

FINDING THEME

I. **Literal Meaning**

- A. Understand the surface story.
- B. Investigate elements not understood.

II. **Figurative Meaning (Theme)**

- A. Theme = message that runs throughout a literary work.
- B. Themes are rarely overtly stated, only implied.
- C. Themes are open to interpretation. The only “right” theme is the one that can be proved.
- D. Identify themes by presenting them in clear statements that express a point/message, not a general concept.

E.g. Bad: The theme of the novel is death.

Good: The theme of the novel is that the working class are unfairly exploited by the ruling class.

- E. Themes are not literal observations about the work.

E.g. Bad: The theme of *Avatar* is that the Na'vi are peaceful people.

Good: The theme of *Avatar* is that humanity should stop abusing the environment.

- F. All literary works have themes (even commercial ones such as t.v. shows and popular film)

III. Types of Themes

- A. Political statements (*Saving Private Ryan*: war is bad)
- B. Observations about the human experience (*The Hangover*: true friendship will aid you through adversity.)
- C. Warnings (*Matrix*: relying on technology has dire consequences)
- D. Morals (*Requiem for a Dream*: Don't do drugs.)

IV. Guides to Finding Theme

- A. Look for characters that represent ideas (Darth Vader = giving in to the temptation of evil)
- B. Look for obvious symbols: (Flag = patriotism)
- C. Analyze other key literary devices (setting)
- D. Pay attention to the speech of key characters
- E. Literary theory: Analyze the work from a particular perspective (gender theory--what does it reveal about the role of men and women in society; Marxism--how are the working class treated; new historicism--what does the work reveal about the time period and culture)
- F. Research

V. Elements That *Could* Be Considered

- A. Life of the author
- B. Historical time period/culture/literary movements
- C. Reader-response theory: The reader interprets and the intention of the author is irrelevant.

VI. Steps to Presenting a Theme

- A. Read the work and clarify the literal meaning
- B. Analyze key literary components/devices (characters; setting; symbols)
- C. Determine the main theme (or themes)
- D. Present the theme and its proof in an essay. (e.g.: State the theme as your argument, then use an analysis of the setting to prove it.)

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

I. **Genres**

- A. Poetry
- B. Drama
- C. Fiction
- D. Film

II. **Subgenres**

- A. Comedy
- B. Tragedy
- C. Horror
- D. Drama
- E. Science Fiction

III. **Fiction**

- A. Narrative based (tells a story with characters)
- B. Two types: Short story and the novel