Determining the Theme of a Poem

Fifth Grade
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Give your class a deeper understanding of theme with this art and poetry-focused lesson plan about theme. By the end of the lesson, students will understand what theme is and how to determine theme in a piece of writing, such as a poem.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to analyze the details in the poem to determine the overall theme. Students will be able to summarize a poem.

Materials and preparation

- Copies of the poem *The Cold Within* by James Patrick Kinney
- Access to the following paintings (from books or internet): *The Scream* by Edvard Munch, *The Bathers* by Georges Seurat, *The Bath* by Mary Cassatt and *Romeo and Juliet* by Frank Dicksee
- Copy of the poem *Hug O’ War* by Shel Silverstein
- Class set of sticky notes

Key terms

- happenstance
- birch
- tattered
- idle
- bespoke
- spite
- forlorn

Introduction (7 minutes)

- Activate prior knowledge by having students discuss theme. Ask: *What is a theme? What are some examples of theme? How can you determine the theme of a text or poem?* Have the students first discuss with a partner, and then share their ideas as a whole group.
- Read *Hug O’ War* by Shel Silverstein to the class. As a class, talk about the words in the poem that indicate the theme of love/friendship: hugs, giggles, kisses, grins, and cuddles.
- Emphasize that careful reading of a poem will help to determine theme.

EL

- **Beginning:**
  - Offer sentence frames to support students during the partner and whole group discussion (e.g., "An example of theme is...").
- **Intermediate:**
  - Provide a word bank with common theme words for students to refer to during the introductory discussion and throughout the lesson.

Explicit Instruction/Teacher modeling (15 minutes)

- Define the word **theme** as the subject of a piece of writing or art. Theme can be either one word or it can be a complete sentence that describes a lesson learned in the text. Explain that, for today’s lesson, we will be looking for a single word to describe the theme of a poem.
- Show students copies of *The Scream, The Bathers, The Bath* and *Romeo and Juliet*.
- Ask students to write down or orally answer what they feel is one word that tells what each piece is
about. Ask them to consider how the speaker in the poem reflects upon the poem's main topic. Point out that the details in the text should support the theme and how the speaker communicates the theme.
• Pass out copies of the poem "The Cold Within" to the class.
• Read the poem aloud and define new vocabulary words: happenstance, birch, tattered, idle, bespoke, spite, forlorn.
• Direct students to look back at stanza one and model how to re-state the stanza in your own words.

EL

• Beginning:
  ○ Model for students how they would determine the theme of a painting and poem.
  ○ Offer examples of theme in familiar stories or poems before introducing new texts.

• Intermediate:
  ○ Brainstorm theme words to create or add to a word bank.
  ○ Provide several sentence stems that can support students’ as they think about theme (e.g., "I think that the theme of this painting is ____ because I see...").

Guided Practice (25 minutes)

• Divide the class into 6 equal groups and assign each group one stanza (2-7). Task each team’s students with re-writing the stanza in their own words.
• Circulate to all groups and help those that need assistance with the task. Once all groups have re-written their stanzas, the poem will be read again using the student’s re-writes.
• Initiate a class discussion on what the theme of the poem might be. Possible answers include: prejudice, hatred, greed. Challenge students to point out evidence and details in the poem that support the theme. (It is important that all answers that can be supported by events in the poem be allowed.)
• Ask: How does the author of the poem reveal that theme in the text?

EL

• Beginning:
  ○ Group students strategically so that students can use their home language in their discussion (if possible).
  ○ Provide word banks and sentence frames to support students during small group discussions.

• Intermediate:
  ○ Review the concept of paraphrasing text.
  ○ Allow students to use a dictionary, thesaurus, or bilingual glossary.

Independent working time (15 minutes)

• Distribute a blank piece of paper and tell students they will be writing a summary of the poem. Review expectations of how to write a short and sweet summary.
• Instruct students to include the theme of the poem as they write a summary of the poem.

EL

• Beginning:
  ○ Allow students to summarize the poem orally with a partner instead of writing a summary.

• Intermediate:
  ○ Provide key transition words that students can use in their summaries (e.g., "in the beginning," "next," "finally").

Related books and/or media

• The Cay by Theodore Taylor

Get more lesson plans at https://www.education.com/lesson-plans/
• Find interactive books for each child’s level.

**Differentiation**

**Support:**

• Ask struggling students to choose their theme and highlight things in the poem that prove their idea. If students seem stuck, provide an example as scaffolding to get them started.

**Enrichment:**

• Have advanced students write their own poem with the same theme, as an extension activity.

**Technology Integration**

• Art pieces can be displayed on an interactive white board.

**Assessment (5 minutes)**

• Put students into partnerships and have them share their poem summary, including the theme. Circulate and observe student conversations. Challenge students to ask clarifying questions of their partner to get them to further explain their thinking.
• Pass out sticky notes to students and ask them to write a definition of theme and how to determine the theme of a poem.
• Remind students to write their name on the note and turn it into the teacher as an exit card.

**EL**

• **Beginning:**
  ○ Ask students to explain "theme" orally in their own words or in their home language in place of an exit card.

• **Intermediate:**
  ○ Provide a sentence frame (e.g., "Theme means...").

**Review and closing (3 minutes)**

• Ask: What are some things that can help you remember what “theme” means?
• Ask the class to discuss the important ideas involved in summarizing a poem.
• Jot notes to record student suggestions to serve as an anchor chart for future reference.