

Theme

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Does that mean a theme is the moral of the story?

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Can there be more than one theme?

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Is a theme a universal statement about the human condition?

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- What is the subject? (*What is the work about?*) → in terms of ideas, not things or events

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- Then, what is the theme? (*What does the work say about the subject?*)

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- Then, what is the theme? (*What does the work say about the subject?*)
- And finally, in what direct and indirect ways does the work communicate the theme(s)?

One strategy for discovering a work's theme(s) is to apply frequently asked questions about areas of human experience, such as the following:

Human nature: What view of humankind emerges from the work? Generally good? Deeply flawed? Good in part? Good in certain circumstances?

**There was an Old Man of Nantucket
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What does the limerick suggest about human nature? What are people like?

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**Is this true of everyone? Or is that
over-generalizing?**

The nature of society: Does the author portray a particular society or social scheme as life-enhancing or life-destroying? Are characters we care about in conflict with their society? Do these characters want to escape from it? What causes and perpetuates this society?

**A certain young fellow named Bee-Bee
Wished to wed a woman named Phoebe.
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What aspect of society could the limerick be said to be criticizing?

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Human freedom: What control over their lives do the characters have? Do they make choices in complete freedom or are they driven by forces beyond their control? Does Providence or some grand scheme govern history, or is history random and arbitrary?

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What is the nature of this force?

Ethics: What are the moral conflicts in the work? Are they clear cut or ambiguous? What rights are in opposition to one another? If right opposes wrong, does right win in the end? To what extent are characters to blame for their actions?

**Here lies a young salesman named Phipps,
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Why does Phipps die?

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What does this suggest about Phipps' initial attraction to Block?

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Are we supposed to approve or disapprove of Phipps?

Conflict and Theme

How does one know where to begin in this process, which of these big questions to ask? The easiest place to start is with the primary conflicts for the protagonist. This will help uncover what the work is really about.

How are the internal and external conflict related? Does one create the other? Finally, how is this conflict resolved? Is it resolved satisfactorily? If so (or even “if not”), is this meant to be seen as a positive or negative outcome? Since this is the author’s final statement on a subject, the resolution (or lack thereof) is almost always the most important clue for determining theme.

Conflict and Theme

Example: “Speaking of Gabriel”

Conflict: The speaker resents the child growing within her womb.

Resolved: The speaker opens herself up to the possibility of sharing her life with another. She becomes less self-centered and is no longer alone.

Guiding questions:

- **Does the author approve?**
- **Does the author believe this to be a feature of life?**

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Theme

Castellanos examines the way that relationships intrude upon human lives-- perhaps most acutely of all in the case of mother and child. Though there remain ambivalences, on balance opening oneself up to others is a net positive.

Some Major Themes in Literature

The individual in nature

e.g., nature is at war with us and proves our vulnerability; nature and people trade off with one another; nature sustains and develops individuals

The individual in society

e.g., society and a person's inner nature are always at war; social influences determine a person's fate; people draw strength from others

The individual and the gods

e.g., religion provides meaning to the individual or society; religion undermines the individual or society; the gods are benevolent and reward individuals; the gods are indifferent and let fate run its undetermined course; there is no higher power to which an individual can appeal

Some Major Themes in Literature

Human relations

e.g., romantic relationships are bound to fail; romantic relationships provide meaning to individuals; parent/child relationships sustain and develop the personal growth individuals; parent/child relationships undermine and harm the personal growth individuals; love conquers all; love is a vain hope

Growth and initiation

e.g., individuals must go through trial to mature; childhood shapes adult personalities; it is never too late to grow as individuals

Time and history

e.g., time passes quickly, and there is never enough of it; there is nothing new (ideas are recycled); individuals should enjoy the present; as time progresses, society improves; as time progresses, society degrades; events in the past inform the present and future

Some Major Themes in Literature

Death

e.g., death is a part of living; death is not the end (religion, spirituality, or memory); the idea of death spurs individual growth

Alienation

e.g., people are isolated and alone; through alienation comes self-knowledge; modern society is alienating, and this is bad

The nature of people

e.g., though they frequently make mistakes, people are essentially good; though they may incidentally accomplish good, people are fatally flawed

The nature of the world

e.g., there is an order and purpose to life; there is an essential justice in the universe; there is no meaning and purpose to life; there is no justice

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Taeko Kōno argues that when the rubber meets the road, it remains a man's world.

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Mothers should love their children no matter what.

Castellanos, then, provides an example of a bad mother who lacks a maternal instinct.

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The central argument, then, is that women are pushed to embrace gender norms that undermine them. This is shown when the protagonist embraces burning up in her bed.

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Castellanos suggests that all mothers experience moments of doubt about their children.

Methods of closing a paper using thematic statements

Conjecture → when the ending or conclusion suggests that the reader needs to consider beyond what is presented in the story:

- In my essay, I have argued the text argues Idea X.
- Idea X allows for Inference Y.
- This extrapolation is what the text is implicitly advocating.

Methods of closing a paper using thematic statements

Considering the total effect of the work → comment on the full impact of the work as it is discovered after we consider all the parts:

- In my essay, I have explored Aspect X of the text.
- Aspect X is a part of Larger Argument Y.
- This larger argument is what the work is really about.

Methods of closing a paper using thematic statements

How the part of the work considered in the paper relates to the work as a whole → add what you have not considered in the principal parts of the paper:

- In my essay, I have taken Approach X.
- Approach X is a subset of / related to Approach / Big Idea Y.
- This larger approach / idea is what the work is about.

Methods of closing a paper using thematic statements

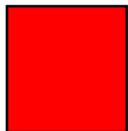
What a close study of the work has done for your understanding of the work's more subtle features → often a good close for papers on poetry or a work whose format helps to shape the theme of the composition:

- In my essay, I have taken Approach X.
- Approach X is an example of a way of reading the text.
- This approach to reading the text is superior to others in revealing the central argument.

Methods of closing a paper using thematic statements

[sum up what you have proved → transition to theme statement → thematic statement]

As a document of the times, then, Kōno's "Bone Meat" is suggestive of the way that post-World War II Japanese men and women conceived of their respective roles within a relationship-- true both in the way that male perspectives are privileged over female perspectives and how this ultimately denies the possibility of female agency. In other words, even when post-war Japanese women such as the protagonist in "Bone Meat" seem to make active decisions about their own lives, in reality they just tend to affirm a status quo that undermines their ability to take control of their own lives. This, in turn, exemplifies Kōno's seeming pessimism about relationships in general. If romantic relationships between men and women are largely defined by the adoption of mutually incompatible goals and mutually incomprehensible points of view, then the most likely outcomes in forming such relationships are unhappiness and dysfunction. Thus, the tragedy becomes the way that the fulfillment of real human needs is undermined by the persistence of inevitable human weakness.



sums up
argument from
essay



transitions to
thematic
statement



thematic
statement