

Analyzing Theme

Objectives:

- Identify and analyze theme in a literary work
- Compare and contrast common themes in literature

Theme

In a work of literature, the theme is the underlying meaning or message that the author wants to communicate to the reader. When identifying theme in a work of literature, be sure to differentiate the theme from the topic. For example, a story may be about war, but the theme of that story would be what the author says about war. This is an important distinction to make when discussing theme.

A work of literature may have multiple themes. An author may have more than one underlying message that he or she wishes to communicate to readers through the work.

Analyzing theme involves a few key components. The first is to identify the theme of the story. Exercises such as summarizing the story, identifying the topic of the story, and examining the author's tone and language can help you to identify the theme. The next step is to find evidence to support your interpretation of the theme. What events in the story support this theme? How do the characters' actions and dialogue support this theme? Are there any passages in the story that particularly exemplify this theme?

Once you find evidence to support your interpretation of the theme, your final step is to explain this evidence. How does it demonstrate the theme? Providing this explanation is a key part of analyzing theme because it is the substantive portion of your analysis.

Themes in Literature

Beowulf

Beowulf is an epic poem in which the title character battles three monsters to ensure the peace and prosperity of his kingdom and his neighbors. During the story, Beowulf battles and defeats Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon. In his final battle, Beowulf himself is slain, and his kingdom mourns the loss of their greatest leader.

Beowulf explores several important themes. One of the primary ones is the idea that good will always triumph over evil. Beowulf, who demonstrates typical heroic qualities including 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. 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 such as these. The characters who honor these traditions are good and honorable; those who do not are shameful.

Beowulf also has some underlying Christian 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 Christian tenets will be rewarded. When Beowulf fights the dragon later in the poem, it is revealed that no person could access the treasure that the dragon guards unless it was the will of God. These examples demonstrate the underlying theme that faithful, religious people will be rewarded for their devotion. Although God does not directly intervene in Beowulf's adventures, there is an underlying Christian religious theme throughout the poem.

Song of Roland

Song of Roland is an epic poem about a war between two kingdoms: the Franks and the Saracens. The Franks have invaded the Saracens' land and conquered most territories; only one city remains under the protection of its leader, Marsile. The poem relates the tale of the fall of that city. Although the Franks are betrayed by one of their own men, Ganelon, and lose a battle in which Roland, Turpin, and Olivier die, they eventually recover their forces and defeat Marsile. The poem ends with the trial and death of Ganelon, the traitor.

Like *Beowulf*, *Song of Roland* has several key themes, including the triumph of good 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 by triumphing 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.

Common Themes

Given their similar subject matter, it should be no surprise that *Beowulf* and *Song of Roland* share several common themes, among them the triumph of good over evil, the role of religion in one’s life and fate, and the perception of the warrior character. In both poems, characters who are defined as good by the author triumph over those who are defined as evil. It is in the definition of these good and evil characteristics, though, that the works diverge. In *Beowulf*, characters are defined as good based on their honor and respect for tradition. In *Song of Roland*, characters are defined as good based on their religious beliefs.

The religious themes seen throughout both works also share some similarities. Both are based in Christian tenets, and characters in both poems are rewarded for their devotion to God. However, in *Song of Roland*, 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. This is not the case in *Beowulf*, in which the characters have more control over their fates and their faith is not blind.

Finally, both poems explore the perception of the warrior as a theme. Both poems contain warrior characters who share similar traits: honor, courage, and strength. However, in *Beowulf*, the warrior character is more fully defined by his respect for tradition. In *Song of Roland*, the warrior is defined by his passion, including his ability to cry, faint, and grieve, even in the middle of a battle.

Summary

When analyzing theme, it is important to not only identify the theme, but also to find and explain evidence that supports your interpretation. Theme is always open to interpretation, but the evidence and text must support that interpretation.

Concept Reinforcement

1. What is theme?
2. How should theme be analyzed?
3. What is one theme in *Beowulf*?
4. What is one theme in *Song of Roland*?