

Lesson 06: Focus on the Big Picture: Theme, Tone

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will define theme and tone and summarize the role they play in literature.
- Students will determine the theme of a short work of fiction.
- Students will describe the tone of a short work of fiction and cite textual examples of how that tone is created including specific word choices in the text.

You probably learned *how* to read early in elementary school, and since then, you've been getting better and better at it. This unit, "How to Read *Literature*," is about developing ways to read this art form to appreciate the full meaning and complexity of a piece. We'll start with a magnifying glass, looking at individual words and small chunks. Then we'll step back and look at the big picture in works of literature.

What is Theme?

The **theme** of a work of literature is the main idea. The theme is the point or the meaning of the work.

Theme is NOT a moral or lesson of a story; it does not tell people what they should or should not do.

We human beings each have such different experiences and personalities, but at some level we are all very much alike. The theme of literature often points out some universal truth about the human experience. It may be the aspect of the story that is similar to your own life. Therefore, different readers could pick out different themes from the same story.

Think about the most recent movie you have watched. If it were exactly like your life, it would have probably been boring--why watch it on screen if you live it everyday? Instead the movie probably dramatized, in a different way,

something that you have also experienced. At some point in your life, in some big or little way, you have been courageous, you have made sacrifices, you have experienced pain and loss, you have fought hard to triumph against difficult odds.

A theme in literature is the abstract concept that it all 'boils down to'.

How to Identify the Theme

Here are some questions to ask yourself that may help you see the theme of a story:

1. What is the same between the story and my own experience?
2. What emotions are the characters feeling chronically?
3. What is similar about all the problems that keep coming up for the characters?
4. Is anything mentioned both near the beginning and near the end of the story or repeatedly throughout the story?
5. How does the character change at the deepest level?

Remember, when you state the theme of a piece of literature, you have to also offer *evidence* of why you think that is the theme. Here is an example:

The Life of Pi is a novel about belief. At the beginning of the novel, the writer says that Mamaji said that Pi Patel has a story that would make him believe in God. Throughout the story, Pi's earnest belief in multiple religions is one of his defining character traits. Then at the end of the novel, Pi Patel asks the writer which story he liked best, and when the writer answers, "The one with the tiger," Pi says, "And so it is with God."

Notice that after I state what the theme is (belief), I describe parts of the story from the beginning, middle, and end that lead me to think that belief is the theme.

What is Tone?

The **tone** of a piece of literature is the *attitude* the speaker or narrator has toward the subject, theme, and character. You might be pretty good at guessing the attitude of people when you're talking with them. For some

people, this comes so naturally that they don't even know they are doing it. But for some people, guessing someone else's attitude is a big problem that they have to think a lot about. In literature, even if you get a feel for the attitude you will have to stop and think about the specific details that clued you into that.

Imagine your best friend talking to you about his English class. Can you tell if he is excited about the class, if he is intimidated by the class, if he is complaining or being sarcastic? You would figure out his attitude toward the class by both *what* he says and *how* he says it. Let's look at two similar examples:

"I don't know how I'm going to get this paper done. I've been reading the book and thinking about what to write. But I just can't seem to get started."

"I can't believe I have to write a paper on this stupid book! It's such a snooze and like a billion pages long. She's crazy if she thinks anybody will actually read that thing!"

In both quotes the theme is similar: it's difficult to write a paper on this book. But the attitude of the two students saying this is very different. Can you identify the tone of each quote? Think for a moment about how you would answer that question then take a look at this sample answer.

How to Identify the Tone

Tone is created by *what* is said and *how* it is said. This is a combination of the diction (the words used), the details that the author focuses on, the images, the way the characters are described and what they say. Here is a list of what to look for to identify the tone and offer evidence to support it:

- Look for words that tend to have emotions attached to them.
- Look for how the narrator describes things and people.
- Identify the THEME first then ask yourself what the narrator thinks about that theme.
- Focus on your own response to the piece. How did it make you feel; what passages were memorable to you? Look for clues about tone in those.
- Look at one of these lists of words used to describe tone to find one that 'feels' right. [Tone Words](#)

Remember that any discussion of tone must give evidence from the text!

Grading Rubric:

To get a 10: All answers are correct, insightful, well-written. Answers 4-7 are also thoroughly supported by evidence from the text.

To get a 9: All answers are correct and well written. Answers 4-7 are also supported by evidence from the text. A couple minor grammatical errors may remain.

To get an 8: All answers are correct or reasonable. Answers 4-7 are also supported by evidence from the text. Up to 4 minor grammatical errors remain.

To get a 7: All answers are reasonable. Several minor grammatical and/or up to two sentence-level errors remain. Textual support for answers 4-7 is attempted but may be inadequate or lack relevance.

To get a 6: All answers are reasonable. Several grammatical errors remain. There is little attempt in 4-7 to provide textual evidence.

To get a 5: Reserved for cheating or plagiarism.

***Note: To complete this lesson, all questions must be answered earnestly with evidence of a basic understanding of theme and tone and of having read the story.

Assignment:

Do not submit text that you have copied from sources, including websites. All of your work should be in your own words. Using copied text would be considered plagiarism. For more information, review our page on [Plagiarism and Citation](#)

Part A:

Answer the questions below in your own words using grammatically correct sentences.

1. Define theme in your own words.
2. Define tone in your own words.
3. Why are theme and tone important parts of literature?

Part B:

For the rest of the questions you must read this short story by Nikolai Gogol:

The Nose

Answer each question in a paragraph of at least 100 words.

4. What is the theme of this story? Explain why you think that and give evidence from the text.
5. What is the tone of this story? Explain why you think that and give evidence from the text.
6. What does the narrator think of Kovaloff? What does he say that leads you to believe that?
7. What does the narrator mean by the last sentence in the story?

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