
CHAPTER ONE

TOPICS AND THEMES: BASIC COMPONENTS OF INTERPRETATION AND TOOLS TO SHARPEN CRITICAL THINKING

An understanding of topics and themes is central to interpretation. Together with characters, plot, and style (covered in the next three chapters), they make up the essential elements of literature. Part One of this book is devoted to teaching these elements. Mastering them is the key to understand and interpret literature. There is nothing mysterious about the word *interpretation*, which simply means sharing with the reader what we grasp as the meaning of a literary work or a movie. The exercise of discovering, formulating, and discussing themes from literary works and movies is thus called interpretation. It involves critical thinking, analysis, and argumentation. Some works yield their meaning effortlessly while others are complex, and decoding them becomes a challenge. The skills and knowledge introduced in this chapter will help you meet that challenge. Interpretation is needed to access topics and themes in literary works and movies. It also comes into play in evaluating the elements of character, plot, and style if you can persuasively argue how they generate or reinforce themes. Interpretation, like argumentation, can be opinionated, harshly judgmental, and reactionary. Ideally, however, it should be viewed as cordial sharing that deepens the meaning of a literary work. It is this latter kind of interpretation that this book practices and recommends. Some necessary ground must first be covered toward that end.

Before getting further into a discussion of topics and themes, it is necessary to understand that not every single literary work may have a readily identifiable topic and theme and not all authors may start writing their works with a distinct topic or theme in mind. However, important topics and themes inevitably and naturally emerge from all literary works that matter.

The critic Roger Henkle's position seems to be reasonable and persuasive. It is this view that the chapters of this book mainly adhere to: "We expect to be manipulated to some extent in reading . . . [literary work]; all writers assemble their materials with some plan of moving the reader toward certain insights or conclusions" (Henkle 72). The reader's task is to understand the author's plan and evaluate the insights and conclusions through careful interpretation.

To learn the skill of interpretation through critical thinking, analysis, and argumentation, we have to assume that literary works do have topics and themes and choose works with identifiable themes. In

your interpretation, it is better to avoid overuse of the words *topics* and *themes*. You can interpret a work without using those words. They, however, should always remain in the back of your mind to give your analysis the right focus.

Theme and Its Central Place in Interpreting Literature and Film

The critic Allardyce Nicoll calls a theme the “central spirit” by which a literary work is inspired and which gives it “unity of impression.” To interpret literary works and movies, understanding and recognizing their themes is paramount. All other features, including style, become incidental to *theme*, which may be defined as *the position an author or a work takes on a topic*. That position is often not self-evident. To access it, we need interpretation of the work’s events, key statements, action, characters’ values, the author’s style, and similar elements. For example, an important topic in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Cask of Amontillado” is the nature of human conscience. The story’s theme on that topic, derived through interpretation, is that *criminals may escape prosecution by law, but they cannot escape trial by their own conscience*. Poe does not make this statement of theme. He implies it through the story’s plot and characters. Even though the story’s narrator and main character Montresor has successfully escaped prosecution by law for his murder of Fortunato, the story shows that his conscience has finally caught up with him and he has to divulge his secret crime.

Formulation of a theme, thus, is an exercise in literary interpretation and reasoned analysis. It is not a purely subjective emotional response.

Theme as an awareness (and an invitation)

A theme thus is an awareness a work of art creates in us. When we put that awareness in the form of a thematic statement, as in the above example, it is of the nature of general, sometimes universal, application and captures the essence of a large part of the work being interpreted. Most literary works communicate their themes not overtly but through implications of plot, characters, and style (that is, the way in which an idea is expressed). On the topic of marriage, for example, an author may present interactions between characters’ actions and their outcomes to suggest the theme that *marriage is not a panacea for personal shortcomings and that, to be successful, it requires constant hard work*. The preceding two examples of statements of theme (on the topics of conscience and marriage) demonstrate that when reading literature and viewing movies, we grasp their essence only if we go beyond surface meanings, beyond the story level, into the concepts and feelings that often animate literary and cinematic works.

Since the theme of a literary work is like an invitation to contemplate a view of life, grasping it brings a sense of fellowship with the author. By its very nature, a theme is a generalization and an abstraction, as in the aforementioned examples, but it is inherent in and based upon the work’s specific and physical details, such as settings that create a mood, descriptions that tell of a background, events, characters, their actions, values, and outcomes. Understanding these details brings us closer to perceiving a literary

work's theme(s) and thus gaining mastery over the ebb and flow of events and appearances presented in a work of art. A work can be read at several levels just as a movie can be viewed for its surface as well as subtler meanings. The heart of interpretation lies in recognizing the deeper themes imbedded in the seemingly chaotic cavalcade of characters and events in a work of art.

Theme-centered discussions are interpretations that involve an ideal synthesis of reading and writing. The ideas on which we write are derived from our reading of the work, and improvement in critical and analytical reading skills enhances our writing ability. Mina Shaughnessy, a well-known writing scholar, describes this essential connection between reading and writing:

“Reading in this way, the student begins to sense that the meaning of what he reads or writes resides not in the page nor in the reader but in the encounter between the two. This insight makes him a more careful writer and a more critical reader. As a writer, he must think about the kinds of responses his words are likely to arouse; as a reader, his growing critical stance encourages him to raise questions about what he reads, to infer the author's intent, and even to argue with him” (Shaughnessy 223).

“What's In It for Me?” Personal Enrichment from Interpretive Reading

Enhancement of reading and writing skills, for many readers, is a good enough reason to warrant literary study, but a theme-centered approach to literature and film has an additional benefit: Many readers will find in this exercise a means of learning about themselves. In real life, when we are emotionally involved in an experience, our involvement often makes it difficult to have the detachment that is necessary to learn about ourselves. Movies and works of literature can provide us that detachment and objectivity through which we can examine the behavior and motives of literary characters who act or do not act like us. Roger Henkle is persuasive on this subject:

“. . . there is no more sensitive and versatile laboratory for the understanding of individual or group behavior or for registering our own reactions, than literature” (Henkle 4).

According to the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in literature, “we can have truly altruistic instincts, genuine acknowledgement of the otherness of others.” Elaborating on Nussbaum's statement, the novelist Zadie Smith also feels that when “we read with fine attention, we find ourselves caring about people who are various, muddled, uncertain and not quite like us (and that is good).”

In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood also points out the value of literature: “Literature differs from life in that life is amorphously full of detail, and rarely directs us toward it, whereas literature teaches us to notice. . . . makes us better noticers of life; we get to practice on life itself; which in turn makes us better readers of detail in literature; which in turn makes us better readers of life” (65).

Experiencing literary or cinematic works through their themes takes us beyond ourselves by allowing us to live vicariously through the characters that we meet. We place ourselves in those characters' as well as their creators' positions and feel their emotions. In this way works of art broaden and sharpen our

points of contact with humanity. Our ability to formulate themes also means that we can transmute our personal experiences into inferences, concepts, and observations of a philosophical nature. This training helps us learn from significant events and actions in life. Such learning, however, is possible only if we are able to step back from the intimacy of a situation and analyze it in order to grasp the essence of our experience. Theme-oriented study of literature thus adds immensely to our self-enrichment.

Distinguishing Topic from Theme

Now that we have covered some basic ground, let us study a few literary works to better understand the terms *topic* and *theme* and to see how full comprehension of them can enhance our enjoyment of literature. It needs no reiteration that the first requirement of interpretation is a clear grasp of these two terms. Without necessarily using these terms, an interpreter moves from topic identification to theme formulation, at least mentally. Without that process, it is difficult to move beyond merely summarizing the events and actions in a literary work. Summarizing is not interpretation. Initially, it is advisable to be explicit in identifying and using the terms *topic* and *theme*. Later, as they become a part of your thinking process when interpreting and analyzing literature, you will find yourself writing about *topics* and *themes* without necessarily using those terms.

Simply stated, a *topic* is an open-ended concept, such as aging. A *theme* is the position an author or a literary work takes on a topic. Identifying a topic does not involve the same amount of detail as a formal statement of theme. A topic is often introduced with words, such as *about*, *deals with*, *concerns*, etc. By their very nature such words do not introduce a complete thought. On the topic of aging, for example, a theme could be that *the process of aging, though inevitable, is seldom accepted cordially, especially in an excessively looks-conscious, youth-oriented society*. Arriving at a theme from a topic thus involves narrowing down the topic and completing the thought process. When we look at a topic and its open-ended nature, we are curious to see how it would be narrowed to a precise theme to satisfy the “What about it?” response. Identifying a topic leaves the author’s/story’s position on that topic unstated. The above-stated, italicized theme on the topic of aging removes the “What about it?” sense of incompleteness.

Compared with identifying a topic, a thematic statement thus demands more effort, greater risk in interpretation, and a clearer grasp of the ideas presented in the work. A literary work or a movie may have several themes; a distillation of all of them leads to the work’s central theme. Some works do not strive for a central theme. We should also keep in mind that some topics, because of their elusive nature, may not yield precise themes. Another term, often used in conjunction with *topic* and *theme* is *thesis*, which is used to refer to the central idea in nonfiction prose, including expository and interpretive essays.

To understand the process of moving from an author's *topic* to *theme*, let us read Sylvia Plath's poem "Mirror."

Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful —
The eye of a little god, four-cornered. 5
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.
Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me, 10
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes. 15
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)

The *topic* of Sylvia Plath's poem is the fear of aging. The poem's central *theme* (or the position the poem takes on that topic) may be stated in many ways, one of which is this: *Seeking self-worth through transient attributes, such as physical beauty and youth, does not lead to contentment.* Like most modern poets, Plath does not state her theme. We arrive at it through interpretation. Plath suggests this theme by the careful selection of the speaker, the setting, the main character's values, and imagery. After we understand how the elements that constitute the poem's physical details function in the poem, we can then infer its theme. On reading any literary work, we usually have at least a vague idea as to what the work is about. Transforming that vague, amorphous idea into a logically supported and valid interpretation is the challenge of this assignment.

Our formulation of the poem's theme comes after something like the following absorption of the poem's plot details or summary has taken place in our minds, if not on paper: *The speaker is a mirror that truthfully reflects the woman's appearance, which is undergoing inevitable changes as a result of aging. This woman is obsessed with the remembered image of her past youthfulness. Instead of accepting the natural process she struggles painfully and vainly to block out the truth. While searching for her youth that, she feels, has disappeared somewhere in the depths of the mirror, she finds "an old woman . . . [rising] toward her day after day, like a terrible fish" (lines 17-18).*

Interpretation also requires that we explain the complex parts of a work as in the following example: In the poem's last line, the image of an old woman rising "toward her day after day, like a terrible fish"

signals the unavoidable -- a dead fish does rise to the surface. Her physical decay that she has been trying to hide will become unconcealable eventually.

The just-finished exercise of reading Sylvia Plath's poem would be regarded as a literary interpretation. The poem's broad *topic* of aging is narrowed down to the *theme* of the futility of seeking self-worth through transient attributes.

The preceding examples show that any supportable generalization made on a topic in a literary work could be regarded as a statement of theme. However, the quality of the thematic statement will depend on two accomplishments:

1. The extent to which your words cover an important idea or aspect of the work being discussed.
2. The precision of the words that you *add* to the topic to capture the scope and direction of your thought.

It will be helpful to remember that in grammatical terms, the topic is like the *subject* in a clause, and what you say about it is like the *predicate*. With this guideline in mind, let us analyze the following sentence: "Plath's position on the topic of aging is that aging is inevitable and efforts to fight or hide it are bound to be unsuccessful." In this statement of theme, *aging* is the *subject*, and the remaining words about its inevitability are the *predicate*. It is, moreover, not necessary that all themes in a literary work or a movie should relate to just one topic. Sometimes a work may have several different topics and many different themes that cannot be forced into the category of an overarching *central* theme. If one is so inclined, one may try to point out a *central* theme that intersects all themes.

A good example of this accomplishment is Augustus W. Schlegel's following interpretation of Shakespeare's complex play *Hamlet*:

Hamlet is . . . a tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, and calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectators (Schlegel 404).

Schlegel's thematic statement captures the essence of *Hamlet*.

The First Major Challenge in Interpretation: Distinguishing Between a Plot Summary and a Statement of Theme

The problem of confusing plot summaries with themes is quite common in interpretations of literature and film. The fundamental rule is clear enough: *Fewest possible analytic, interpretive, and evaluative words in a summary and fewest possible plot details in a statement of theme.* In spite of this seemingly clear rule, the problem remains endemic. To overcome this hurdle, let us first read “The Man from Kabul,” a short story by Indian author Rabindranath Tagore, then write its summary and formulate its themes.

The Man from Kabul

My five-year-old daughter, Mini, cannot live without chattering. I really believe that in all her life she has not wasted a minute in silence. Her mother is often vexed at this, and would like to stop her prattle, but I would not. For Mini to be quiet is unnatural, and I cannot bear it long. And so my own talk with her is always lively.

One morning, for instance, when I was in the midst of the seventeenth chapter of my new novel, my little Mini stole into the room, and putting her hand into mine, said, “Father! Ramdayal, the doorkeeper, calls a crow a crew! He doesn’t know anything, does he?”

Before I could explain to her the difference between one language and another in this world, she had embarked on the full tide of another subject. “What do you think, Father? Bhola says there is an elephant in the clouds, blowing water out of his trunk, and that is why it rains!”

And then, darting off anew, while I sat still, trying to think of some reply to this: “Father, what relation is Mother to you?”

With a grave face I contrived to say, “Go and play with Bhola, Mini! I am busy!”

The window of my room overlooks the road. The child had seated herself at my feet near my table, and was playing softly, drumming on her knees. I was hard at work on my seventeenth chapter, in which Pratap Singh, the hero, has just caught Kanchanlata, the heroine, in his arms, and is about to escape with her by the third-story window of the castle, when suddenly Mini left her play and ran to the window, crying, “A Kabuliwallah! A Kabuliwallah!” And indeed, in the street below, there was a man from Kabul, walking slowly along. He wore the loose, soiled clothing of his people, and a tall turban; he carried a bag on his back and boxes of grapes in his hands.

I cannot tell what my daughter’s feelings were when she saw this man, but she began to call him loudly. “Ah!” thought I. “He will come in, and my seventeenth chapter will never be finished!” At that very moment the Kabuliwallah turned and looked up at the child. When she saw this, she was overcome by terror, and running to her mother’s protection, disappeared. She had a blind belief that inside the bag

which the big man carried there were perhaps two or three other children like herself. The peddler meanwhile entered my doorway and greeted me with a smile.

So precarious was the position of my hero and my heroine that my first impulse was to stop and buy something, since Mini had called the man to the house. I made some small purchases, and we began to talk about Abdur Rahman, the Russians, the English, and the Frontier Policy.

As he was about to leave, he asked, "And where is the little girl, sir?" And then, thinking that Mini must get rid of her false fear, I had her brought out.

She stood by my chair and looked at the Kabuliwallah and his bag. He offered her nuts and raisins, but she would not be tempted, and only clung the closer to me, with all her doubts increased.

This was their first meeting.

A few mornings later, however, as I was leaving the house, I was startled to find Mini seated on a bench near the door, laughing and talking, with the great Kabuliwallah at her feet. In all her life, it appeared, my small daughter had never found so patient a listener, save her father. And already the corner of her little sari was stuffed with almonds and raisins, the gift of her visitor. "Why did you give her those?" I said, and taking out an eight-anna piece, I handed it to him. The man accepted the money without demur and put it into his pocket.

Alas, on my return, an hour later, I found the unfortunate coin had made twice its own worth of trouble! For the Kabuliwallah had given it to Mini; and her mother, catching sight of the bright round object, had pounced on the child with: "Where did you get that eight-anna piece?"

"The Kabuliwallah gave it to me," said Mini cheerfully.

"The Kabuliwallah gave it to you!" cried her mother, greatly shocked. "Oh, Mini! How could you take it from him?"

I entered at that moment, and saving her from impending disaster, proceeded to make my own inquiries.

It was not the first or the second time, I found, that the two had met. The Kabuliwallah had overcome the child's first terror by a judicious bribe of nuts and almonds, and the two were now great friends.

They had many quaint jokes, which amused them greatly. Mini would seat herself before him, look down on his gigantic frame in all her tiny dignity, and with her face rippling with laughter, would begin: "O Kabuliwallah! Kabuliwallah! What have you got in your bag?"

And he would reply, in the nasal accents of the mountaineer, "An elephant!" Not much cause for merriment, perhaps; but how they both enjoyed the fun! And for me, this child's talk with a grown-up man had always in it something strangely fascinating.

Then the Kabuliwallah, not to be behindhand, would take his turn: "Well, little one, and when are you going to your father-in-law's house?"

Now, nearly every small Bengali maiden had heard long ago about her father-in-law's house; but we were a little newfangled, and had kept these things from our child, so that Mini at this question must have been a trifle bewildered. But she would not show it, and with ready tact, replied, "Are you going there?"

Amongst men of the Kabuliwallah's class, however, it is well known that the words "father-in-law's house" have a double meaning. It is a euphemism for jail, the place where we are well cared for, at no expense to ourselves. In this sense would the sturdy peddler take my daughter's question. "Oh," he would say, shaking his fist at an invisible policeman, "I will trash my father-in-law!" Hearing this, and picturing the poor discomfited relative, Mini would go off into peals of laughter in which her formidable friend would join.

These were autumn mornings, the very time of year when kings of old went forth to conquest; and I, without stirring from my little corner in Calcutta, would let my mind wander over the whole world. At the very name of another country, my heart would go out to it, and at the sight of a foreigner in the streets I would fall to weaving a network of dreams – the mountains, the glens, and the forests of his distant land, with his cottage in their midst, and the free and independent life, or faraway wilds. Perhaps scenes of travel are conjured up before me and pass and repass in my imagination all the more vividly because I lead an existence so like a vegetable that a call to travel would fall upon me like a thunderbolt. In the presence of this Kabuliwallah, I was immediately transported to the foot of arid mountain peaks, with narrow little defiles twisting in and out amongst their towering heights. I could see the string of camels bearing the merchandise, and the company of turbaned merchants, some carrying their queer old firearms, and some their spears, journeying downward toward the plains. I could see – But at some such point, Mini's mother would intervene, and implore me to "beware of that man."

Mini's mother is unfortunately very timid. Whenever she hears a noise in the street, or sees people coming toward the house, she always jumps to the conclusion that they are either thieves, or drunkards, or snakes, or tigers, or malaria, or cockroaches, or caterpillars. Even after all these years of experience, she is not able to overcome her terror. So she was full of doubts about the Kabuliwallah and used to beg me to keep a watchful eye on him. If I tried to laugh her fear gently away, she would turn around seriously, and ask me solemn questions: Were children never kidnapped? Was it not true that there was slavery in Kabul?

Was it so very absurd that this big man should be able to carry off a tiny child? I urged that though not impossible, it was very improbable. But this was not enough, and her dread persisted. But as it was a very vague dread, it did not seem right to forbid the man [from] the house, and the intimacy went unchecked.

Once a year, in the middle of January, Rahman, the Kabuliwallah, used to return to his own country, and as the time approached, he would be very busy, going from house to house collecting his debts. This year, however, he could always find time to come and see Mini. It might have seemed to a stranger that there was some conspiracy between the two, for when he could not come in the morning, he would appear in the evening.

Even to me it was a little startling, now and then, suddenly to surprise this tall, loose-garmented man, laden with his bags, in the corner of a dark room; but when Mini ran in, smiling, with her “O Kabuliwallah! Kabuliwallah!” and the two friends, so far apart in age, subsided into their old laughter and their old jokes, I felt reassured.

One morning, a few days before he had made up his mind to go, I was correcting proof sheets in my study. The weather was chilly. Through the window the rays of the sun touched my feet, and the slight warmth was very welcome. It was nearly eight o'clock and early pedestrians were returning home with their heads covered. Suddenly I heard an uproar in the street, and looking out, saw Rahman being led away bound between two policemen, and behind them a crowd of inquisitive boys. There were bloodstains on his clothes, and one of the policemen carried a knife. I hurried out, and stopping them, inquired what it all meant. Partly from one, partly from another, I gathered that a certain neighbor had owed the peddler something for a Rampuri shawl, but had denied buying it, and that in the course of the quarrel, Rahman had struck him. Now, in his excitement, the prisoner began calling his enemy all sorts of names, when suddenly in a veranda of my house appeared my little Mini, with her usual exclamation: “O Kabuliwallah! Kabuliwallah!” Rahman's face lighted up as he turned to her. He had no bag under his arm today, so that she could not talk about the elephant with him. She therefore at once proceeded to the next question: “Are you going to your father-in-law's house?” Rahman laughed and said, “That is just where I am going, little one!” Then seeing that the reply did not amuse the child, he held up his fettered hands. “Ah!” he said, “I would have thrashed that old father-in-law, but my hands are bound!”

On a charge of murderous assault, Rahman was sentenced to several years' imprisonment. Time passed, and he was forgotten. Our accustomed work in the accustomed place went on, and the thought of the once-free mountaineer spending his years in prison seldom or never occurred to us. Even my lighthearted Mini, I am ashamed to say, forgot her old friend. New companions filled her life. As she grew older, she spent more of her time with girls. So much, indeed, did she spend with them that she came no more, as she used to do, to her father's room, so that I rarely had any opportunity of speaking to her.

Years had passed away. It was once more autumn, and we had made arrangements for our Mini's marriage. It was to take place during the Puja holidays. With Durga returning to Kailas, the light of our home also would depart to her husband's house, and leave her father's in shadow.

The morning was bright. After the rains, it seemed as though the air had been washed clean and the rays of the sun looked like pure gold. So bright were they that they made even the sordid brick walls of our Calcutta lanes radiant, and at each burst of sound my own heart throbbed. The wail of the tune, “Bhairavi,” seemed to intensify the pain I felt at the approaching separation. My Mini was to be married that night.

From early morning, noise and bustle had pervaded the house. In the courtyard there was the canopy to be slung on its bamboo poles; there were chandeliers with their tinkling sound to be hung in each room and veranda. There was endless hurry and excitement. I was sitting in my study, looking through the

accounts, when someone entered, saluting respectfully, and stood before me. It was Rahman, the Kabuliwallah. At first I did not recognize him. He carried no bag, his long hair was cut short, and his old vigor seemed to have gone. But he smiled, and I knew him again. "When did you come, Rahman?" I asked him. "Last evening," he said, "I was released from jail."

The words struck harshly upon my ears. I had never before talked with one who had wounded his fellow man, and my heart shrank within itself when I realized this; for I felt that the day would have been better-omened had he not appeared.

"There are ceremonies going on," I said, "and I am busy. Perhaps you could come another day?"

He immediately turned to go; but as he reached the door, he hesitated, and said, "May I not see the little one, sir, for a moment?" It was his belief that Mini was still the same. He had pictured her running to him as she used to do, calling, "O Kabuliwallah! Kabuliwallah!" He had imagined, too, that they would laugh and talk together, just as of old. Indeed, in memory of former days, he had brought, carefully wrapped up in a paper, a few almonds and raisins and grapes, obtained somehow or other from a countryman; for what little money he had, had gone.

I repeated, "There is a ceremony in the house, and you will not be able to see anyone today."

The man's face fell. He looked wistfully at me for a moment, then said, "Good morning," and went out.

I felt a little sorry, and would have called him back, but I found he was returning of his own accord. He came close up to me and held out his offerings with the words: "I have brought these few things, sir, for the little one. Will you give them to her?"

I took them, and was going to pay him, but he caught my hand and said, "You are very kind, sir! Keep me in your memory. Do not offer me money! You have a little girl; I, too, have one like her in my own home. I think of her, and bring this fruit to your child -- not to make a profit for myself."

Saying this, he put his hand inside his big loose robe and brought out a small and dirty piece of paper. Unfolding it with great care, he smoothed it out with both hands on my table. It bore the impression of a little hand. Not a photograph. Not a drawing. Merely the impression of an ink-smear hand laid flat on the paper. This touch of the hand of his own little daughter he had carried always next to his heart, as he had come year after year to Calcutta to sell his wares in the streets.

Tears came to my eyes. I forgot that he was a poor Kabuli fruit-seller, while I was – But no, what was I more than he? He also was a father.

That impression of the hand of his little Parvati in her distant mountain home reminded me of my own little Mini.

I sent for Mini immediately from the inner apartment. Many difficulties were raised, but I swept them aside. Clad in the red silk of her wedding day, with the sandal paste on her forehead, and adorned as a young bride, Mini came and stood modestly before me.

The Kabuliwallah seemed amazed at the apparition. He could not revive their old friendship. At last he smiled and said, "Little one, are you going to your father-in-law's house?"

But Mini now understood the meaning of the word "father-in-law," and she could not answer him as of old. She blushed at the question and stood before him with her bride like face bowed down.

I remembered the day when the Kabuliwallah and my Mini had first met, and I felt sad. When she had gone, Rahman sighed deeply and sat down on the floor. The idea had suddenly come to him that his daughter, too, must have grown up while he had been away so long, and that he would have to make friends anew with her, also. Assuredly he would not find her as she was when he left her. And besides, what might not have happened to her in these eight years?

The marriage pipes sounded, and the mild autumn sunlight streamed around us. But Rahman sat in the little Calcutta lane and saw before him the barren mountains of Afghanistan.

I took out a currency note, gave it to him, and said, "Go back to your daughter, Rahman, in your own country, and may the happiness of your meeting bring good fortune to my child!"

Having made this present, I had to curtail some of the festivities. I could not have the electric lights I had intended, nor the military band, and the ladies of the house were despondent about it. But to me the wedding feast was all the brighter for the thought that in a distant land a long-lost father had met again his only child.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

Plot Summary (with fewest possible analytic/interpretive comments)

In a plot summary, information is included about settings, characters, their significant deeds, events, conflicts, consequences, and similar matters. Comments of interpretive, analytic, and evaluative nature, which belong in a statement of theme, are excluded or, at least, kept to the very minimum. For easy recognition, analytic and interpretive words are italicized in this summary.

The man from Kabul – Abdur Rahman – is a street vendor. The little girl Mini, like her mother, is initially frightened of Rahman because of the prevailing myth that outsiders like him kidnap little children. However, with some encouragement from her father and with the help of little presents of almonds and raisins brought to her by Rahman, the little girl soon loses her fear and befriends him.

One day, just before Rahman's annual trip back home to Kabul, he is arrested for assaulting someone who refuses to pay him the money owed. Rahman is jailed, and when he is released after several years, he goes directly to see Mini. Her father is not pleased to see him and considers his sudden appearance on the day of Mini's marriage an ill omen.

Rahman's heartbreak on being denied his request to see Mini, *the initial insensitivity and harshness of Mini's father*, and the eventual *melting away of the barrier between the two men* are the story's *vital details*. We discover in the end that Rahman, too, has the loving heart of a father. Having been unable to see his daughter of Mini's age for many years, he has had to satisfy his longing for his daughter with a precious memento that he has always carried "next to his heart" inside his robe. This memento is the impression of his little girl's hand on an ink-smear paper, *a poor man's substitute for a photograph*. When he shows it to the father-narrator and explains to him the reason for his closeness to Mini, the *[gulf between the two men disappears]*. This was a brief plot summary of the story. Statements of the story's themes now follow.]

Theme Formulation (with fewest possible plot summary details)

Statements of themes are analytic and interpretive in nature. They prevent an essay from sounding like a plot summary. In thematic statements, plot details are kept to a minimum. In the following sample of theme formulation, there are no plot summary details. However, such details can be used as long as they are kept subordinate to the themes.

The two topics of stereotyping and human ties lead to the following two themes in Tagore's story:

"The Man from Kabul" makes us realize that we have a tendency to stereotype people according to our imperfect knowledge of their backgrounds and cultures. From another closely related direction that the story takes we learn that when the superficial barriers of class, caste, and origin are overcome, human beings are found to have the same fears, longings, needs, and concerns, thus emphasizing the element of common humanity that binds us all. (In the preceding sentence the underlined words are a substitute for the word *theme*, just in case you want to avoid using that word too frequently).

The foregoing examples of converting topics into themes have demonstrated this simple and very practical method: To discover and formulate a theme, the first step is identifying an important topic and then determining the position or stand the literary work or movie takes on that topic. This is an easy, solid, and reliable way to access themes. These examples also show that readers often derive different themes from a topic, based on their own perceptions and interpretations.

Criteria for good statements of themes

Statements of themes are often made with insufficient regard to their wording. As a result, *themes* get confused with *topics* and plot summaries. The preceding section on "Distinguishing Topic and Theme," together with the guidelines for phrasing themes listed below, will solve the problem.

- Any theme that you formulate or identify should be supportable with textual evidence.
- Nothing in the text should contradict your statement of theme.
- A thematic statement should cover a substantial portion of the text's content.
- Avoid prefabricated expressions and clichés like the following: "The story's theme is that what goes around comes around." Being the product of someone else's thoughts, such clichés sound inauthentic and cannot be expected to carry the weight of a theme, nor can they evoke the reader's interest.
- Statements of themes are the culmination of your thinking as your mind interacts with the characters, events, and topics in the works you read.
- Write the themes in the present tense for these two reasons: First, the past tense is often associated with summaries, which a theme is not. Secondly and more importantly, the truth contained in themes is never dated and is, therefore, always relevant to the present.

Combining Skill with Creativity in Generating Statements of Themes

The preceding examples have demonstrated that formulating a statement of theme based on a literary work or film combines skill with creativity. Skill is needed to choose the appropriate word combination and sentence structure. Creativity comes into play in discovering connections between characters' values and their actions, between an author's style and the work's substance, between the work's title and its thought content, and working them into an engaging statement of theme. Undoubtedly, the process of discovering themes is somewhat like solving an intellectual puzzle, but, as Roger Henkle points out, there is a difference:

Unlike a puzzle . . . some of the pieces are from your own experience, your past reading, or your own imagination, so it is to that extent a creative, not a mechanical operation (Henkle 15).

When making statements of themes, remember that such statements should be general. Therefore, names of particular characters are usually not mentioned in the statement to keep its relevance general and not limited to a few characters. If the character's name is mentioned, the phrasing of the theme should not limit the theme to the named character alone. The following examples from *Hamlet* will illustrate this point.

Weak: In his play, Shakespeare shows that Hamlet comes to grief because he expects too much out of life.

Comment: This statement is limited to Hamlet in its application.

Improved (1): In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare shows that a perfectionist is often unhappy in an imperfect world.

Comment: Here the theme is universal because it is applicable to perfectionists in general, not to just one perfectionist (Hamlet).

Improved (2): As an epitome of perfectionism, Hamlet demonstrates that it is tragic to be a perfectionist in an imperfect world.

Comment: Here the character's name is mentioned, but the relevance of this theme is not limited to him. He is used only as a representative of his type.

A rule of thumb

If all else fails, this rule of thumb will help you create a suitably worded thematic statement: A sentence containing a statement of theme requires a complete thought after the introductory words. Surprisingly, almost always the introductory part of a formal statement of theme ends with the words *that, is that, how,* or with a colon (not with *about, deals with, or concerns*). This part is then followed by a complete thought, which a theme always is. Both parts together make up a complete statement of theme.

For example, the topic of jealousy could yield three different themes. [*For easier recognition, I have placed the introductory words in square brackets and underlined the complete thought in all three*

instances. Both parts – the words in brackets and the underlined words – make up a complete statement of theme.]

1. [A major theme in this story is that] the feeling of jealousy stems from insecurity.
2. [Several events in the story, moreover, dramatize the author’s feeling that] jealousy sometimes acts as a necessary spark to rekindle a dying relationship.
3. [The author’s next notable concern is with a curious irony that characterizes jealous people:] even though jealousy is a common human feeling, the persons afflicted with it often deny being jealous.

The third example above introduces a challenging way to formulate a theme.

A colon is placed after the introductory words that identify the literary work’s/film’s general topic. Then the author’s/work’s position on the topic, as perceived by the interpreter, appears in an independent clause.

Comment: The curious irony in jealousy is the topic in this example. The independent clause that follows the colon is the position the story takes on that topic. Both parts of the sentence, joined by the colon, make up the complete theme.

Alternative Ways of Stating Themes

Knowledge of appropriately phrasing themes is essential to accurate interpretation and analysis. However, there are several valid ways of stating themes. So far I have demonstrated only one of them that you can start with. Once you are comfortable with this basic format, feel free to do some experimentation. The primary goal is to grasp the substance of a work of art. Summarizing of supporting details poses no problem for the beginning student. The challenge lies in the phrasing of statements of themes. To make the task easier, you can use an alternative way of stating themes.

Since supporting details are easier to come by, you can start with them and make them the opening part of the statement of theme while still keeping the thematic statement general/universal. Sometimes the mere fact of finding the relevant supporting details can lead us to the related theme. Let us read Keith Douglas’s poem “Vergissmeinnicht” to practice this alternative method of theme formulation.

The German title of this poem means “Forget me not.” The author, an English poet, fought with a tank battalion in World War II.

Vergissmeinnicht

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone,
returning over the nightmare ground
we found the place again, and found
the soldier sprawling in the sun.
The frowning barrel of his gun
overshadowing. As we came on
that day, he hit my tank with one

like the entry of a demon.

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil
the dishonored picture of his girl
who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht
in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content
abased, and seeming to have paid
and mocked at by his own equipment
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

But she would weep to see today
how on his skin the swart flies move;
the dust upon the paper eye
and the burst stomach like a cave.
For here the lover and killer are mingled
who had one body and one heart.
And death who had the soldier singled
has done the lover mortal hurt.

Keith Douglass (1920-1944)

Combining supporting details from the poem with the statement of theme, we may write: The picture of the dead German soldier's beloved (Stefi), found next to his body, poignantly conveys the theme that the *nameless, faceless soldier, who kills and dies on the battlefield, is someone's lover and beloved* (theme in italics).

The following sentence is another example of this different but valid style of stating a theme by mixing plot details (specific in nature) and thematic key words (general in nature): Since, as a consequence of his values, Hamlet meets a tragic end, we find in his fate a reiteration of the view that *perfectionists have a difficult time surviving in a corrupt system* (theme in italics).

This alternative style of theme formulation is the preferred format for writers who like to disguise their statements of themes in order to appear less deliberate. The important point to note is that the plot details are still subordinated to, and made to serve, the theme-bearing words, without which the result would be summarizing, not interpretation.

As you become comfortable with the basic format, you will discover that literary interpretation allows abundant room for creative experimentation.

Advice on experimentation

Before taking too many liberties with the structured approach to the craft of interpretive writing, you should first learn to observe its restraints; only then will your innovations be effective. There is no limit to successful creative experimentation.

Organization of an Interpretive Essay

Sylvia Plath's poem "Mirror" and Rabindranath Tagore's short story "The Man from Kabul" are the two literary works we have discussed in some depth so far. Since we identified only one topic – the fear of aging – and only one theme on that topic in Plath's poem, our thesis statement for the interpretive essay was stated as follows: Seeking self-worth through transient attributes, such as physical beauty and youth, does not lead to contentment. Using supporting details from the poem to support this thesis needed a simple organization. However, had we covered more than one topic and theme in Plath's poem, the thesis and organization would have been more complex as demonstrated in the interpretation of Tagore's multi-topic and multi-theme story.

To complete our interpretation of Tagore's story in the form of an essay, the following items would be needed. All examples are italicized for clarity.

1. A suitable *title* for the essay, such as "Education of the Educated" or "The Sanctity of Human Ties."
2. An *introduction*: A few points selected from the plot summary (already completed) can often serve as a good introduction, as in this example: *Tagore's "The Man from Kabul" is a story of two fathers – one rich, the other poor. It is Mini, the rich man's daughter, who makes the two men see their common humanity.*
3. The *thesis*: It has been already stated in the form of two statements of themes in the preceding section on "Theme Formulation," as follows: The two topics of stereotyping and human ties lead to the following two themes in Tagore's story:

"The Man from Kabul" makes us realize that we have a tendency to stereotype people according to our imperfect knowledge of their backgrounds and cultures. In another closely related theme, the story demonstrates that when the superficial barriers of class, caste, and origin are overcome, human beings are found to have the same fears, longings, needs, and concerns, thus emphasizing the element of common humanity that binds us all.

4. *Supporting the thesis*: It consists of relevant plot details, controlled by topic sentences. Only those details from the story would be cited that illustrate Tagore's themes, stated in the interpreter's thesis. Supporting details come from plot summaries whom they resemble. Both are specific, unlike the statements of themes that are always general. Short quotations, combined with relevant plot details in your own words, are an effective way to support your thesis.

Supporting details from Tagore's story: The narrator's wife wants to protect their little daughter Mini from the street vendor of dry fruits – Rahman. Her fear is caused by her stereotypical thinking that men from Kabul kidnap little children. Encouraged by her father, who happens not to believe in the stereotype, Mini loses her fear of Rahman as she get to know him. The negative thinking about this outsider Rahman finally gets replaced by trust, and the questionable barrier is removed by Rahman's friendship with the family.

Relevant to the story's second theme that concerns the binding human ties between people of different classes and backgrounds, the upper-class narrator initially distances himself from the vendor Rahman because his return after many years coincides with the day of Mini's wedding. He considers it a bad omen and discourages Rahman from seeing her. He offers him some money for his gifts of dry fruit that he has brought for Mini. Rahman refuses to accept money, and a wrenching

scene follows that transforms the narrator: Rahman tells the narrator that he brings Mini the gifts of nuts and raisins not because he wants to make a profit but because Mini reminds him of his own daughter whom he has not seen in many years. He pulls out from inside his robe the impression of his little daughter's ink-smeared hand on a sheet of paper (a poor man's substitute for a photograph). "This touch of the hand of his own little daughter he had carried always next to his heart, as he had come year after year to Calcutta to sell his wares in the streets." After this scene, the narrator's words show that he is a changed person: "Tears came to my eyes. I forgot that he was a poor Kabuli fruit-seller, while I was – But no, what was I more than he? He also was a father." The narrator not only lets Rahman see the bride but also gives him some money so that he can go back home and see his daughter. Giving Rahman the present of money necessitated curtailment of the wedding festivities, but to the narrator "the wedding feast was all the brighter for the thought that in a distant land a long-lost father had met his only child."

It is important to note that even though most of the words in the preceding paragraph are a summary of relevant parts of plot, the controlling words of the paragraph are the thematic words of the opening sentence – "binding human ties."

5. The *conclusion*: Reiteration of a crucial point, raising or answering an important question, mentioning any special insight the work has offered, bringing either a sense of closure to the work's interpretation or purposely leaving the conclusion open-ended.

Sample conclusion: *In this work, Tagore shows his special gift of weaving profound themes into a simply told, compelling story. Impressive character development, credible character revelation, gripping suspense, and a deeply satisfying conclusion make "The Man from Kabul" an exemplary tale.*

Evidently, the more themes an essay discusses the more sections are needed that increase the complexity of organization. However, observing the basic rules of organization explained above would keep your paper organized and coherent.

Placement of Statements of Themes

In an interpretive essay, thematic statements may appear in one cluster as they do in our sample thesis on "The Man from Kabul." Alternatively, thematic statements may be made and supported with textual evidence one by one until the discussion of all themes is completed. Whether they appear in one *concentrated* cluster or one at a time, statements of themes constitute the thesis of an interpretive essay and *control* its organization. As for their placement, they can appear anywhere – in the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the section that they control. They may appear before the supporting details, after them, or may be mixed with them.

Length Ratio: Analysis versus Summarizing

In an interpretation, thematic statements and analytic, creative, and evaluative comments take up far less space than plot summaries (usually about one-third of the essay's total length), but they are the means to organize the more voluminous supporting details and give an interpretive essay its form. Analytic and interpretive statements often consist of the following:

- The title of an interpretive essay.
- Thesis: the most important component. In an interpretive essay, it consists of statements of themes from the literary work/movie.
- Connecting and transitional devices.
- Evaluative comments that link a work's stylistic and technical features to its themes.
- Conclusion.

How Supporting Details Are Organized

Every interpretation contains at least one statement of theme and many supporting details that are necessary to validate it. As was noted earlier, supporting details do not have to come *after* a statement of theme. They could precede and thus lead up to it, using the inductive method of organization, according to which the topic sentence comes at the end of the details that it controls. Inductive organization, that is, putting supporting details *before* the interpreting topic sentence, is especially suited to situations in which you expect resistance to your interpretation. Moreover, instead of separating them into distinct categories, most interpreters blend plot summaries (using specific supporting details) with themes harmoniously, and include direct quotations from the work sparingly. [The structure of an interpretive essay is the focus of Chapter Seven. Only the absolutely necessary information is given here for clarity.]

Works Ideally Suited to Interpretation: Explicit Versus Implied Themes

It is important to remember that not every literary work or film lends itself equally well to the exercise of interpretation. To write an interpretive essay, you should choose a literary work or a film that is rich in ideas and requires an effort on your part before yielding its meaning. Such works veil their themes in suggestive plot details and stylistic elements. In complex works, the author's position may be so disguised as to be almost inaccessible without the reader's deep engagement with the text, thus compounding both the difficulty of interpretation and the pleasure of discovering the theme.

Direct expression of theme, such as this one in Jean Toomer's "Fern," is rare in literature: ". . . men are apt to idolize or fear that which they cannot understand, especially if it be a woman" (Toomer 14). Most writers suggest their themes indirectly through choice of the title, dialogue, narrative voice, settings, atmosphere, imagery, figurative language, tone, characters, symbolism, allusion, and other elements of style (discussed in Chapter Four).

Modern fiction writers and film directors often prefer subtlety to direct statement and, therefore, rely on the power of suggestion. This absence of overt thematic statement does not mean that such works are lacking in ideas. Sometimes themes emerge from a pattern of images. For example, in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (discussed in Chapter Three), imagery of tarnishing and decay subtly embody the theme of decline and decadence of Southern aristocracy.

Exercises to Test Your Mastery of Chapter One

The following questions have been answered in this chapter. The knowledge needed to answer them is essential to interpretation.

1. How is a *topic* different from a *theme*? Give an example of each term.
2. What are the two parts of a statement of theme? Give an example.
3. What are the criteria for good statements of themes?
4. List some of the ways to save an essay on themes of a work from sounding like a plot summary.
5. When you write an essay on themes from a literary work or a movie, what parts of the essay are called your analytical comments. These parts are the result of your interpretation of the work. Summarizing details and quotations from the work are tied and subordinated to these analytical comments.
6. Toward the end of the chapter, a way of stating themes is mentioned that is an alternative to the conventional form. This latter style mixes specific plot details with thematic words of a general nature while keeping the dominant *versus* subordinate nature of the two clear. Does the following example mix plot details with theme-bearing words in a valid, acceptable way? You need not be familiar with the story to answer this question. The theme-bearing words are italicized in the following example:

In O Yong-Su's short story "Nami and the Taffyman" Nami's crafty and purposeful aloofness and the Taffyman's clumsy but sincere pursuit of her illustrate that *in the rituals of romantic love, it is men who are often called upon to take the initiative and risk rejection and ridicule.*

7. Mention some of the personal enrichment aspects of acquiring the know-how of discovering and formulating themes from literary works and movies.
8. If you expect resistance from your reader in a particular section of your paper, what method of organization would you use – inductive or deductive? Why?

