

## Theme

A novel's theme is the main idea that the writer expresses. Theme can also be defined as the underlying meaning of the story.

The theme of a novel is more than its subject matter, because an author's technique can play as strong a role in developing a theme as the actions of the characters do. For example, American novelist Wright Morris explores the interaction of the past and present in his work *The Field of Vision* (1956), which is set at a bullfight in Mexico. Morris's technique is to use the bullfight's action as a trigger that causes each of the five characters, all American spectators, to remember events from the past.

Rarely can a novel's theme be interpreted in only one way. Because of the length of novels, and the various characters, conflicts, and scenes found within them, readers can look at different aspects of the work to uncover different interpretations of the meaning of the tale. British novelist Lawrence Durrell demonstrated this in his series of novels *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957-1960), which is intended to be experienced not as a series of individual novels but as a single work. The collection looks at life in Alexandria, Egypt, before and during World War II (1939-1945). In the four books, Durrell offers different perspectives on roughly the same actions.

A common theme in novels is the conflict between appearance and reality. For example, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) by American writer Carson McCullers concerns John Singer, a man who cannot speak or hear. Nevertheless, he serves as a sort of confessor to a group of neighbors. These people idealize him as a listener—"Each man described the mute as they wished him to be"—and unburden themselves by speaking to him. However, the reality is that Singer cannot understand the people and that they do not understand him; they are bewildered when he commits suicide.

Another common theme is the search for personal identity. *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by American writer J. D. Salinger convincingly depicts Holden Caulfield, a teenager who realizes that he is no longer a child, but who is not quite ready for adulthood. Holden's desperate search for identity has captured the imagination of generations of adolescent readers.

The theme of an individual who strikes out alone to face the world is used in many works. One of the most famous instances is in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by American novelist Mark Twain. The book, set before the American Civil War (1861-1865), is about a boy, Huck, who cannot endure the restrictions of his life in a town along the Mississippi River. He runs away and rafts down the river, along the way becoming friends with an escaped slave named Jim.

Some novels feature people who cannot break from their society's conventions and instead become disillusioned with the conflict between their aspirations and the reality of their lives. American novelist John Updike explored this theme in *Rabbit, Run* (1960), about a former high school basketball star who is disappointed with his marriage, unsettled by the birth of his first child, and unhappy with his job as a used-car salesman.

Throughout the history of the novel, a major theme has been whether people can change their situations in life or whether they are in the grips of forces beyond their control. The literary school of naturalism, which emerged in the late 1800s in Europe and later spread to North America, explored the idea that people could not control their fates. Novelists such as Émile Zola of France and Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser of the United States were major figures in the naturalism movement. In his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), American author John Steinbeck dramatizes a similar theme of loss of personal control by writing about the Joads, a family forced by economic changes to leave their land in Oklahoma to become migrant workers in California.

Other common themes in novels include how art and life are reflected in one another, the meaning of religion, and whether technology helps people or whether it is a harmful aspect of society.

## Setting

The setting of a novel—the time and place of its action—is crucial to the creation of a complete work. Physical places such as deserts and outer space, as well as cultural settings such as hospitals and universities, help determine characters' conflicts, aspirations, and destinies.

In the 19th century, writers such as Honoré de Balzac of France, Ivan Turgenev of Russia, and Charles Dickens of England provided great amounts of detail when describing their novels' settings, and they did so for specific reasons. In Balzac's *Père Goriot* (1834; *Old Goriot*), the main character arrives in Paris and finds lodging at a boarding house, the Maison Vauquer. The house's shabby furniture and stained linens represent the struggles of lower-middle-class life. In *Ottsy i deti* (1862; *Fathers and Sons*), Turgenev distinguishes between two kinds of country families by contrasting the elegance and the earthiness of their respective households. The ominousness of Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) proceeds as much from the bleak marshes and the Gothic house owned by the character Miss Havisham as from anything the characters say or do.

Some novelists pay less attention to specific physical objects. English writer Jane Austen, for example, is less concerned with items in a room than Dickens is, but this does not mean she is not concerned with social environment. In focusing, rather precisely, on details such as Mr. Bennet's income in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or Mr. Eliot's background in *Persuasion* (1818), she creates an atmosphere in which a character's background and home town—whether London, the town of Meryton, or somewhere in northern England—becomes central to the story.

Sometimes novelists make time and place so essential to the narrative that they become as important as the characters themselves. Often this occurs when novels are set in a single, distinctive location. For example, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by English novelist Emily Brontë, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) by English novelist Thomas Hardy are inconceivable without their settings of Stonehenge, colonial New England, and the Yorkshire moors, respectively.

American author William Faulkner set *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and many other works in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi. Characters featured in one book also show up as characters in other works, drawing all the works together as what is called the Yoknapatawpha saga.

The novel *Jazz* (1992) by American author Toni Morrison is set in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance. This cultural movement of the 1920s and early 1930s featured innovations in literature, theater, art, and music. The setting Morrison creates is integral to the book, whose narrative voice echoes the loose, unpredictable rhythms of the jazz music of the time.