Theme

"Daddy, the man next door kisses his wife every morning when he leaves for work. Why don't you do that?"
"Gracious, little one, I don't even know the woman!"

"Daughter, your young man stays until a very late hour. Hasn't your mother said anything to you about this habit of his?"
"Yes, Father. Mother says men haven't altered a bit."

For the reader who contemplates the two jokes above, a significant difference emerges between them. The first joke depends only upon a reversal of expectation. We expect the man to explain why he doesn't kiss his wife; instead he explains why he doesn't kiss his neighbour's wife. The second joke, though it contains a reversal of expectations, depends as much or more for its effectiveness on a truth about human life; namely, that men tend to grow more conservative as they grow older, or that fathers often scold their children for doing exactly what they did themselves when young. This truth, which might be stated in different ways, is the theme of the joke.

The **theme** of a piece of fiction is its controlling idea or its central insight. It is the unifying generalization about life stated or implied in the story. To derive the theme of a story, we must ask what its central purpose is: what view of life it supports or what insight into life it reveals. Not all stories have theme. The purpose of a horror story may be simply to scare the reader and give him gooseflesh. The purpose of an adventure story may be simply to carry the reader through a series of exciting escapades. The purpose of a murder mystery may be simply to pose a problem for the reader to try to solve (and to prevent him from solving it, if possible, until the last paragraph). The purpose of some stories may be simply to provide suspense or to make the reader laugh or to surprise him with a sudden twist at the end. Theme exists only (l) when an author has seriously attempted to record life accurately or to reveal some truth about it, or (2) when he has mechanically introduced some concept or theory of life into it which he uses as a unifying element and which his story is meant to illustrate. Theme exists in all interpretive fiction but only in some escape fiction. In interpretive fiction it is the purpose of the story; in escape fiction it is merely an excuse, a peg to hang the story from.

In many stories the theme may be equivalent to the revelation of human character. If a story has as its central purpose to exhibit a certain kind of human being, our statement of theme may be no more than a concentrated description of the person revealed, with the addition, "Some people are like this." Frequently, however, a story, through its portrayal of specific persons in specific situations will have something to say about the nature of all men or about the relationship of human beings to each other or to the universe. Whatever central generalization about life arises from the specifics of the story constitutes theme.

The theme of a story, like its plot, may be stated very briefly or at greater length. With a simple or very brief story, we may be satisfied to sum up the theme in a single sentence. With a more complex story, if successfully unified, we can still state the theme in a single sentence, but we may feel that a paragraph - or occasionally even an essay - is needed to state it adequately. A rich story will give us many and complex insights into life. In stating the theme in a sentence we must pick the central insight, the one which explains the greatest number of elements in the story and relates them to each other. For theme is what gives a good story its unity. In any story at all complex, however, we are likely to feel that a one-sentence statement of theme leaves out a great part of the story's meaning. Though the theme of *Othello* may be expressed as 'Jealousy exacts a terrible cost," such a statement does not begin to suggest the range and depth of Shakespeare's play. Any successful story is a good deal more and means a good deal more than any one-sentence statement of theme that we may extract from it, for the story will modify and expand this statement in various and subtle ways.

We must never think, once we have stated the theme of a story, that the whole purpose of the story has been to yield up this abstract statement. If this were so, there would be no reason for the story: we could start with the abstract statement. The function of the interpretive writer is not to stare a theme but to vivify it. He wishes to deliver it not simply to our intellects, but to our emotions, our senses, and our imaginations. The theme of a story may be little or nothing except as it is embodied and vitalized by the story. Unembodied, it is a dry backbone, without flesh or life.

Sometimes the theme of a story is explicitly stated somewhere in the story, either by the author or by one of the characters. In some stories, several statements may be made which, with slight edit changes, would serve admirably as statements of theme. More often however, the theme is implied. The story writer, after all, is a writer, not an essayist or a philosopher. His first business is to record life, not to comment on it. He may well feel that unless the story somehow expresses its own meaning, without his having to point it out, he has not told the story well. Or he may feel that if the story is to have its maximum emotional effect, he must refrain from interrupting it or making remarks about it. He is also wary of spoiling a story for the perceptive reader by "explaining" it as some people ruin joke explaining them. For these reasons theme is more often left implied than stated explicitly. The good writer does not ordinarily write a story to 'illustrate" a theme, as does the writer of parables or fables. He writes the story to bring alive some segment of human existence. When he does so searchingly and coherently, theme arises naturally out of he has written. The good reader may state the generalizations for himself.

Some readers - especially student readers - look for a "moral" in everything they read - some rule of conduct which they regard as applicable to their lives. They consider the words “theme” and "moral" to be interchangeable. Sometimes the words are interchangeable. Occasionally the theme of a story may be expressed as a moral principle without doing violence to the story. More frequently, however, the word “moral” is too narrow to fit the kind of illumination provided by a first-rate story. It is hardly suitable, for instance, for the kind of story which simply displays human character. Such terms as “lesson” are therefore best avoided in the discussion of fiction. The critical term *theme* is preferable for several reasons. First, it is less likely to obscure the fact that a story is not a preachment or a sermon: a story's *first* object is enjoyment. Second, it should keep us from trying to wring from every story a didactic pronouncement about life. The person who seeks a moral in every story is likely to oversimplify and conventionalize it to reduce it to some dusty platitude like “Be kind to animals" or “Look before you leap” or “Crime does not pay.” The purpose of the interpretive story writer is to give us a greater awareness and a greater understanding of life, not to inculcate a code of moral rules for regulating daily conduct. In getting at the theme of the story, it is better to ask not "What does this story teach?" but *"What does this story reveal?"*

The revelation offered by a good story may be something fresh or something old. The story may bring us some insight into life that we had not had before, and thus expand our horizons, or it may make us feel or feel again some truth of which we have long been merely intellectually aware. We may know in our minds, for instance, that "War is horrible” or that “Old age is often pathetic and in need of understanding", but these are insights that need to be periodically renewed. Emotionally we may forget them, and, if we do, we are less alive and complete as human beings. The story writer performs a service for us - interprets life for us - whether he gives us new insights or refreshes and extends old ones.

The themes of commercial and quality stories may be identical, but frequently they are different. Commercial stories, for the most part, confirm their readers’ prejudices, endorse their opinions, ratify their feelings and satisfy their wishes. Usually, therefore, the themes of such stories are widely accepted platitudes of experience which may or may not be supported by the life around us. They represent life as we would like it to be, not always as it is. We should certainly like to believe, for instance, that “Motherhood is sacred,” that ‘True love always wins through", that “Virtue and hard work are rewarded in the end,” that "Cheaters never win,” that “Old age brings a mellow wisdom which compensates for its infirmity,” and that "Every human being has a soft spot in him somewhere.” The interpretive writer, however, being a thoughtful observer of life, is likely to question these beliefs and often to challenge them. His ideas about life are not simply taken over ready-made from what he was taught in Sunday school or from the hooks he read a child; they are the formulation of a sensitive and independent observer who has collated all that he has read and been taught with life

itself. The themes of his stories therefore do not often correspond to the little sentiments we find inscribed on candy valentines. They may sometimes represent rather sombre truths. Much of the process of maturing as a reader lies in the discovery that there may be nourishment and deeper enjoyment in assimilating these sombre truths than in licking the sugar off of candy valentines.

We do not, however, have to accept the theme of an interpretive story any more than we do that of a commercial story. Though we should never summarily dismiss it without reflection, we may find that the theme of a story represents a judgment on life with which, on examination, we cannot agree. If it is the reasoned view of a seasoned and serious artist, nevertheless, it cannot be without value to us. There is value in knowing what the world looks like to other men, and we can thus use a judgment to expand our knowledge of human experience, even though we cannot ourselves accept it. A genuine artist and thoughtful observer, moreover, can hardly fail to present us with partial insights along the way although we disagree with his total view. A good reader, therefore, will not reject a story because he rejects its theme. He can enjoy any story which arises from sufficient depth of observation and reflection and is artistically composed, though he disagrees with its theme; and he will prefer it to a shallower, less thoughtful, or less successfully integrated story which presents a theme which he endorses.

Discovering and stating the theme of a story is often a delicate task. Sometimes we will feel what the story is about strongly enough, and yet find it difficult to put this feeling into words. If we are skilled readers, is perhaps unnecessary that we do so. The bare statement of the theme, so lifeless and impoverished when abstracted from the story, may seem to diminish the story to something less than it is. Often, however, the attempt to state theme will reveal to us aspects of a story which we should otherwise not have noticed, and will thereby lead to more thorough understanding. The ability to state theme, moreover, is a test of our understanding of a story. Beginning readers often think they understand a story when in actuality they have misunderstood it. They understand the events but not what the events add up to. Or, in adding up the events, they arrive at an erroneous total. People sometimes miss the point of a joke. It is not surprising that they should frequently miss the point of a good piece of fiction, which is many times more complex than a joke.

There is no prescribed method for discovering theme. Sometimes we can best get at it by asking in what way the main character has changed in the course of the story and what, if anything, he has learned before its end. Sometimes the best approach is to explore the nature of the central conflict and its outcome. Sometimes the title will provide an important clue. At all times we should keep in mind the following principles.

1. **Theme must be expressible in the form of a statement with a subject and predicate.** It is insufficient to say that the theme of a story is motherhood or loyalty to country. Motherhood and loyalty are simply subjects. Theme must be a statement about the subject. For instance, "motherhood sometimes has more frustrations than rewards," or "loyalty to country often inspires heroic self-sacrifice." If we express the theme in the form of a phrase, the phrase must be convertible to sentence form. A phrase such as “the futility of envy,” for instance, may be converted to the statement “Envy is futile”: it may therefore serve as a statement of theme.

2. **The theme must be stated as a *generalization* about life.** In stating theme we do not use the names of the characters in the story, for to do so to make a specific rather than a general statement. The theme of Morley Callaghan's “The Little Business Man” is not that “Luke learns how to deal with his uncle, a man with a very practical approach to life.” Rather, it is something like this: “A young, lonely boy learns that practical people, through their precise and exact attitude toward life, are capable of destroying things of great value.”

3. **We must be careful not to make the generalization larger than is justified by the terms of the story.** Terms like *every, all, always*, should used very cautiously; terms like *some, sometimes, may*, are often more accurate. The theme of Hugh Garner's “E Equals MC Squared” is not that “Evil actions will always be punished,” for we are presented with only the instance of retribution in the story. Furthermore, there are no evil qualities in Matt Colby that warrant his grisly death, and his death, would undermine such a theme. The theme of this story could be expressed thus: “Even an apparently passive and harmless individual may sometimes react with calculated and irreversible revenge." "Notice that we have said *may sometimes*, not *will always*.

4. **Theme is the *central* and *unifying* concept of the story.** Therefore, (a) it must account for all the major details of the story. If we cannot explain the bearing of an important incident or character on the theme, either in exemplifying it or modifying it in some way, it is probable that our interpretation is partial and incomplete, that at best we have got only of a sub-theme. Another alternative, though it must be used caution, is that the story itself is imperfectly constructed and lacks unity. (b) The theme must not be contradicted by any detail of the story. If we have to overlook or blink at or

"force" the meaning of some significant detail in order to frame our statement, we may be sure that our statement is defective. (c) The theme must not rely upon supposed facts - facts not actually stated or clearly implied by the story. The theme must exist *inside*, not *outside* the story. It must be based on the data of the story itself, not on assumptions supplied from our own experience.

5. **There is no one way of stating the theme of a story.** The story is not a guessing game or an acrostic which is supposed to yield some magic verbal formula which won't work if a syllable is changed. It merely presents a view of life, and, as long as the above conditions are fulfilled, that view may surely be stated in more than one way. Here, for instance are three possible ways of stating the theme of "Horses of the Night." (a) "Sensitivity and creativity are often not appreciated by those whose main goal in life is to make a living or win a war." (b) "Those who are sensitive and creative may lose their sanity as a result of the pressures society.'' (c) ''A sensitive, creative individual frequently finds it difficult, often impossible, to cope with the realities of a mundane pragmatic, sometimes cruel society; as a result, complete withdraw may be the only solution." The third of these statements is fuller and therefore more precise than the first two, but each is a valid formulation.

6. **We should avoid any statement which 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."** Although such a statement may express the theme accurately, too often it is simply the lazy man's short cut which impoverishes the essential meaning of the story in order to save mental effort. When a reader forces every new experience into an old formula, he loses the chance for a fresh perception. Instead of letting the story expand his known awareness of the world, he falls back dully on a cliché. To come out with "Honesty is the best policy" as the theme of a story is to lose the whole value of the story. If the impulse arises to express the meaning of a story in a ready-made phrase, it should be suppressed!!

(Source - *Story and Structure*)