

What is a theme?

For working definition of the theme in literature, [Wikipedia](#).

What kinds of themes are explored in fiction?

Students submitting assignments and end-of-year portfolios on the undergraduate diploma course, also have to submit a short piece of critical reflection in which they talk about their creative writing and what they were hoping to achieve in it.

When I was marking diploma finals one year, a very talented student said that he had chosen to write the chapter from his novel in short sections, each narrated from a different perspective in the third person, because the theme of the chapter was how perspective alters the way we think about the same set of events.

To me, this approach to theme seems like 'pure' theme—or writer's theme, perhaps.

The student's approach to theme was unusual, it seemed to me, because he saw the theme not as something that occurred in the world of the story—like jealousy in *Othello*, say—but as something formal. While I can't back what I'm about to say with statistics, it seems to me that this student's approach to theme was more akin to that of artists or musicians than writers. Writers tend to talk about themes in terms of emotions, like jealousy, love, revenge, or in terms of concepts like social injustice, or issues, like drug addiction or teenage crime. It's not unusual, though, for artists to talk about one of their works in terms of, say, how light affects how we perceive the different elements that make up a face, as opposed to the emotion in the face, which is possibly what most people looking at the painting would relate to first.

Painters have their thematic obsessions. The late Lucian Freud seems to have been perpetually fascinated by the texture of human flesh in all its varied forms.

Writers too have their obsessions but—and I hope it isn't too much of a generalisation to say it—these tend to be not with techniques in themselves but with ideas, say, that they wish to explore through their narratives or with particular types of character and particular classes of situation or setting. That is, writers tend to be fascinated by aspects of the story rather than purely the techniques by which the story is produced. Of course they are fascinated by these but not in the way artists, perhaps, tend to be nor the way the diploma student that I mentioned is.

How do themes get expressed in fiction?

It seems to me that one way that themes in fiction can be viewed is similar to the way we looked at voice (see 'Some questions and "answers" relating to voice, summer 2011'). That is, by considering the totality of the work in hand. Whether we think in rather purist terms that a work can only really have one theme or whether we think that this view is too

simplistic and that there are likely to be numerous related themes in a fiction waiting to be teased out by readers, I would suggest that all the elements of fiction—character, description, setting, plot and so on—play their part in the expression of the theme or themes.

This suggests that a writer is likely to know what her/his theme is before writing begins. Possibly. Though I don't at all think this is necessarily the case. Writers sometimes talk about their story or novel turning out to be about something very different to what they expected it to be. I think this can include themes. If a writer focuses on the characters and the story that fascinates them themes will inevitably emerge. Having said that, I think writers are likely to be aware that the central focus of their story is likely to involve a theme or themes. So, there is a clear relationship between theme and subject. Indeed some critics see theme as subject.

It is perhaps true to say that there are often a number of subjects in a work of fiction and one overarching theme. One might go further and say that subject themes are concrete and the meta theme is abstract. For example in my novel *Invisible* there are a number of subjects, including the pub business, eating disorders and property development—not to mention the dysfunctional family. If, however, you wanted to find a common thread in all these subjects, I would suggest it is obsession.

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