

Writing About Theme

Consider theme as an abstract idea coupled with a comment or observation that addresses (a) human motivation, (b) the human condition, (c) human ambition, or (d) the nature of the world in which humans live.

This is often framed as a lesson or moral, but a more accurate (and helpful) way of thinking about theme is that it is the text's point of view (*This is the way _____ is*). Sometimes this can be summed up in a prescriptive statement (like a moral in a fable: *One should behave in this way*), but more often, the take-away ideas from a text are not so heavy-handed.

The key questions for eliciting a work's theme(s) are:

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

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?

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?

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?

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.

Some Major Themes in Literature

1. 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

2. 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

3. 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

4. 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

5. 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

6. 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

7. 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

8. Alienation

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

9. 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

10. 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 in the universe; the world is a dangerous place

Thematic Statements

When used as part of a conclusion of an essay: 1) sum up what you have proved → 2) transition to theme statement → 3) theme statement. DO NOT FORGET THE FIRST AND SECOND STEP. The thematic statement *must* feel as if it is an organic development from your argument.

Methods of closing a paper using thematic statements (these are not mutually exclusive approaches):

1. Conjecture → when the ending or conclusion suggests that the reader needs to consider beyond what is presented in the story
2. 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
3. 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
4. How form has contributed to content → often a good close for papers on poetry or a work whose format helps to shape the theme of the composition

Be sure the observation:

- a. Avoids too terse an observation or cliché; you develop a thematic statement just like you would any other argument
- b. Avoids moralizing from a point of view beyond what the text argues; you especially want to avoid giving your “take” on the work or the actions of its characters
- c. Avoids specific references to the plot and characters; this was for the first part of your conclusion; the thematic statement is where you engage ideas, not details
- d. Avoids absolute words like all, none, everything, everyone; do not overstate the argument

Example conclusion (using Kōno’s “Bone Meat”):

What the Story is About: relationships

The Conflict: external (man vs. woman)

Resolution and How the Reader is Supposed to Feel about It: The man does not return. This is a mostly negative outcome from the protagonist’s point of view. The reader is not supposed to particularly sympathize with this point of view, since the relationship is depicted in such a way as to suggest that it is mostly unhealthy.

What This Suggests: Kōno is pessimistic about the possibility of healthy relationships; she also seems to feel women actively crave these unhealthy relationships (a related internal conflict)

The Bigger Idea: human relations

How the Example Will Move Beyond the Text: The hypothetical paper argues something specific about a relationship between history and text. This will be used in the conclusion to suggest an underlying point of view about the more general topic (relationships).

[A conclusion to a paper that argues that “Bone Meat” typifies many features of post-WWII male-female gender identity.]

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 [*sums up the main argument in some kind of logical, sequential way*]. **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.

Here are some student examples:

Taeko Kōno uses “Bone Meat” to emphasize how a woman relinquishes power over herself by her submissive actions. This, in turn, allows a man to have full control over her and can result in disastrous consequences for the woman, evidenced in the story by the protagonist’s descent into madness. **In this, Kōno shows how always deferring to the masculine point of view, gives men the opportunity to seize control over women in order to create an extreme dependence that is not healthy for females trapped in these unequal relationships. In such a world, women not only defer to men, they actively participate in their own domination.**

In this way, *Sputnik Sweetheart* is expressive of the way that the conscience works as a source of judgment-- seen in the way Miu shapes her reality, transforming her instinctual behaviors to becoming a militantly virtuous individual who has fleeting connections with those who she claims are important in her life. **This, then, suggests Murakami's larger critique of the inability for people to conceive of themselves outside of the expectations imposed upon them by society-- both in the way that ideals are internalized by the superego and how this process frustrates attempts at compromise between societal expectations and one’s true self. In other words, to be alienated from desire is to be alienated from something that is essential to one’s very humanity.**

Overall, *Enemies, a Love Story* revolves around issues relating to Herman’s constant struggle with overcoming his past decisions and moving forward with his life. By being stuck in between his past and his present life, Hermann simply cannot advance toward the future. Instead, he finds it incredibly stressful to deal with his reactions based on both his inherited responses from the past and involuntary responses motivated by the Id-- resulting in a general paralysis. **Hence, the story shows how the past continues to shape the future. Though people believe that they are in control of their lives, in control of their decisions, the reality is that people are primarily governed by past experience and internal desire. In many ways, Singer argues that freedom of will is nothing more than a comforting illusion.**