

WRITING ABOUT AN IDEA OR THEME

The Meaning and the Message in Literature

The word **idea** refers to the result or results of general and abstract thinking. Synonymous words are *concept, thought, opinion, and principle*. In literary study the consideration of ideas gets us involved in *meaning, interpretation, explanation, and significance*. Though ideas are usually extensive and complex, separate ideas may be named by a single word, such as *justice, right and good, love, piety, causation*, and, not unsurprisingly, *idea* itself.

IDEAS NEED THE FORM OF ASSERTIONS

Although a single word may give us the name of an idea, an idea itself is not operative until we phrase it as a sentence or **assertion**. In other words, an idea needs a subject and a predicate to get it moving so that we can use it as the basis for discussion. It is important to understand that an *assertion* of an idea is not the same as an ordinary sentence, such as “It’s a nice day.” This observation may be correct (depending on the weather), but it cannot be called an idea. Rather, an idea should indicate *thought* about the day’s quality, such as “A nice day requires blue sky, a warm sun, and light breezes.” Because this latter sentence deals with an assertion about “nice,” it lends itself to the development of a theme on the idea of a nice day.

In studying literature, you should always phrase ideas as assertions. For example, you might claim that an idea in Chekhov’s *The Bear* is “love,” but it would be difficult to begin writing unless you make an assertion, such as “*The Bear* demonstrates the idea that love is both irresistible and irrational.” With this assertion you could explain the sudden and apparently impossible love between Smirnov and Mrs. Popov. Similarly, for Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path” you might make the following assertion based on the character Phoenix Jackson: “Phoenix embodies the idea that caring for others gives no reward but the continuation of the duty itself.”

Although we have noted only one idea in these works, there are usually many separate ideas. When one of the ideas seems to be the major one, it is sometimes also called the **theme**. Loosely, the words *theme* and *major idea* or *central idea* are the same.

IDEAS IN LITERATURE: VALUES AND THE HUMAN SIDE OF THINGS

In literature, ideas are of interest because they concern people in their lives—the ways in which they *actually* lead them, *should* lead them, or *ought to be allowed* to lead them. This means that ideas are not ends in themselves. Rather they apply to the human side of things, and usually they are presented along with the expression or implication that certain things should be highly valued.

As a general rule, **values** are embodied in literary works coincidentally with ideas. For example, the idea of justice may be considered abstractly and broadly, as Plato does in his *Republic* when developing his concept of a just government. In comparison, a poem dealing with the importance of justice is Lowell’s “Patterns,” in which the speaker, in despair because of her lover’s death in battle, questions the justice of “the pattern called war.” Lowell’s values clearly place individuals higher than the politics of state warfare. Similarly concerned with justice,

though somewhat more indirectly, is Welty's "A Worn Path," in which the topic is presented through the personal struggle of an impoverished woman trying to maintain her grandson's health. Welty's idea is that human beings exhibit strength of character despite their race, and she asserts the need for equal treatment by showing that her protagonist, Phoenix, exhibits just such strength. In short, to speak about Welty's idea is also to speak about her values.

THE PLACE OF IDEAS IN LITERATURE

Because writers of poems, plays, and stories are usually not systematic philosophers, it would be a mistake to go "message hunting" as though their works contained nothing but ideas. Indeed, there is much benefit and pleasure to be derived from savoring a work, from being taken up in the developing pattern of story and conflict, from following its implications and suggestions, and from listening to the sounds of its words—to name only a few of the things for which literature is treasured.

All these reservations aside, ideas are vital to understanding and appreciation, for it is indisputable that writers have ideas and want to communicate them. For example, in *The Bear* Chekhov's purpose is to make his audience laugh at two unlikely people falling suddenly in love. The play is funny, however, not only because it is preposterous, but also because it is based on the idea that love takes precedence over other resolutions that people might make. Though "A Worn Path" is first and foremost the poignant *story* of an aging woman on a hopeless quest, it also embodies *ideas* about the strength of human character and the beauty of loving duty. Other ideas to be found in literary works, in addition to these, may be *happiness, impermanence, taste, maturity, pain*, and many more.

DISTINGUISHING IDEAS FROM SUMMARIES

As you make assertions about ideas in a work, it is important to avoid the trap of retelling plots or main actions. Such a trap is contained in the following sentence about Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death": "The major character, Prospero, believes he can avoid the Red Death, but the Red Death kills him anyway." This sentence successfully describes the story's major action, but it does not express an *idea*. Indeed, it *obstructs* understanding because it focuses only on what happens and does not introduce an idea to connect characters and events. The necessary connection might be achieved with a sentence such as "Poe's story illustrates the idea that human beings are powerless before Death," or "The Masque of the Red Death' embodies the thought that human activities are at best no more than a diversion." Themes based on these connecting formulations could be focused on ideas and would not be sidetracked by the retelling of Poe's story.

In a similar way, you should maintain the distinction between ideas and situations. For example, in Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," the speaker is saying goodbye to his sweetheart, who is apparently about to cry because he is going away. That is the *situation* of the poem. But in consolation the speaker cleverly develops the idea that true lovers (like themselves) are never apart but are always connected by their bond of love. This assertion, which the speaker exemplifies in the last four stanzas of the poem, is one of Donne's more powerful ideas above love.

HOW DO YOU FIND IDEAS?

Ideas do not leap out from the page and announce their presence. To determine an idea, you need to look carefully and to consider the meaning of what you have read, and then you need to develop explanatory and comprehensive assertions. There is no rule requiring that your assertions must be the same as those that others might make; people notice different things, and individual formulations vary. A study of Jackson's "The Lottery" might produce any of the following assertions: (1) Most human beings are preoccupied, and therefore are indifferent to the suffering of others. (2) Outdated customs can survive despite their ineffectiveness. (3) The past is a constant and harmful weight on the present. (4) People may easily shed their human qualities when involved in mass actions. Any of these assertions would be useful in a theme about ideas in "The Lottery," and it follows that if one were chosen, the others would need to be either set aside or incorporated into the growing fabric of the theme. In studying for ideas, you should follow a similar process—making a number of formulations for an idea and then selecting one for further development.

As you study, you should be alert to the various ways in which authors convey ideas. Thus one author might prefer an indirect way through a character's speeches, while another may prefer direct statement. In practice, authors may employ all the following methods within the same work:

Direct Statements by the Authorial Voice

Although authors are interested mainly in rendering action, dialogue, and situation, they sometimes, through their authorial voice, state ideas to guide us and deepen our understanding. Such authorial ideas are usually brief but are nevertheless crucial. In the second paragraph of "The Necklace," for example, Maupassant's authorial voice presents the idea that women have only charm and beauty to get on in the world. Ironically, however, Maupassant uses the story to show that for Mathilde, the major character, nothing works, for her charm cannot prevent disaster for her. Poe, in "The Masque of the Red Death," asserts a key idea that "there are matters of which no jest can be made" (paragraph 9). This idea is expressed as authorial commentary just as the Red Death has invaded the party, and it demonstrates the futility of Prospero's attempts to overcome death.

Direct Statements by the First-Person Speaker

First-person narrators or speakers frequently express ideas along with their descriptions. (See also Chapter 6, "Writing about Point of View," pp. 77-89). Because they are part of a dramatic presentation, the ideas may be right or wrong, well-considered or thoughtless, brilliant or half-baked, depending on the speaker. An example of brilliance may be seen in Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," a short poem but nevertheless one in which the speaker develops many perspectives on the nature of love. Less well-developed thought is expressed in Frost's "Desert Places," where the speaker concludes with a phrase (the poem's title) that does no more than hint at the idea of alienation and indifference, which is of major importance in the poem.

Dramatic Statements Made by Characters

In many words, characters express their own views, which may be admirable or contemptible. Through such dramatic speeches, you may encounter thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird, and must do considerable interpreting and evaluating yourself. For example, Old Man Warner in “The Lottery” states that the lottery is valuable even though we learn from the narrator that the beliefs underlying it have long been forgotten. Because Warner is a zealous and noisy supporter, however, his words show that outdated ideas continue to do harm even when there is strong reason to abandon them and develop new ideas. In Chekhov’s *The Bear*, both Smirnov and Mrs. Popov express many silly thoughts as they begin speaking to each other, and it is their sudden love that reveals how wrong-headed their ideas have been.

Figurative Language

Authors often use figurative language to express and reinforce ideas. In the poem “Bright Star,” for example, Keats uses a fixed star, presumably the North Star, as a symbol of constancy. Writers of fiction and drama also freely use figurative language. At the beginning of “Young Goodman Brown,” Hawthorne refers to the sun setting and to his protagonist’s looking backward; these references clearly anticipate Young Goodman Brown’s acceptance of distrust rather than love. In Glaspell’s *Trifles*, a character compares John Wright, the murdered man, to “a raw wind that gets to the bone” (speech 103). With this figurative language, Glaspell conveys the idea of bluntness, cruelty, and indifference that this character so completely embodies.

Characters Who Stand for Ideas

Quite often, characters engage in actions that are so typical that they stand out as representatives of certain ideas and values. Thus Mathilde’s story in Maupassant’s “The Necklace” is so powerful that she comes to stand for the idea that unrealizable dreams may invade and damage the world. Two diverse or opposed characters may represent contrasting ideas, as with Mr. and Mrs. Adams and Old Man Warner of Jackson’s “The Lottery” who stand for opposing views about the effectiveness of the sacrifices required by the lottery.

In effect, characters who stand for ideas may assume symbolic status, as in Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” where the protagonist symbolizes the alienation accompanying overzealousness. The speaker of Frost’s “Desert Place” invites identification as a symbol of the frightening qualities of emptiness and unconcern within individual human beings. Welty’s Phoenix Jackson stands for individuals who by virtue of common humanity deserve equality. In this way, such characters may be equated directly with particular ideas, and to talk about them is a shorthand way of talking about the ideas.

The Work Itself as It Represents Ideas

One of the most important ways in which authors express ideas is to make them an inseparable part of a work’s total impression. All the events and characters may point toward an idea that the work itself makes forceful. For example, in “Young Goodman Brown,” Hawthorne makes objective the idea that the need for love and trust overrides the traditionally rigorous religious view that human beings are sinful and unworthy. Although he does not use these exact words, the story effectively makes the idea clear. Similarly, Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet* dramatizes

the idea that an evil person (Claudius) originates destructive forces that cannot be stopped until they destroy everything in their path. Even “escape literature,” which ostensibly enables readers to forget their immediate concerns, embodies conflicts between good and evil, love and hate, good spies and bad, earthlings and aliens, and so on. Thereby, such stories *do* embody ideas and themes, even though their reason for existence is not thought but forgetfulness.

WRITING ABOUT AN IDEA

Most likely you will wish to write about a major idea or theme, but you may also get interested in one of the many other ideas you find. In Hardy’s “Channel Firing,” for example, a major idea is that destructive warfare is an inescapable condition of human history. The poem also contains other challenging ideas, such as that no civilization is permanent, that the concept of the afterlife may be nothing more than fancy, and that life is synonymous with disturbance. If your assignment were on “Channel Firing,” you could reasonably take any of these for your theme topic.

If you choose a major idea, such as that on warfare in Hardy’s poem, remember that in a well-written story, poem, or play, things are introduced only as they have a bearing on the idea. In this sense, the idea is like a key in music, or like a continuous thread tying together actions, characters, statements, symbols, and dialogue. As readers, we can trace such a thread, with all the variations that writers work upon them. Thus in Amy Lowell’s “Patterns,” the details can be related to the idea that an abstraction such as service in warfare has no meaning when compared with life and love.

As you take notes and sketch your plan of attack, you should explore all the methods of expressing ideas described above (pp. 92-95) and use as many as you think will give you useful information. You might rely most heavily on the direct statements of the authorial voice, or on a combination of these and your interpretation of characters and actions. Or you might focus exclusively on a first-person speaker and use his or her ideas to develop your analysis.

In developing preliminary drafts, try to answer questions such as these: What is your best wording of the idea? Is the idea personal, social, political, economic, scientific, ethical, esthetic, or religious? How pervasive in the work is the idea (throughout for a major idea; intermittently or just once for a secondary idea)? How can character, action, dialogue, statement, description, scene, structure, and development be related to the idea? Are there contradictory statements? Implications? Images? Symbols? Is the idea asserted directly, dramatically, ironically? How? What value or values are embodied in the idea?

Introduction

In your introduction you might state any special circumstances in the work that affect ideas generally or your idea specifically. Your statement of the idea will serve as the central idea for your essay. Your thesis sentence should indicate the particular parts or aspects of the story that you will examine.

Body

In the body, your general goal should be (1) to define the idea, and (2) to show its importance in the work. Each separate story, poem, or play will invite its own approach, but here are a number of strategies for development:

1. ANALYZING THE IDEA AS IT APPLIES TO CHARACTER.

Example: “Minnie Wright is an embodiment of the idea that a life lived amid cruelty and insensitivity will lead to alienation, unhappiness, despair, and also even to violence.

2. SHOWING HOW ACTIONS BRINGS OUT THE IDEA.

Example: “That Mrs. Popov and Smirnov fall in love rather than fight a duel indicates Chekhov’s idea that love is so strong that it literally rescues human lives.”

3. SHOWING THE IDEA OPERATING IN DIALOGUE.

Example: “The speeches of Mrs. Pupuv to Luka, to Smirnov, and to the entering servants illustrate the idea that the poses people adopt may mask and contradict their true self-interest.”

4. DEMONSTRATING HOW THE STRUCTURE IS DETERMINED BY THE IDEA.

Example: “The idea that horror may exist in ordinary things leads to a structure in which Jackson introduces seemingly commonplace people, builds suspense about an impending misfortune, and develops a conclusion of mob destructiveness.”

5. TREATING VARIATIONS OR DIFFERING MANIFESTATIONS OF THE IDEA.

Example: “The idea that overzealousness leads to destruction is shown in Brown’s nightmarish distortion of reality, his rejection of others, and his dying gloom.”

6. DEALING WITH A COMBINATION OF THESE (TOGETHER WITH ANY OTHER SIGNIFICANT ASPECT).

Example: “Chekhov’s idea that love is complex and contradictory is shown in Smirnov’s initial scornfulness of Mrs. Popov, his self-declared independence of character, and his concluding embrace.” [Here the idea is to be traced through speech, character, and action.]

Conclusion

In your conclusion you might begin with a summary, together with your evaluation of the validity or force of the idea. If you have been convinced by the author’s ideas, you might say that the author has expressed the idea forcefully and convincingly, or else you might show the relevance of the idea to current conditions. If you do not like the idea, it is never enough just to state your disagreement; you should include reasons and should demonstrate the shortcomings or

limitations of the idea. If you wish to mention a related idea, whether in the work you have studied or in some other work, you might introduce that here, but be sure to stress the connections.

SAMPLE THEME

The Idea of the Strength of Love in Chekhov's *The Bear**

In the one-act farce *The Bear*, Anton Chekhov shows a man and woman, who have never met before, falling suddenly in love. With such an unlikely main action, ideas may seem unimportant, but one can nevertheless find a number of ideas in the play. Some of these are that responsibility to life is stronger than responsibility to death, that people may justify even the most stupid and contradictory actions, that love makes people do foolish things, and that lifelong commitments may be made with hardly any thought at all. One of the play's major ideas is that love and desire are powerful enough to overcome even the strongest obstacles.^o This idea is shown as the force of love conquers commitment to the dead, renunciation of womankind, unfamiliarity, and anger.[?]

Commitment to her dead husband is the obstacle to love shown in Mrs. Popov. She states that she has made a vow never to see daylight because of her mourning (speech 4), and she spends her time staring at her husband's picture and being self-satisfied with her faithfulness. Her devotion to the dead is so intense that she claims to be virtually dead herself out of sympathy for her husband:

My life is already ended. *He* lies in his grave; I have buried myself in these four walls...we are both dead. (speech 2)

In her, Chekhov has created a strong obstacle so that he might illustrate the power of all-conquering love. By the play's end, Mrs. Popov's embracing Smirmov is a visual example of the idea (speech 151, S.D.).

Renunciation of women is the obstacle for Smirmov. He tells Mrs. Popov that women have made them (speech 69). His disillusioned words apparently make him an impossible candidate for love. But, in keeping with Chekhov's idea,

* For the text of this play, see Appendix C, pages 195-204.

^o Central idea

[?] Thesis sentence

Smirmov soon confesses his sudden and uncontrollable love at the peak of his anger against Mrs. Popov. Within him, the force of love operates so strongly that he would even claim happiness at being shot by the “little velvet hands” of Mrs. Popov (speech 140).

As if these personal causes were not enough to stop love, a genuinely real obstacle is that the two people are strangers. Not only have they never met, but they have never heard of each other. According to the main idea, however, this unfamiliarity is no major problem. Chekhov is dramatizing the power of love, and shows that it is strong enough to overcome even the lack of familiarity or friendship. Indeed, that Smirmov and Mrs. Popov are total strangers may be irrelevant to the idea about love’s strength.

Anger and the threat of violence, however, make the greatest obstacle. The two characters become so irritated about Smirmov’s demand for payment that, as an improbable climax of their heated words, Smirmov challenges Mrs. Popov, a woman, to a duel! He shouts:

And do you think just because you’re one of those romantic creations, that you have the right to insult me with impunity? Yes? I challenge you! (speech 105)

Along with their own personal barriers against loving, it would seem that the threat of shooting each other, even if poor Luka could stop the, would cause life-long hatred. And yet love knocks down all these obstacles, in line with Chekhov’s idea that love’s power is, like a flood, irresistible.

The idea of not new or surprising. It is the subject of popular songs, stories, and other plays, movies, and TV shows. What is surprising about Chekhov’s use of the idea is that love in The Bear overcomes such unlikely conditions, and wins so suddenly. These conditions bring up an interesting and closely related idea: Chekhov is showing that intensely negative feeling may lead not to hatred but rather to love. In the speeches of Smirmov and Mrs. Popov, one can see hurt, disappointment, regret, frustration, annoyance, anger, rage, and potential self-destructiveness. Yet at the high point of these negative feelings, love takes over. It is as though hostility finally collapses because it is the nature of people to prefer

loving to hating. The Bear is an uproarious dramatization of the power of love, and it is made better because it is founded on a truthful judgment of the way people really are.

COMENTARY ON THE THEME

This theme follows the sixth strategy (p. 97) by showing how separate components from the play exhibit the idea's pervasiveness. Throughout, instances of dialogue, situations, soliloquies, and actions are evidence for the various conclusions. Transitions between paragraphs are effected by phrases like "these personal causes" (4), "greatest obstacle" (5), and "The idea" (6), all of which emphasize the continuity of the topic.

The introduction notes that the play is a farce but even so that it contains a number of ideas. The major idea is that love has the power to surmount great obstacles. The thesis sentence lists the four obstacles to be explored in the body.

As the operative aspects of Chekhov's idea, paragraphs 2 through 5 detail the nature of each of the obstacles. The obstacle of paragraph 2, Mrs. Popov's commitment to her husband's memory, is "strong." The one in paragraph 3, Smirmov's dislike of women, is seemingly "impossible." The one in paragraph 4, their being total strangers, is a "genuinely real" difficulty. In paragraph 5, the obstacle of anger is more likely to produce "hatred" than love.

A Close Look at Paragraph 6

There are two objectives in the concluding paragraph. One is to reassert the central idea—a brief summary, as it were. The second is to build on the idea by suggesting another related and important idea. The conclusion therefore demonstrates a major quality of reading literature, namely that a consequence of one idea is the exploration of other ideas. In the paragraph, the topic moves from the idea of love's power to the idea that normal human beings cannot long sustain potentially destructive anger. Obviously, this second idea is a broad generalization which could bear extensive treatment in its own right. Even though the topic would require great development if it came at the beginning, it is effective as a part of the conclusion. The final sentence blends the two ideas, thereby looking both inwardly into the theme and outwardly to the consideration of new ideas.

From: Roberts, Edgar V., Writing Themes About Literature, 1991