

Lesson Name : 12

Lesson Title : Analyzing Theme: Beowulf and Song of Roland

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Essential Instruction

Today you will learn how to identify and analyze theme in a literary work. As you work on this lesson, it is a good idea to take notes on the concepts and vocabulary.

Before you begin to work on today's lesson, review [Beowulf](#) and [Song of Roland](#).

Summary

When reading a piece of literature, whether it is fiction or nonfiction, you should use reading strategies. **Summarizing** involves breaking down what you have read into the key points. Summarizing is a powerful reading strategy to help you recall important information from the text you just read. Now that you have read both *Beowulf* and *Song of Roland*, write a summary of each text. In your summaries, you should focus on discussing the main ideas of the two texts. Make sure to maintain an objective tone and language throughout your summaries.

One thing that you might have noticed in *Song of Roland* is that the characters are referred to by several different names. For instance, Charlemagne is referred to as Charlemagne and as Charles, a nickname. It might help to review this [list of character names and nicknames](#) to help keep track of the characters.

Theme

In a work of literature, the **theme** is the underlying meaning or message that the author wants to communicate to the reader. Sometimes a work of literature can have multiple themes, as you will see when you examine the themes in *Beowulf* and *Song of Roland*.

When you identify the theme in a work of literature, make sure you differentiate the theme from the topic. For instance, while you might say that *Romeo and Juliet* is about love, love is not the theme. The theme is the message that Shakespeare wants to communicate about love. Therefore, one could argue that one theme of *Romeo and Juliet* is that love is all-consuming.

When you identify a theme, be specific about what you believe the author wants to communicate.

Another important thing to remember about theme is that you do not have to have agree with the author's message. The author may have different beliefs or values than you have, but that's okay. When you write about theme, your interpretation is based on the text rather than your personal opinion.

Theme in *Song of Roland*

Now you will examine some themes in *Song of Roland*. In this epic poem, the writer explores a few different themes. One of the primary ones is the idea that good will always triumph over evil. In this poem, the author defines characters as either good or evil. The Franks, such as Roland, Charlemagne, and Olivier, are good, whereas the Saracens, such as Marsile, are evil. While there are obvious parallels between the lifestyles and

personalities of these characters, they are defined as good or evil based on their religious beliefs. The Franks are rewarded for their religious devotion to the “right” God with their triumph over the Saracens, thus reinforcing the theme that good will always triumph over evil.

A related theme is the idea that fate controls human actions. Throughout the poem, God intervenes in the battles and struggles of the characters in order to ensure that the righteous characters will always emerge victorious. A good example of this can be seen at the end of the poem, when God intervenes in the fight that will determine whether Ganelon lives or dies. Fate steps in to determine that the more righteous man will win, thus reaffirming the theme that fate controls human actions.

Another theme in this poem is the idea that passion defines a strong warrior. Throughout the battles in the poem, characters display passion in various forms. Roland weeps over the body of Olivier after he is slain, despite the battle going on around him. Charlemagne openly grieves for Roland after his death, going so far as to state, “Such grief I have that I would fain be dead.” These traits are not shown as weaknesses of the characters, but rather as the qualities that make them strong, noble warriors. This supports the theme that passion defines a strong warrior.

These are just a few of the themes present in *Song of Roland*. Can you think of any others?

Theme in *Beowulf*

Like *Song of Roland*, *Beowulf* also has multiple themes that define the work. This work of literature also shows the theme of good triumphing over evil. In *Beowulf*, the title character fights three battles and conquers his enemies each time. Beowulf, who demonstrates typical heroic qualities such as courage, nobility, and strength, is clearly defined by the author as the “good guy.” Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon, on the other hand, are defined as the “bad guys.” These characters are depicted as monstrous, violent, and destructive. By showing Beowulf’s triumph over all three characters, the author reinforces the theme that good triumphs over evil.

Another theme in this poem is the importance of tradition. The honorable characters in this tale share certain qualities, among them a traditional code of honor and respect. Characters are addressed as “son of ...” to emphasize traditional familial relationships. Throughout the poem, the characters focus on adhering to a code of honor depending on their place in society: ruler, warrior, or peasant. Good rulers are defined by their generosity and political savvy; good warriors are defined by their courage and strength; every person must maintain a good reputation. Throughout the poem, the author emphasizes the importance of traditions like these. The characters who honor these traditions are good and honorable; those who don’t are shameful.

Beowulf also contains some underlying religious themes, in that the characters are rewarded for faithfulness and goodness. When Grendel attacks the Danes after hearing their devotion to God, Beowulf comes and promptly defeats Grendel, thus reaffirming that those who follow religious tenets will be rewarded. When Beowulf fights the dragon later in the poem, it is revealed that no person can access the treasure that the dragon guards unless God wills it. These examples demonstrate the underlying theme that faithful, religious people will be rewarded for their devotion. Although God does not directly interfere in Beowulf’s adventures, there is an underlying religious theme throughout the poem.

These are just a few of the themes present in *Beowulf*. Can you think of any others?

Comparing Themes

As you read literature, you will notice that stories often explore similar themes. This is certainly true in *Beowulf* and *Song of Roland*. By identifying these common themes and comparing them, you can create an interesting analysis of theme in these two works of literature.

A good way to approach the comparison of a theme common to two works is to identify the common theme, explain the similarities in the ways the stories explore this theme, and then explain the differences in the ways the stories explore this theme. By doing these three things, you can form a comprehensive understanding of

the ways two works of literature develop a common theme.

To get a better idea of how to do this, check out the table below, which compares common themes from *Beowulf* and *Song of Roland*.

Theme	Similarities	Differences
Good triumphs over evil	Both stories contain this theme. Characters who are defined as good in the stories consistently overcome their enemies.	In <i>Song of Roland</i> , this theme has religious undertones. The good characters are defined by their religious beliefs. Similarly, they triumph only with divine intervention. In <i>Beowulf</i> , on the other hand, the characters overcome evil on their own merit. Additionally, these characters are defined as good because of their honor and respect for tradition, rather than because of their faith.
Religious themes	Both stories have religious themes rooted in Christianity. Characters are rewarded for their devotion to God.	In <i>Song of Roland</i> , the presence of religion is more overt. God regularly intervenes in the characters' lives to control their fates. All of the characters have blind devotion. In <i>Beowulf</i> , however, religion is more of a backdrop to the story. Although the heroes of the story are devout, their devotion is not blind and the characters question God's choices.
The perception of the warrior	Defining the qualities of a warrior is an important theme in both stories. Both stories contain warrior characters: Roland and Charlemagne in <i>Song of Roland</i> ; Beowulf in <i>Beowulf</i> . These characters are defined by similar traits of honor, courage, and strength.	In <i>Song of Roland</i> , passion is another defining quality of the warrior. Characters are shown as heroic when they cry, faint, or grieve, and they are passionate in their feelings. In <i>Beowulf</i> , on the other hand, the warrior is more fully defined by his honor, strength, and respect of tradition. He does not exhibit passion in the way the characters in <i>Song of Roland</i> do.

These are just a few of the themes that define these two works of literature. Can you think of any others? What common ideas do they share?