

#9467

UNIVERSAL THEMES IN LITERATURE

CLEARVUE/eav

2000

Grade Levels: 7-13+

25 minutes



DESCRIPTION

Throughout history, stories have always had similar themes. Familiar examples from literature underscore the themes of the individual as hero, and the conflict between the individual and self, another person, family, society, nature, and the cosmos. Excerpts from poetry, drama, novels, essays, and others emphasize each.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Subject Area: Language Arts

- Standard: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts
 - Benchmark: Understands inferred and recurring themes in literary works (e.g., bravery, loyalty, friendship, good v. evil; historical, cultural, and social themes)
 - Benchmark: Understands how themes are used across literary works and genres (e.g., universal themes in literature of different cultures, such as death and rebirth, initiation, love and duty; major themes in American literature; authors associated with major themes of specific eras)
- Standard: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process
 - Benchmark: Understands specific devices an author uses to accomplish his or her purpose (e.g., persuasive techniques, style, literary form or genre, portrayal of themes, language)
 - Benchmark: Understands writing techniques used to influence the reader and accomplish an author's purpose (e.g., organizational patterns, such as cause-and-effect or chronological order; imagery, personification, figures of speech, sounds in poetry; literary and technical language; formal and informal language; point of view; characterization; irony; narrator)

INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

1. To analyze similarities and differences in the use of advanced literary elements among a wide variety of stories.
2. To discover and select authors and works representing a broad diversity of social, cultural, and historical perspectives and develop sophisticated interpretations of their works.
3. To examine themes common to works from a range of cultures and historical periods and compare the treatment of these themes among the various works.
4. To assemble a collection of stories from diverse cultures around a common theme, and compare and contrast their treatment of that theme.

VOCABULARY

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|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. antagonist | 19. Homer | 37. Reconstruction |
| 2. archetype | 20. hyperbole | 38. resolution |
| 3. character development | 21. literary analysis | 39. rising action |
| 4. characters | 22. London, Jack | 40. setting |
| 5. character traits | 23. main characters | 41. Shakespeare, William |
| 6. Chaucer, Geoffrey | 24. metaphor | 42. simile |
| 7. climax | 25. monologue | 43. Stevenson, Robert Louis |
| 8. cosmos | 26. motive | 44. supporting characters |
| 9. culture | 27. narration | 45. suspense |
| 10. denouement | 28. novel | 46. Tennyson, Alfred Lord |
| 11. description | 29. onomatopoeia | 47. theme |
| 12. dialogue | 30. personification | 48. third-person |
| 13. drama | 31. plot | 49. Thoreau, Henry David |
| 14. Ellison, Ralph | 32. Poe, Edgar Allan | 50. tone |
| 15. falling action | 33. point of view | 51. universal themes |
| 16. first-person | 34. problem | 52. Walker, Alice |
| 17. Hellman, Lillian | 35. protagonist | 53. Whitman, Walt |
| 18. hero | 36. pun | 54. Yoruba |

BEFORE SHOWING

Ask students to name works from recent course readings and current film and stage offerings whose theme is the individual in conflict with society. As a group, discuss ways in which these works are similar and different. Point out a variety of works, which students may not have read, but which also treat this theme.

AFTER SHOWING

Discussion Items and Questions

1. What are *archetypes*?
2. Who is one of the earliest heroes in Western literature and in what work does he appear? What did the title originally mean and how has it changed? How is this work similar to a work of science fiction?
3. What are the typical qualities of the legendary hero? What cultural function do heroic tales serve? Discuss contemporary heroes, in literature and in popular culture. Where do we find our heroes today—on the battlefield or in other competitive arenas? In public life or on the silver screen? What do these figures say about the values of our society or its place in history? How do they compare to the heroes of earlier generations?
4. What are some of the questions individuals confront as they explore their place in the cosmos? Compare the three creation stories recounted in the program. What does each imply about the place of humans in the universe?
5. What are the two principal ways writers view nature? Discuss the uses of nature in Thoreau and London. How is nature viewed in contemporary works?
6. How are the themes of crime and punishment and society's oppression of the individual related? In *Antigone*, the title character justifies her defiance of Kreon by invoking divine justice. In Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau argues that individual has a right and responsibility to rebel against immoral laws. Prepare excerpts of these works to hand

out in class. What does each suggest about the grounds for legitimate rebellion? How can we apply these viewpoints today?

7. What is the most universal theme in all literature? What two aspects of this conflict does the program address?

SUMMARY

The stories that people tell are as different and as varied as the people who tell them. Yet, there are certain themes that transcend time and place.

In every culture, storytellers have focused on heroic qualities, which are defined originally through heroes of legend, but which may be shown by ordinary individuals in everyday life. These individuals also face similar conflicts. In many stories, they must find their place in the universe, or come to terms with death. Individuals must face nature, which might be seen as a helpful teacher, or might appear cold and impersonal. Often, individuals must find a place in their society, in stories about crime and punishment, oppression or war. They also must find their place in their families, learning to live with parents and siblings. Many stories focus on two individuals, including stories about love and rivalry. And almost all stories focus on the individual and self, in some cases exploring the extreme of madness, or more commonly illustrating the self-doubt that we all must face.

These are universal themes in literature, representing conflicts, dreams, hopes, and fears that underlie the stories people tell, across cultures and continents, and from generation to generation.

RELATED RESOURCES



Captioned Media Program

- Mythology in Literary Culture #9315
- Parts of a Story #9341



World Wide Web

The following Web sites complement the contents of this guide; they were selected by professionals who have experience in teaching deaf and hard of hearing students. Every effort was made to select accurate, educationally relevant, and “kid safe” sites. However, teachers should preview them before use. The U.S. Department of Education, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Captioned Media Program do not endorse the sites and are not responsible for their content.

- **LIT CAFÉ**

<http://library.thinkquest.org/17500/>

The “Lit Café” assists students and teachers through the basis of literature. Learn and discover biographies; go into the InfoBar to learn literary terms; and search for other information.

- **A COLLECTION OF CLASSICS**

<http://library.thinkquest.org/27864/data/index2.html>

Defines “classics”; click on Search to find favorite classic authors, Timeline to travel through time with classic authors; and take a behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to make a classic.

