

Common Themes in Literature

These are a just a few of the many possible literary subjects and themes. **The point to remember is that a subject is not a theme: a subject is some dimension of the human condition examined by the work; a theme is a statement, direct or implied, about the subject.** The themes about the subjects on the list are still fairly general. As a critical writer discussing a particular literary work, you'll need to bring your observations about theme closer to the work.

1. The Individual in Nature

- a. Nature is at war with each of us and proves our vulnerability.
- b. People are out of place in Nature and need technology to survive.
- c. People are destroying nature and themselves with uncontrolled technology.

2. The Individual in Society

- a. Society and a person's inner nature are always at war.
- b. Social influences determine a person's final destiny.
- c. Social influences can only complete inclinations formed by Nature.
- d. A person's identity is determined by place in society.
- e. In spite of the pressure to be among people, and individual is essentially alone and frightened.

3. An individual's Relation to the gods.

- a. The god(s) are benevolent and will reward human beings for overcoming evil and temptation.
- b. The gods mock the individual and torture him or her for presuming to be great.
- c. The gods are jealous of and constantly thwarts human aspiration to power and knowledge.
- d. The gods are indifferent toward human beings and let them run their undetermined course.
- e. There are no gods in whom people can place their faith or yearning for meaning in the universe.

4. Human Relations

- a. Marriage is a perpetual comedy bound to fail.
- b. Marriage is a relationship in which each partner is supported and enabled to grow.
- c. An old man marrying a young woman is destined to be a cuckold.
- d. Parents should not sacrifice all for a better life for their children.
- e. There are few friends who will make extreme sacrifices.

5. Growth and Initiation

- a. A boy and a girl must go through a special trial or series of trials before maturing.
- b. Manhood or womanhood is often established by an abrupt, random crisis, sometimes at an unusually early age.
- c. Aspects of childhood are retained in all of us, sometimes hindering growth, sometimes
- d. A person grows only in so far as he or she must face a crisis of confidence or identity.

6. Time

- a. Enjoy life now, for the present moment, because we all die too soon.
- b. By the time we understand life, there is too little left to live.

7. Death

- a. Death is part of living, giving life its final meaning.
- b. Death is the ultimate absurd joke on life.
- c. There is no death, only a different plane or mode of life without physical decay.
- d. Without love, death often appears to be the only alternative to life.

8. Alienation

- a. An individual is isolated from fellow human beings and foolishly tries to bridge the gaps.
- b. Through alienation comes self-knowledge.
- c. Modern culture is defective because it doesn't provide group ties which in primitive cultures make alienation virtually impossible.