

Kirkwood Community College

CASTLE Case Study

Teaching Students to Identify a Major Theme in Short Story

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I teach Forms of Literature: Fiction, an introductory literature course that helps students satisfy their general education requirement. Of course, students also take this class because they like to read fiction. The only prerequisite is Composition I (or an equivalent).

In this course students learn about how to interpret works of fiction, from the short story to the novel. One of the main goals of the course is to give students a vocabulary for writing and talking about fictional elements such as character, plot, symbol, and theme. A working knowledge of these elements helps students perform in more advanced literature classes.

For one of the major writing assignments, students must write an essay in which they state a theme and support that theme with evidence from the story. The theme is a general statement about the meaning of a literary work. The importance of writing themes is difficult to over-emphasize because in writing a theme, students demonstrate that they understand how other fictional elements support this theme. This assignment regularly baffles students, who often break down in frustration and say, “Just tell us what the theme is!” I try to walk a fine line between guiding students toward certain themes and allowing them the freedom to assert their own judgments.

The theme analysis, therefore, is not an assignment that is given early in the semester. Students must have an understanding of the fictional elements before they begin working on a theme. In fact, this assignment requires students to fulfill higher-order objectives such as synthesis because they must use a body of knowledge to interpret, make judgments, and support their ideas with examples from the story.

This is when I usually run into the problem. And until I undertook this case study, I was not able to classify the errors my students made. At my first

meeting with Dr. Hardre, another professor suggested I conduct a “Learner Analysis” to gauge what tasks my students were able to complete and what tasks they still needed help with. I found that when students tried to identify and support a theme, they made one of the following mistakes: they stated the theme in terms of the plot, compressed the theme into one word or a phrase, or identified a minor theme to keep from engaging the complex ideas. The mistakes are listed in order below.

1. “The theme of the story has to do with change.”

About the story “The Chrysanthemums” by John Steinbeck:

2. “Elisa, trapped in a gender-defined life, longs for freedom and a chance to exercise the passion that lies within her.”

About the story “The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka:

3. “I think the theme is isolation or alienation. Or if you can’t help, then you’re worthless. You should love your family in sickness.”

Before I began work on the case study, I asked students to come up with the theme on their own. The difficulty of the assignment resulted in some outcomes that correspond to Weiner’s theory, which states that students who perceive a task to be too difficult will not connect the effort to possible outcomes. This difficulty, at times, may have contributed to some plagiarism in the course. I have observed that students who struggle with literary analysis sometimes turn to websites for answers.

After consultation with Janet Godwin, I realized that one problem was that students did not have a process for identifying and supporting a theme. We decided that I could give students structured assignments that would help students gradually be able to isolate the theme of a story. Such assignments would reduce their anxiety and be more helpful than simply giving them a story and saying, “Here. Give me the theme of this story.” For example, Ms. Godwin suggested I

give them a quiz with questions that, if the students were able to answer them, would help them to understand the theme of the story. In addition to the questions, students also were given a section of the story that they were to interpret (instead of analyzing the entire work). It became clear that students needed more help with the actual process that lies between reading a story for the first time and understanding the theme of that story. All too often I assumed that students had the knowledge and skills when, in fact, those basic skills were not yet in place. Guiding questions helped them understand how to write and support a theme. These questions asked students to analyze the characters, plot, setting, and symbols with the intention that they would see how these elements were related to each other.

One of the above examples of themes (“Elisa, trapped in a gender-defined life, longs for freedom and a chance to exercise the passion that lies within her.”) was a student’s response on the first time I administered the quiz. I commented on their answers and explained their mistakes and how they might improve their statements of the theme. This theme might be described as competent because the theme addresses the main idea of the story, but it is stated in terms of the plot. A novice answer on the quiz would have been that the story was about sexism (a novice answer because such an answer would lack the story is saying **about** sexism). This student later turned in an answer with this theme: “Frustrated women trapped in gender-defined roles try to reach outside themselves to exercise the passion, idea of freedom, and sense of equality they are defined.” This revision is a better statement of the theme because it is a general statement that is not part of the plot. I found that students responded well to receiving detailed feedback and the opportunity to revise for a better grade. Students looked favorably on my decision to allow them to revise, for it removed the anxiety that students have about grades.

In order to help them understand how to state a theme, I also gave them an example of a short essay that states and supports a theme of a story we read earlier in the semester. In this way, I tried to foster observational learning by encouraging my students to imitate the example I gave them. Our discussion of

the essay helped them understand what was expected of them. With a tangible example in front of them, they were able to approach the assignment, I hope, with a greater sense of ease.

On the final exam question about “The Lottery,” for example, a student wrote the following theme: “Change is often feared and avoided because people believe that if things have worked for so long, why change now—even to the point of holding onto things that are obviously wrong, for tradition’s sake.” This statement is general and it addresses the story’s meaning. Examples like this show me that students learned more about themes; however, on the final exam several students exhibited the errors I discussed earlier, which leads me to believe that more work needs to be done on helping students prepare for questions about themes on the final exam. The case study helped to improve student learning and raised my confidence in teaching students how to identify themes.