Writing Thematic Statements

Or

What IS a Theme Anyway?

**“Theme is the central message of a literary work. It is not the same as a subject, which can be expressed in a word or two: courage, survival, war, pride, etc. The theme is the idea the author wishes to convey about that subject. It is expressed as a sentence or general statement about life or human nature. A literary work can have more than one theme, and most themes are not directly stated but are implied. The reader must think about all the elements of the work and use them to make inferences, or reasonable guesses, as to which themes seem to be implied.” (from *Laying the Foundation* series of books published by AP Strategies in Dallas)**

For example, if love is a topic/subject of two novels, a major theme in one of the novels could be “Love, if taken to extremes, can be negative rather than positive,” while in the other novel, the theme might be “Love can conquer even the greatest evil.” Notice that the topic/subject is the same, but the messages about that topic/subject are different in different works.

Consider this:

A theme is a meaning of a work. (Yes, there can be more than one “meaning.”) Can the meaning of a work be love? hate? greed? No—that makes no sense! Those are just topics, not themes. The theme is the statement an author is making about a topic.

Stating the theme

Begin by using several abstract words to state the principal ideas of the work (topics that the piece is really about). Abstract words describe concepts or ideas that exist only in our minds like alienation, prejudice, ambition, freedom, love, loyalty, passion, etc.

Combine those abstract ideas with comments that reflect the author’s observations about human nature, the human condition, or human motivation. In other words, what is the author saying about the abstract idea? Is he/she, for example, saying something about the qualities of people and/or commenting on society?

A Theme is NOT

A moral or a command

It doesn’t tell us how to behave using words like “should” or “ought.” You want to avoid judging. Also, it’s not an order like “be nice to elderly people”

A common saying

It’s not a cliché like “actions speak louder than words”

Specific to the text

It doesn’t refer to any characters or plot

Absolute

It doesn’t use words like “All,” “none,” “Everything,” or “always.” These aren’t realistic when we think about the human reality

A Theme IS

An observation

It makes a comment about the way things appear to be in reality

Original and thoughtful

It should be something you find interesting, maybe a bit philosophical. The wording is something you’ve come up with by yourself

General, about reality

It translates the characters and plot into generalizations such as “people” or “parents” or “raising a child”

Reasonable

It uses terms like “sometimes,” or “often,” or refers to limited circumstances to suggest a more realistic view of life.

Let’s practice with “Shark’s Teeth” by Kay Ryan

What topics are in this poem?

List them:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

What can we observe about those topics?

Theme statement:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_