

Module: Reasoning through Language Arts

Lesson Title: Themes in Short Stories

Objectives and Standards

Students will:

- Analyze a short story in order to make inferences about characters, setting, and plot
- Determine the theme of a short story by analyzing the problems and solutions in a narrative

Reasoning through Language Arts 2014 GED® Assessment Targets
Make inferences about plot/sequence of events, characters/people, settings, or ideas in texts. (R.2.8)
Identify a theme or element of a written source that supports a theme (R.2.6)
Infer what an author's stated and unstated purpose is based on the details in a passage. (R.6.3)

Materials

- *The 12 Most Common Themes in Literature* handout
- *Searching for the Theme* handout
- Chart paper and markers
- Copies of a short story appropriate for interests and reading level of students
- Sample sites for downloading short stories for classroom use:
 - Short Story Library - <http://americanliterature.com/short-stories>
 - Story Bytes - <http://www.storybytes.com/>
 - Classic Short Stories - <http://www.classicshorts.com/>

Instructional Plan

Overview

In this lesson, students will analyze a short story and determine the theme. Different short stories or fables can be used to teach this lesson. One example of a short story to use in the GED® classroom is: *Broken Promises* by Lorraine M. Gregoire - <http://www.storybytes.com/view-stories/2000/broken-promises.html>. This story provides a real-world scenario, is of an appropriate length for classroom instruction, and provides students with opportunities to analyze characters, setting, plot, conflict, and themes. Students should be familiar with the various elements of a short story prior to implementing this lesson.

Process

Begin the lesson by having students identify the different elements of a short story. Students should include: setting, character, plot, conflict (including point of view), and theme. If students need a review of the elements of a short story before proceeding into determining the theme, a short review or video may be shown and discussed.

One example of a short video is:

- Five Things (Elements of a Short Story) by FlocaBulary
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6l24S72Jps>

Share with students that today they are going to determine the theme of a short story. Have students define the term theme. Students may share that the theme of a story is the author's message or what the author wants the reader to take away from the story. **Theme** is one of the more difficult elements of a story to identify. A theme is a story's message. It is what the author of a piece of text wants you to remember most. Tell students that it has been argued that there are anywhere between 3 and 40 main themes in literature that continue to be explored by each successive generation of writers. No one knows for sure what the real number is. There are many variations, and there are often overlaps as well. Some sample themes are included in *The 12 Most Common Themes in Literature* handout.

Have students read the selected short story, such as: *Broken Promises*. Divide the class into small groups of 3 to 4 students. Provide each group with the handout – *Searching for the Theme*. Have the students first identify the characters, setting, and problem(s). As a group discuss each of the elements. Have students add or delete information in the chart as necessary. Next, tell students to create a summary of the short story using the "somebody-wanted-but-so-then" summary chart. Discuss that a summary statement should incorporate the information from the chart into a sentence of 20 words. Have each group share their summary sentence with the class.

To identify the theme of the story, tell students that they need to use the information that they have gathered to determine lessons learned by the characters, as well as the overarching lesson that the author wants the reader to take away with him/her. Students should complete the charts and craft a sentence that provides the overarching theme of the story. Have students write their themes on chart paper and post around the room.

Debrief the activity by comparing the various themes to the common themes of most short stories.

Sample Debriefing Questions

Have students answer the following questions regarding the revising and editing activity:

- Why is it necessary to first identify the character, setting, and problem of a short story prior to determining the theme?
- What clues in the story did you use to determine the theme?
- How did summarizing the story assist you in determining the theme?
- How were the themes of each group similar? Different?
- Can an author have more than one theme for a story? Explain.

Assessments/Extensions

1. Have students identify the theme in their independent reading. Provide students with short stories or excerpts to read that provide practice with the various types of common themes.
2. Have students share their definition of theme and the steps they use to determine the author's theme.

The 12 Most Common Themes in Literature

1. **Man Struggles Against Nature:** Man is always at battle with human nature, whether the drives described are sexual, material or against the aging process itself.
2. **Man Struggles Against Societal Pressure:** Mankind is always struggling to determine if societal pressure is best for living. These themes focus on characters who know how society says they should live, but feel society's dictation is contrary to what makes them happy.
3. **Man Struggles to Understand Divinity:** Mankind tries to understand and make peace with God, but satisfaction is elusive and difficult.
4. **Crime Does Not Pay:** A popular theme played out in books throughout time is the concept that honesty is honored and criminals will eventually be punished/will pay for their deeds
5. **Overcoming Adversity:** Many books laud characters who accept a tough situation and turn it into triumph.
6. **Friendship is Dependent on Sacrifice:** This is the idea that you can't have friends if you don't act like a friend.
7. **The Importance of Family:** Sacrifices for family are honored and explored, as are the family bonds that survive adversity.
8. **Yin and Yang:** Just when you think life is finally going to be easy, something bad happens to balance it all out.
9. **Love is the Worthiest of Pursuits:** Many writers assert the idea that love conquers all, appealing to the romantic side of us.
10. **Death is Part of the Life Cycle:** Literary works with this theme show how death and life are intricately connected.
11. **Sacrifices Bring Reward:** Sacrifices and hard work pay off in the end, despite the challenges along the way.
12. **Human Beings All Have the Same Needs:** From Montagues to Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet* or the characters in S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, book after book asserts that rich or poor, educated or illiterate, all human beings need love and to have other basic needs met.

Searching for the Theme

Title of Short Story _____

1. To identify the theme of the story, first jot down information regarding each of the following elements of the story.

Characters	Setting	Problem

2. Use your ideas to complete a somebody-wanted-but-so-then summary:

Somebody	Wanted	But	So	Then
Write your summary here:				

3. Complete the following with information inferred from your analysis of the characters, setting, problem, and your summary:

A lesson learned by a character (review characters, problem, and summary)	The message or lesson the author wants you to take away from the story.
---	---

4. The theme of the story is: _____
