

Theme

I vividly remember my frustrations when teachers asked me to look for themes or symbols in a story. Because of my inexperience, I would begin searching for themes as if I were looking for an obscure Waldo in a busy *Where's Waldo?* book. Or I'd look for symbols as if they were miniature combs, mice, or elephants in a hidden pictures drawing. I'd be so focused on looking for what I couldn't see, that I essentially missed the overall message, not to mention the enjoyment of reading the story. I also remember sitting in the back of a literature classroom, raising my hand because I thought I knew a theme of the story. The teacher told me I was wrong.

Themes and symbols are not Magic Eye pictures that appear only after blurred staring. With more experience and direction, you will learn that themes and symbols aren't mysterious and aren't hidden. Rather they are evident to perceptive readers who search for a story's meaning to apply to their individual lives. And by applying literature to life, readers earn a greater appreciation of the literature they read.

Literature conveys meaning to readers. These meanings are often individual and personal since readers with different backgrounds, different experiences, different outlooks read stories in different ways. Readers color their interpretations of what they read with their own personalities. For that reason, readers can learn different lessons while reading the same story. Two of the most significant literary methods authors can use to convey meaning in literature are through themes and symbols. Although multiple interpretations are possible, not all interpretations are accurate. The purpose of this lesson is to guide readers in arriving at appropriate interpretations by critically identifying evidence from literature to support their explanations of theme and symbol. Then once we as readers determine possible lessons from literature, we can apply those lessons to our lives.

Theme

Theme is the general idea or general insight revealed within a story. Theme is more than a word that functions as the topic of a story. Elder David A. Bednar addressed the young adults of the Church in a CES fireside in February 2007. In this talk entitled "A Reservoir of Living Water," Elder Bednar shares meaningful insights to enhance and strengthen our personal scripture study. These same principles also apply to more meaningful literature study.

Connections. Elder Bednar suggests that as we read, study, and search the scriptures we should seek for connections, patterns, and themes. He explains that "a connection is a relationship or link between ideas, people, things, or events, and the scriptures are full of connections." For example, in the scriptures we see a connection between obedience and promised blessings. We learn about this connection in this verse, "I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise" (D&C 82:10). When Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19), Abraham willingly obeys even without fully

understanding reasons. Yet he prepares his son on the altar for the sacrifice, and he stretches forth his hand to slay, Isaac, and an angel appears and says, “Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (Genesis 22:12). Abraham is able to sacrifice a ram caught in the thicket rather than his son. Perhaps more significantly, Abraham’s obedience allows the promises of the Abrahamic covenant to continue through this obedient patriarch.

On the other hand, we also learn that blessings are also lost through disobedience. Esau held the promised birthright because he was the elder brother to Jacob. However, Esau disobeyed and didn’t value his birthright, and willingly offered his birthright to his brother Jacob (Genesis 25:19-34). We see a connection between obedience and blessings. So as we read scriptures or literature, we should connect what we read to other scriptures, stories, poems, readings, individuals, and personal experiences. What do they share in common? How are they different? How do they relate?

Patterns. Elder Bednar encourages us to look for patterns as we read, study, and search the scriptures. He explains that “a pattern is a plan, model, or standard that can be used as a guide for repetitively doing or making something. . . . Typically, a scriptural pattern is broader and more comprehensive than a connection.” A powerful scripture pattern is in James 1:5-6: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.”

The pattern to receive answers, help, or wisdom, is to ask God in unwavering faith. Of course, the young Joseph Smith’s First Vision provides the ultimate example of this pattern. Yet the pattern appears throughout the scriptures, such as young David when he slays Goliath. Here we have a young youth who is taking provisions to his three brothers in the king’s army. King Saul’s army is paralyzed because the Philistine’s mighty giant warrior Goliath is waiting for one individual to fight him. Unlike the soldiers who run in fear, David stands before the king and declares his faith: “Let no man’s heart fail because of him; they shall go and fight with this Philistine. . . . The Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine.” King Saul sends out David to fight this giant: “Go, and the Lord be with thee” (1 Samuel 17:32, 37). And with David’s sling and five smooth stones, he stands before Goliath, slays him, and removes his head. David had unwavering faith in God, and he received divine assistance. David exemplified this sacred pattern.

Themes. Closely associated with connections and patterns are themes. Elder Bednar reminds us:

Themes are overarching, recurring, and unifying qualities or ideas, like essential threads woven throughout a text. Generally, scriptural themes are broader and more comprehensive than patterns or connections. In fact, themes provide the background and context for understanding connections and patterns.

Elder Bednar then declares: “The central and recurring theme of the Book of Mormon is the invitation for all to ‘come to Christ, and be perfected in him’” (Moroni 10:32). If not all, then nearly all else in the Book of Mormon focuses on and testifies of Jesus the Christ as the Redeemer and our Savior—the theme of the Book of Mormon.

Elder Bednar then briefly lists additional themes from the Book of Mormon:

- “If . . . the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them.” 1 Nephi 17:3
- “Press forward with a steadfastness in Christ.” 2 Nephi 31:20
- “Men are, that they might have joy.” 2 Nephi 2:25
- “In the strength of the Lord thou canst do all things” Alma 20:4
- “Wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10)

Again, the same principles of reading, studying, and searching the scriptures to recognize connections, patterns, and themes also apply to our study of literature. Themes in literature are central messages or ideas within a text. Themes are often abstract concepts that are exemplified through concrete examples of persons, actions, images, or examples in a story, poem, or play.

Laurence Perrine gives us some guidelines for literary themes:

1. Theme must be expressible in the form of a statement with a subject and a predicate. The theme should be a complete sentence rather than a topic word or two.
2. The theme must be stated as a *generalization* about life. When stating themes, avoid using the names of characters since those names restrict the theme's application to other's lives. Theme should be inclusive rather than exclusive.
3. We must be careful not to make the generalization larger than is justified by the terms in the story. To avoid making the generalization larger than it is, do not use words such as *every*, *all*, *always* within the theme. Instead consider using *an individual*, *sometimes*, *may*.
4. Theme is the *central* and *unifying* concept of a story. Therefore, there must be *evidence from the story* to support the theme, evidence based on major details, character, conflict, setting, point of view, symbol or other literary elements.
5. There is no one way of stating the theme of a story."As indicated in the introduction to this lesson, each reader can bring a different interpretation to a reading based on experience, background, and personality. However, remember that there must be evidence from the reading to support whatever a reader's position may be.

6. We should avoid any statement that reduces the theme to some familiar saying that we have heard all our lives, such as “You can't judge a book by its cover” or “A stitch in time saves nine.” Statements such as these rarely provide an insightful expression of theme.

Theme and symbol are closely woven within literature. In other words, the stories' themes will help us identify symbols, and the symbols will help us recognize themes. To direct our search for themes and symbols, we will use X. J. Kennedy's points for arriving at theme:

1. Look back once more at the title of the story. What does the title indicate?
2. Does the main character in any way change in the story? Does this character arrive at any eventual realization or understanding? Are you left with any realization or understanding you did not have before? What changes are evident? What changes are suggested? Why do the characters change? What evidence from the story supports these changes? What do the characters realize at the end of the story that they did not understand at the beginning of the story? What evidence from the story supports this realization?
3. Does the author make any general observations about life or human nature? Do the characters make any?
4. Does the story contain any especially curious objects, mysterious flat characters, significant animals, repeated names, song titles, or whatever, that hint toward meanings larger than such things ordinarily have?
5. When you have worded your statement of theme, have you cast your statement into general language, not just given a plot summary?
6. Does your statement hold true for the story as a whole, not for just part of it?

Themes broaden and deepen our understanding of what we read; we read by recognizing messages an author is suggesting. These messages and themes enrich our literary experience and encourage readers to make connections from readings to life.