be great.
- c. The gods are jealous of and constantly thwarts human aspiration to power and knowledge.
- d. The gods are indifferent toward human beings and let them run their undetermined course.
- e. There are no gods in whom people can place their faith or yearning for meaning in the universe.

4. Human Relations

- a. Marriage is a perpetual comedy bound to fail.
- b. Marriage is a relationship in which each partner is supported and enabled to grow.
- c. An old man marrying a young woman is destined to be a cuckold.
- d. Parents should not sacrifice all for a better life for their children.
- e. There are few friends who will make extreme sacrifices.

5. Growth and Initiation

- a. A boy and a girl must go through a special trial or series of trials before maturing.
- b. Manhood or womanhood is often established by an abrupt, random crisis, sometimes at an unusually early age.
- c. Aspects of childhood are retained in all of us, sometimes hindering growth, sometimes providing the only joy in later life.
- d. A person grows only in so far as he or she must face a crisis of confidence or identity.

6. Time

- a. Enjoy life now, for the present moment, because we all die too soon.
- b. By the time we understand life, there is too little left to live.

7. Death

- a. Death is part of living, giving life its final meaning.
- b. Death is the ultimate absurd joke on life.
- c. There is no death, only a different plane or mode of life without physical decay.
- d. Without love, death often appears to be the only alternative to life.

8. Alienation

- a. An individual is isolated from fellow human beings and foolishly tries to bridge the gaps.
- b. Through alienation comes self-knowledge.
- c. Modern culture is defective because it doesn't provide group ties which in primitive cultures makes alienation virtually impossible.