The Development of Tone and Theme

Wednesday, Sept. 5, 2012

Objectives

California

• Use evidence from a text to analyze how the text presents a theme (a view or a comment on life) (11-12.R.3.2)
• Use evidence from a text to analyze how tone serves an author’s purposes (11-12.R.3.2)
• Compare incidents and themes, showing an author’s view or comment on life (11-12.W.2.3.b)
• Use the appropriate tone in your writing to fit your purpose and audience (11-12.W.2.5.c)

National

• Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text. (RI [RL] 11-12.2)
• Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing. (W 11-12.2.2)

From the introduction to the AP English Literature and Composition course (reflecting ways to excel in college English, effective writing, and reading for fun and profit):

An AP English Literature and Composition course engages students in the careful reading and critical analysis of imaginative literature. Through the close reading of selected texts, students deepen their understanding of the ways writers use language to provide both meaning and pleasure for their readers. As they read, students consider a work’s structure, style and themes, as well as such smaller-scale elements as the use of figurative language, imagery, symbolism and tone.

Tone: “The general character or attitude of a place, piece of writing, situation, etc.”
(http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/tone.) “Tone is a literary technique that is a part of composition, which encompasses the attitudes toward the subject and toward the audience implied in a literary work. Tone may be formal, informal, intimate, solemn, somber, playful, serious, ironic, guilty, condescending, or many other possible attitudes. Each piece of literature has at least one theme, or central question about a topic, and how the theme is approached within the work is known as the tone.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tone_(literature). Emphasis added.) “The poet’s attitude toward the poem’s speaker, reader, and subject matter, as interpreted by the reader. Often described as a ‘mood’ that pervades the experience of reading the poem, it is created by the poem’s vocabulary, metrical regularity or irregularity, syntax, use of figurative language, and rhyme.” (http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/Tone.) Tone is what the author sets; mood is what the reader perceives.
Theme: A topic of discussion or writing; a major idea or proposition broad enough to cover the entire scope of a literary or other work of art. Note: A theme may be stated or implicit, but clues to it may be found in the ideas that are given special prominence or tend to recur in a work. (English-Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools.) (1) the abstract concept explored in a literary work; (2) frequently recurring ideas, such as enjoy-life while-you-can; (3) repetition of a meaningful element in a work, such as references to sight, vision, and blindness in Oedipus Rex. Sometimes the theme is also called the motif. Themes in Hamlet include the nature of filial duty and the dilemma of the idealist in a non-ideal situation. A theme in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is the difficulty of correlating the ideal and the real. (http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/lit_term.html) A theme is an idea beyond the text. It is a general idea.

- How are tone and theme related?
- What comes first, tone or theme? (“I don’t know what I think about something until I write about it.” See http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/interviews/ba990630.htm.)
- In what kinds of writing are tone and theme important? How and why?
- Where are tone and theme used besides literature?
- What was the theme of the 2008 presidential election? This year’s elections? What’s the tone of the candidates? The tone of candidates’ supporters?
- If you were running a campaign, what tone and theme would you use? Why?

From the Purdue Online Writing Lab:

Theme

If character is the most important aspect of fiction, then theme is the “meaning” of a story. The “meaning” of a story shouldn’t be mistaken with topic, however. What the writer makes of the topic constitutes theme.

Some literary critics have claimed that theme is a lost art in contemporary American fiction because we are not likely to ask of a story, “What does it add up to?” We are more likely to make sure the cause-and-effect points are rational and make sense. We appreciate meaningful moments of insight in a story, but sometimes balk at asking big questions. Such questions are considered old-fashioned, and the outdated qualities of closure and epiphany have diminished the importance of theme.

Yet readers usually search for answers and meaning in literature, and perhaps this is one reason why readers have lost interest in contemporary American short fiction. Unless this quandary is dealt with, classroom prompted stories may fail to be memorable. Theme makes a story memorable. Part of the reason that theme is not discussed very much in writing workshops is that the primary problem with many stories is lack of coherence. For example, it’s difficult for the story to succeed if the character or the plot is not credible, so the workshop is devoted to fixing the problem.
While these problems do need to be fixed, fixing the problems doesn’t make for a memorable reading experience. Theme often depends on a vision of life that the writer starts out with before she begins the story. Therefore, theme may be beyond the realm of the creative writing workshop, since workshops are usually centered around beginning or intermediate level poets and writers who have not yet discovered their vision of life.

Still, great fiction depends on theme, and theme is sometimes a lost art. Jerome Stern’s suggestion, in Making Shapely Fiction, is an important reminder to all beginning and intermediate writers: “You can’t avoid meaning even if you want to.”

--http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/754/