

Part I: Some Preliminary Thoughts on Theme

Soviet writer Marietta Shaginian relates a story about a performance from her friend Sergei Rachmaninoff, early 20th Century Russian composer and one of the great concert pianists of the century:

Once during an intermission such a storm of wild enthusiasm reigned in the hall that it was almost impossible to get through the crowd. When we entered the green room, we found Rachmaninov in a terrible state. Before we had a chance to congratulate him, Rachmaninov, angrily biting his lip, began to complain that he was getting old, losing his mind, that he belonged to the scrap heap, that one should prepare an obituary for him telling everyone that there had been a musician, but now nothing was left of him, that he could not forgive himself.... He said, "Didn't you notice that I missed the point? The point came down, do you understand?"

[anecdote from Victor Seroff's 1950 biography *Rachmaninoff*]

For Rachmaninoff, every piece of music had a "point" (his terminology) about which the music revolved. It could be a musical climax, or even a seeming lull, but whatever it was-- wherever it was-- it was the interpreter's job to identify and communicate (through performance) the logic and architecture of the score by uncovering that decisive moment, and a performance lived or died to the extent that one was able to execute the composer's (implicit) charge. For Rachmaninoff, the music never spoke for itself.

I tell this story because what Rachmaninoff tried to do on the concert stage one hundred years ago is not dissimilar to what you are asked to do on the AP exam, what I ask you to do on a near daily basis, viz. find some unifying idea behind a text and explain how an author creates a whole that transcends the limitations of its constituent parts. As you've probably guessed (or should have guessed), I'm talking about **theme**.

As a concept, theme is remarkably simple to define, yet in practice difficult to pin down with absolute precision. Simply put, it's the implied argument or point of view that the text is trying to communicate to the reader (notice I did not say, *the author* is trying to communicate; the reason will become clearer in a moment). As such, it is a concept, rather than a topic. For example, the idea that *war is wasteful and barbaric* is a theme, whereas *war* is not (or not in any meaningful or helpful sense).

To define it in another way, if we take as axiomatic the view that an inductive argument consists of a claim, grounds (some sort of evidence), and a warrant (explanation of how the grounds proves the claim is correct or, at the very least, a reasonable point of view), then the theme is the *implied* claim (as most fictional texts do not affix a *The moral of the story is...* statement at the end); the grounds are the individual moments that the author describes; and the warrant is the working out of the implications and consequences of those moments in the text, revealing its point of view.

The obvious question that arises at this point, “Is there only one theme in a work of literature?” The answer, however, is not so straightforward: it depends on your critical point of view.

Most of what goes on in a high school and lower division university English classes is the sort of analysis pioneered by a group of university professors in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s called the New Criticism, a name taken from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book of the same name.

For the New Critics (and I'm simplifying here, as there was never complete agreement among those associated with this school), what mattered in a fictional text was the text itself, full stop. Questions about biography, social context, psychology, or similar texts by the same author were irrelevant. Like Rachmaninoff, they saw the text as containing a sort of formal logic with a unifying idea, and the critic's job is to explicate the text so as to make this unifying idea lucid to the reader. The goal of criticism, in other words, is to uncover how the text functions as a text.

Even the author's intentions, from this point of view, become irrelevant. Because the author (as a concept) is unrecoverable without appeal to external sources, the author's intentions are irrelevant as to whether the text works as a piece of art. The piece, in other words, can only be justified in terms of itself and how successful it is in communicating to a reader.

There are, incidentally, very good reasons for not confusing author and character, even if we weren't adopting this point of view. Even when a text uses a first person narrator, she is best conceived as just another character, for it is impossible to measure the distance between the narration and the author's actual views. Thus, even if the correspondence were one-to-one, the text freezes that point of view at a specific point and time, whereas actual viewpoints evolve with the passage of time. However, in practice, they could never be one-to-one anyway, as any point of view is inevitably going to be flattened and simplified when expressed in writing. The best one can say is that a text expresses *some aspect* of an author's point of view, and even that is largely unverifiable. This is why, when you write about literature, you should speak of a *character* or *narrator* believing or thinking something (use the term *speaker* when doing this in a poem), as opposed to the author *believing* or *thinking* it. This is also why I wrote earlier that theme is what *the text* is trying to communicate to the reader.

The tools the New Critics used in their approach should be very familiar to you, since they include every close reading strategy you've ever been taught in an English class: diction and imagery analysis, relating text structures to the overall purpose of a work, explaining how figurative concepts work within a text, looking for evidence of irony, and using all of these tools (and more) to talk about the tone (which is just a fancy word for the point-of-view at a given point in the text).

If you actually look at what was called criticism before this time period, it would bear almost zero relationship to what you would think of as literary criticism. One finds, for instance, a lot of attention paid to the author's biography with surprisingly little paid to the text (except as an extension of biography), often with biography and the text treated as interchangeable. Literature was sometimes read as embodying a set of defined characteristics of the age in which they

were written (an idea that really finds its origin in the philosophical writings of the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel). A lot of times one reads extended treatises on why an author was, in fact, such a genius (an idea that takes as its starting point that there is a stable canon of identifiable “great” works). Amusingly, you can also find very fanciful metaphorical interpretations of works of art that seem to bear almost no relationship to the actual words on the page (E.M. Forster satirizes this sort of criticism, though in the context of music, in an amusing passage in Chapter 5 of his novel *Howards End*).

To clarify the distinction in terms of things we have talked about in class, the New Critics were concerned with convergent questions and answers (looking at the text itself to form inferences that help reveal some understanding of the text) whereas what came before was largely concerned with divergent questions and answers (looking to external sources or ideas in order to reach some understanding of the text). The New Criticism wasn’t the only Formalist criticism (and, no, I’m not going to explain what Formalism is; I just can’t resist being precise); it was just the most influential, though very few literary critics today would describe themselves as New Critics in the same sense as John Crowe Ransom or Cleanth Brooks or I.A. Richards (though almost all make free use of the sorts of close reading strategies that the New Critics pioneered).

But wait a second, what does this have to do with this class or this assignment?’

Fair enough (pretending that someone is still reading): as I said earlier, this is the sort of criticism one usually finds in a high school class (often without the teacher knowing that this is what she is doing). The reason is very straightforward. The analytical tools of the New Criticism (e.g., looking at words and phrases in isolation to uncover connotations that have thematic significance) provide a clearly measurable means by which students can not only have opinions about what a text means, but be able to draw conclusions that can be supported in a very real, demonstrable way that does not rely on outside authority (teacher lectures, historical data, a complete reading of an entire corpus of literature). Gone are the days of the bearded, tweedy professor puffing thoughtfully on a pipe while reverently intoning about what a Great Man Shakespeare really was. Now anybody can have an opinion on literature, as long as she can back it up with evidence from the text. In short, it tests the cleverness of the analysis, not the ability to fit a text into some preconceived tradition or idea.

Why the AP test adopts this point of view is also very straightforward. For most of the test you will be reading, answering questions, and writing about short passages that you have never seen before. As such, it limits the amount of external data you can reasonably bring to bear in explicating those passages, almost forcing you to rely solely on the text itself (cf. the AP foreign language literature tests where you have a pre-determined list of literature that could potentially be on the exam). Almost by default you are limited to what inferences you can draw from the passage and the inferences you can draw from the use of the analytical tools you learn in class, and when you write, the time crunch virtually forces you to look for a single unifying idea, even if you were inclined to examine multiple thematic strands of a text.

This is why I am so interested in theme, even if I don't really share the New Critics' fixation with boiling down a text to a single dominant point of view. Luckily, however, there is no need to be quite as dogmatic as Rachmaninoff was in his piano playing, as we can treat a text as having multiple big ideas developing more or less simultaneously, particularly when we transition into longer works in a few days. It never hurts, however, to be constantly asking ourselves as readers: what does this passage reveal about the author's point of view, and what big idea is she trying to communicate to me as a reader through its development?

As an aside, most of Rachmaninoff's recordings are now nearly one hundred years old and available from a variety of sources. If you have a background in music, you can hear for yourself exactly how he shaped a piece, often ignoring or changing dynamic or tempo markings if it was at odds with the effect he was trying to create (although in terms of the performance tradition of the time, he was actually very faithful to the score). His Chopin recordings are probably the best example of building to a "point" (and, yes, the sound quality is extremely dated), though if you don't know the works in question you will obviously not be able to discern how unique his conception usually is.