Identifying Themes and Literary Analysis

Literary works are used to entertain, to teach a moral lesson, to convey meaning, or more importantly, to make the reader aware of some aspect of the human condition. Through their work, writers creatively share their ideas and express *themes* that are timeless and universal.

For example: A fifteen year old boy in an American suburban high school, who has not made the basketball team, knows the experience of *disappointment*, but so does a seventy year old Chinese grandmother whose family does not come home to the mainland to celebrate the new year. Each character's story might detail the events of how they move from disappointment to contentment. These stories have a similar theme. Even though the details of the story are expressed differently, either scenario could express the *theme* of overcoming disappointment and hurt – yet, each in a unique way. Could you connect with either of these characters? **Why**? Get into the habit of asking **how** and **why** questions as you move through the details of a literary selection.

Furthermore, certain themes can be understood by people regardless of age, gender, geography, or culture. This commonality makes them **universal**. Universal themes developed in a story, poem, or play ultimately *expand the reader's knowledge of being human* by the expression of *experiences* through different perspectives.

> Common themes can include:
> Loneliness, oppression, repression, transformation, good versus evil, struggle and accomplishment, death, rebirth, initiation, redemption, and free will.

With a specific purpose in mind, the author carefully crafts his themes using literary tools. By employing literary tools the author embeds the theme or meaning into separate elements that make up the totality of the literary piece.

- Some of the more common tools of the author's craft are: **character development, setting, mood, plot, point of view, figurative language, allegory, symbolism, and irony.**
- A poet might additionally use: **alliteration, metaphor, simile, onomatopoeia, personification, rhyme, and repetition.**

The careful examination of these tools is a part of literary analysis. By observing how the tools are being used individually, and by critically thinking about how they *interrelate* to construct the expression of theme, the reader pushes beneath the surface details to discover the literature's deeper meaning.

- Too many students make the mistake of never moving past the surface details.
- Focusing only on the surface details results in summary, *not* literary analysis.

Just as a scientist examines a specimen to prove a hypothesis, the literary analyst has a thesis to prove. Like a scientist who methodically examines separate aspects of a specimen such as its appearance, movements, and responses to environmental factors, the student is expected to *make careful observations* of the individual *parts* of a literary piece. This examination takes time and concentrated effort.

To uncover themes and meanings, begin the analysis by making verifiable observations, like a scientist, through careful reading. Observations that are verifiable are those that can be pointed out and agreed upon by others. These observations are the raw data of literary analysis; they are objective facts. **Objective facts** are the **third person** accounts that indicate **who** is doing **what** in the story or poem. They establish the **when**; they confirm the **where**. They recognize interesting key words and repetitions. They record character dialogue, and they note specific devices used by the poet. Keep in mind that the author made a decision about each of these objective elements. Your role as a reader/analyst is to determine **why** these creative decisions were specifically made.

At the same time, it is very important to pay attention to the personal thoughts and emotional reactions that surface when reading the details of the story. This type of information is subjective. **Subjective information** arises while experiencing the literature. Subjective information is the thoughtful **first person** "I think, I feel, I know" responses that come from the reader's background of knowledge and personal experience. These subjective responses are valuable for making initial critical connections to the details within the author's work. Your probing "*I wonder why*" questions initiate from subjective responses. Just like the tendency to focus only on surface details – don't make the mistake of only reporting your subjective impressions, reactions, and opinions. To conduct a thorough analysis which results in the identification of themes – surface details, subjective information, objective data, and inferences must all be **reintegrated** to reveal the big picture of theme and deeper meaning.

TIP 1 – Annotating: Write down ideas that surface during the reading such as noting a passage that seems particularly interesting or meaningful. Write down questions you might have when speculating, for example, **why** a character did this or that. These **annotated ideas** can help to make important connections between what the author has purposely done with his writer's tools and the reader's first subjective responses.

Subjective information may or may not be beneficial when writing the final analysis. But once the surfaced ideas are written down they will not be lost, nor will valuable time be wasted later in trying to remember what came to mind while reading.

TIP 2 – Vocabulary: Circle any unfamiliar words and look up their meaning in a dictionary. One unusual word may hold the key to understanding a whole passage. Consider, as well, the word's connotation.

Most importantly, repeatedly ask probing **how** and **why** questions while reading.

For example:

Why did the character always wear red?
How does the winter setting relate to the inner qualities of the character?
Why is that answer important?
What is the significance of the open window?
How is the open window helping to express the idea of freedom?
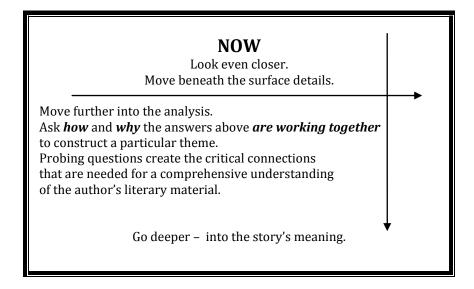**What** other details are working with the window to develop the theme?
What specific details created the depressing mood?
If this happened…., **then why** did that occur….?
Do elements repeat? **Why** are the repetitions noteworthy?
Do similarities or differences exist between characters? **What** are they? **How** do they contribute to the development of a unified theme?

NOW
Look even closer.
Move beneath the surface details.

Move further into the analysis.
Ask **how** and **why** the answers above **are working together**
to construct a particular theme.
Probing questions create the critical connections
that are needed for a comprehensive understanding
of the author's literary material.

Go deeper – into the story's meaning.