

Theme

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Philosopher John Locke's highly regarded treatise ***Some Thoughts Concerning Education*** was published in 1693. He believed that authoritarian teaching was counterproductive, and suggested that children in "all their innocent folly, playing, and childish actions are to be left perfectly free." His goal, however, was to make *moral* children, not scholars. He made the revolutionary suggestion that someone might make a picture book for children. It wouldn't happen for another fifty years... I suppose people had to get used to the idea of such a radical notion.

Unstructured play or entertainment in Locke's era were considered a waste of time, and the only book learning tool specifically for children was the **hornbook**. The hornbook was the first alphabet book – but it was really a paddle that displayed the alphabet, numbers from zero to nine, and a passage of scripture. It had the distinction of being both a learning tool and a form of punishment. Presumably children learned their letters quite readily.

In the seventeenth century, French philosopher **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** had opinions about the education of children. He declared that children were pure and innocent, and wrote, "nature made me happy and good, and if I am otherwise, it is society's fault." He believed that *nature* was the greatest *moral* educator for children.

The whole notion of Western childhood was shifting, and along with that the idea that there might be a literature specifically for children, rather than adult books and stories simply adapted for children. Whatever that literature might be, everyone agreed the prime directive would be to make children into moral beings.

In 1744 John Newbery published ***A Little Pretty Pocket-Book***. It was heralded as the first book intended specifically for children's pleasure reading, and was followed by ***The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes***.

Pocket Book was originally sold with free toys: a ball for a boy and a pincushion for a girl (who of course should be sewing and not running about playing ball). The pincushion was black on one side, and red on the other. A girl's good deeds were to be marked by a pin stuck on the red side, and her bad deeds with a pin on the black. The title page states that the book was intended to, quote "**infallibly make Tommy a good boy, and Polly a good girl.**"

Each page has a little verse about a game, and below it a moral. "Trap ball. Touch lightly the trip and strike low the ball, let none catch you out and you'll beat them all." Underneath it says, "Moral. Learn hence my dear boy to avoid every snare, contrived to involve you in sorrow and care."

When Louisa May Alcott published ***Little Women*** in 1868, it shook things up a bit. It was a smash hit - two thousand copies, sold out in two weeks, and it just kept going from there. Still read 150 years later, *Little Women* has had hundreds of editions and is published in over 50 languages. When it was initially published, it was unique because it was about real girls, including the slightly rebellious Jo. Yes, Marmee frequently admonishes her girls against sins such as "chasing men" and urges them to embrace "womanly" virtues such as modesty in dress, quiet voices, domestic skills, and nurturing qualities. But tomboy Jo – rebel Jo – she is the *hero*. The story dared to ask a question or two about the nature of admirable womanhood and femininity.

Little Women was part of what some have called the golden age of children's literature. It included works like *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne behaved like a real child – delightfully naughty. The advent of WWI slowed things a bit, but in 1926 we were graced with ***Winnie-the-Pooh* by A. A. Milne**, the first *Mary Poppins* book by P. L. Travers in 1934 (although she said she didn't write it for children), *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien in 1937, and the *Sword in the Stone* by T. H. White in 1938.

Just whopping good stories! Slowly, it seemed, we were escaping the age of didacticism. No more heavy-handed moralizing, no more thinking of children's books as a sneaky way to indoctrinate children, to make Tommy a good boy and Polly a good girl. The children's literature community, in fact, became incensed by such overt intentions.

But I have been concerned lately, as an artist and as a teacher, that there seems to be a reinventing, or a re-acceptance, of the notion that it is the "responsibility" of writers for the young to "teach" their readers. It feels like I am seeing evidence of this trend everywhere I look now.

Dr. Jacqueline Rose, professor of humanities at the University of London has suggested that children's fiction is a colonial discourse. The colonizers are the publishers, writers, teachers, librarians and parents who write, print and disseminate these books. The primitives are our children, impressionable slates upon whom we inscribe correct cultural practice.

In a 2016 interview with literary critic and professor at University of California–San Diego Seth Lerer said, **"You need the didacticism in order to have the subversion; they go hand in hand. You have to know what you're subverting."**

Recently, professor Grenby of Newcastle University said, **"Those who write children's books have *always* thought it part of their job to instruct their readers, whether in facts, religion, morals, social codes, ways of thinking, or some other set of beliefs or ideas."**

Modern scholar Kimberley Reynolds suggests children's books can never be neutral as *their nature is intended as instructional* and by using its language, *children are embedded with the values of that society*. Claiming childhood as a culturally constructed concept, Reynolds states that it is through children's literature that a child learns how to behave and to act as a child should, according to the expectations of their culture.

A 2016 New York Times article titled "What Makes a Children's Book Good?" by Adam Gidwitz said this: **"A good book for children is somehow instructive or nutritive, often morally so. You might laugh that off as hopelessly old-fashioned, but there**

has been a broad resurgence of the idea that children's books should be "socially conscious," which isn't that far from morally instructive." End quote.

Now.

I am getting old. I collect old-age security, and can no longer walk up a hill. I recognize that I have gone out of style in every conceivable way, although something about proximity to death makes you philosophical about being out of style.

But I think on this particular matter, I think I cannot go gentle into that good night.

My conviction is that writing a story with the *intent* to make children converts to some virtuous notion or other is disrespectful at best. It says, I, the wise grown up author, will tell you, the weak and mindless child or teenager, how to think like me. It says, I wrote this book, not to tell a story, not to light up your imagination or to entertain you, not to explore with you, or to give voice to the agonies and ecstasies of childhood and adolescence, but to declare my opinion of who you should be. Writing with the intent to instruct and moralize says, I am above you, I understand everything, and I am qualified to write a book that will show you kids how to live.

Instead, I strongly believe that what qualifies me as a writer for the young still, even though I am old, is that my childhood and teenaged years were *messed up* and that even as a senior citizen, I have not outgrown my messed-up-ness. My messed-up-ness means my readers can trust that I still don't get myself, that I'm still just as baffled and appalled and confused and full of wonder and worry about life as they are, that I'm on the journey right beside them.

Of course, in all these years I hope I've learned a thing or two, but when I write, I'm my young self again, or as much as I can be. As much as possible I try to unlearn, and start learning all over again. I believe that if I'm not, I'm not doing it right. Can we write for the young without the sense that we know in our bone of bones that we, too, are students of life, perhaps even bad students at that, or at least questioning and/or rebellious ones? And if so, how can we presume to begin a book with the intent to moralize?

Now. I suspect that some of you may be thinking, on the other hand, Martine... on the other hand...

We know the power of language to create reality. We know without a word we do not see. We know the power of story to change hearts, to change lives. We know every one of us was changed by a story when we were young. That's why we write for young people, because once a story opened up the world to us. If we know the power of a book to make a difference, will we not take up that power to teach correct cultural practice when the world so badly needs some correcting? We want to write books that make people think! As one of my students said, I want my book to say something!

I propose that there is a way for writers to be humble before their art, to respect their readers, to refuse to moralize, and still write meaningful books that can change hearts and worlds. I believe the answer is found in a proper understanding of theme.

So what is theme? I have a distinct memory of being very young and asking my English teacher what theme was. I remember not understanding her answer. I asked another teacher later, and I still didn't understand.

If you google what is theme, you'll get the answer that theme is the underlying message. So we're back to that distressing word *message* again. I also read that it's the *life lesson* of a work. Worse and worse.

When I googled themes in *Wuthering Heights*, I got:

Love and hate.

Good versus evil.

The clash of economic interests and social classes.

The study of childhood.

Communicating and understanding.

Betrayal.

In my mind, these are subjects. Or topics. Essay topics, designed to make high school students despise English literature. I suggest that theme is not the same as subjects or topics, either.

Some take it a step further to say that theme is what the author *says about* a subject or topic. I'm the author, and I say thus and thus about love... High school students agonize over trying to figure out what the author is saying about love so they can pass the test. I have two problems with this definition of theme: first, unless you are Shakespeare or Dostoevsky, I'm not sure why I should care what you think about love; and second, and more importantly, this implies that it's not about the reader discovering their own meaning in a text, it's about decoding. This idea of theme makes every book a puzzle about the mind of the author, which can never be known, instead of the reader discerning something unique and personal to them.

So no, I do not perceive theme as a message, a life lesson, a concept, a topic, or even what the author is saying about a topic. Occasionally I've heard theme being referred to as the "central question" of the work. This sounds close, until you learn that the central question is, "What is the life lesson of the work? What is the message? What is the author saying about XY and Z?" And so we are back to the beginning. One source said that theme was what a story says about human nature, which sounds interesting, but to me that seems too narrow and limiting. What if I'm writing a story about animals? And I have to say that I have never written a book with the intent to say something about human nature – I'm not sure I'd be qualified to do so.

Instead, I believe that theme

theme asks a big question, an important question, a question to which there may be no one right answer, or even any answer at all. If a reader really thinks about the question, they must be a different being for having considered it, even if the answer isn't obvious or easy. *Especially* if the answer isn't obvious or easy. The important thing is that the reader knows there is a question. Theme leaves room for another reader to identify different questions or come to different possible meanings.

Perhaps as an example I could compare ***Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte to Tenant of Wildfell Hall by Anne Bronte.***

The basic story of *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is as follows: It shows the struggle of a woman trying to gain independence from an abusive marriage despite her lack of resources. It portrays an alcoholic husband and how he abuses his wife. The woman leaves her husband, taking their child with her – which would both have been illegal in Victorian England – and tries to create a new life for herself. It's full of arguments against the prevailing patriarchal ideologies of the time, and today is considered one of the first feminist novels.

I read *Wuthering Heights* when I was sixteen and fell in love with Heathcliff, who I believed was the epitome of the romantic man. I read it again when I was forty-something, found Heathcliff to be an abusive and controlling narcissist, and blamed my entire disastrous first marriage on Emily Bronte. I consider the book again as an older woman and find Heathcliff portrayed as a disturbed, complex character who was a product of neglect, poverty, abuse, class discrimination, and probably grew to be exactly what he was raised to be. I forgave Emily everything. In similar ways my understanding of the notion of betrayal in this book has changed over the years. You think you understand the book, and then things shift, and you understand it slightly differently. Other people talk about the book and you wonder if you've read the same book.

When I read *Tenant*, I find one message about the empowerment of women. It is a very good message. But the writer's intent is clear. There is no room for me in *Tenant*. When I read *Wuthering Heights*, I find the text asks questions about the very nature of womanhood – what it wants to be, what it becomes when societal conventions are imposed on it, what these structures do to the way we love, and the impact it has on men. I find a multiplicity of hard questions and contradictory meanings. Which is the opposite of message or moral. *Wuthering Heights* is a thematically rich book. It's a book I want to read more than once.

I propose that when we go in with a moral in mind, or with an agenda, we make it difficult if not impossible to discover thematic threads in our work.

I acknowledge that one or two of my books began with an agenda. *My Book of Life by Angel* is an anger book. My intentions with that book were not pure. I went in agenda blazing. But at least I have been duly ashamed of it. I give myself that much. I hope I would never say, “Did you see what I did there?” No. I would never admit it, except to VCFA students, to whom I confess everything. My Book of Life by Angel was up against Amy King’s *Ask the Passengers* for the Los Angeles Book Prize, which is how we met and fell in love. Her book won, and I’m convinced that it was at least in part because her agenda wasn’t hanging out as rudely as mine – there was a lot of beautiful asking in *Ask the Passengers*. But I will defend myself in this way: I did my very best to stay open to the thematic question I was exploring.

The question I wanted to ask was, how is sexual exploitation of teen girls allowed to be? Who is to blame? Who was to blame for Angel being who and what she is, and for the peril she is in?

As I wrote, I felt like I kept finding different possible answers and more questions. Was it Angel’s fault? I had to be willing to ask that question, as much as I loved her. She was so foolish as to go with a stranger, take the drugs he offered – so was it her fault? Yes, her mother died, and so we hesitate to attribute blame to her. But if I made it everyone else’s fault, did I take away her power to walk away, to help herself? Was it her father’s fault? He kicked her out of the house when he found out about the drugs. Was it Call’s fault, Angel’s pimp? He’s the one who turned her on to drugs and turned her out to prostitution. He’s the one who controlled her and enslaved her. Was it the fault of the police for not doing anything, and in fact for being part of the problem? The fault of the police for allowing dozens and dozens to die at the hands of a serial killer because the lives of these women didn’t matter enough to investigate? Was it the fault of the men who paid Angel for sex? Surely it was their fault... But then, aren’t they a product of a certain cultural winking at prostitution? Shouldn’t we lay fault at the feet of all people who see this happening and do nothing? Like myself? Like all the people who seem to think prostitution is something to make jokes and snicker about? Finally, although I’m a person of faith, I had to ask, could it be God’s fault? Ultimately I was asking, why do bad things happen to the good, the innocent, the naïve, the powerless?

I believe my willingness to be open to these questions saves Angel from being merely an issue book. In asking a big question, it retains the complexity and honesty to be a book that could, I hope, both challenge and respect my audience.

If one were to identify a **message** in Louis Sachar's *Holes* it might be that we owe a debt to historically oppressed populations, and we cannot progress or prosper until we have paid the debt. But the **theme** that I saw in *Holes* is about justice. Is justice a force so elemental in the universe, so ancient, that it works like magic? Is it this force that allows an old woman to place a curse on a man that can be passed down through generations? How is justice placated? And how do we mere mortals administer justice? Can we? Should we? After all, the so-called justice system wrongfully convicted Stanley. Does it seem we administer justice at our peril? If so, what about the warden? Doesn't he deserve justice? This kind of big question is what makes *Holes* more than just a perfectly plotted book. Theme, again, in my opinion, grows out of the tension that comes from asking hard questions, exploring timeless and universal ideas.

Kekla Magoon's brilliant novel *How It Went Down* – if there was ever a book that we wouldn't have minded having an agenda, it's this one. Instead, this book is a master class in how to write a story with thematic depth that utterly respects its audience. The writer never tells the audience what to think – she trusts the truth will come of raw honesty. The reader is given the opportunity to discover for herself.

In my reading of *How It Went Down*, these are the questions I grappled with: What happens when personal narratives and cultural narratives collide? How do we know our personal narrative is true when it confronts completely different narratives? How do other narratives play a part in our reality? For example, how is our personal narrative influenced by the media? Our religious leaders? Our parents? Our friends? Can we trust the story we're telling ourselves about ourselves? How will we use our personal narratives to empower ourselves? To make good or evil in the world?

This is theme. This is how you make room for the reader. The reader thinks, she feels, she comes to understandings that are uniquely her own and therefore internalized.

One writer I knew said “it isn’t the business of writers to think about theme.” Writers just put their words on the page, supposedly, and trust that somewhere among that brilliance is all kinds of thematic interest!. Apparently we are so magical that we can write whatever and themes will pop up like weeds in a garden.

And perhaps we don’t think about it in the first draft, or even the second draft, but if we are writing an honest book, if we are writing complex, true-to-life characters, we will see the questions we are wrestling with. And once we discover our themes, we can further explore and nurture theme in our own work and make them more accessible to our young readers. The word theme comes from the Greek *thema* meaning “to deposit, to put down, to place, to do.” Who is doing all that depositing if it isn’t the writer? I propose that we can discover and nurture theme without strong-arming the story into moralizing, and without offering up any pat or easy answers to life’s problems, as if life were some sort of mathematical equation with a single right answer.

So what I’d like to talk about now are three techniques I use to develop theme once I have an idea what it might be. The most powerful way to explore and develop theme is through complex characters – but that is a lecture or two of your own. I will discuss three small techniques that I consciously use and feel I can lecture about and which may help you:

- **Developing theme at the level of word choice and the layering of images**
- **theme at the level of sentence through the use of thematic passages**
- **theme at the level of structure, through the use of palimpsest**

1. developing theme at the level of word choice and the layering of images

Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* is replete with **ynic imagery** to support her feminist themes. Let’s examine the images she chooses to describe her setting, for example. Each relatively neutral image is ultimately corrupted, used as a symbol of pain and oppression:

- a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, which she upends by saying, “in the middle of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out”
- a print of flowers, blue irises, but the print has no glass covering because glass could be broken up and used to self-harm
- a bell – but the bell is compared to one used in a nunnery
- white wings as part of a uniform – but it prevents her from seeing and being seen
- a convex mirror – which is described to be like the eye of a fish, and her image in it like a distorted shadow
- tulips, quote, “red, a darker crimson toward the stem, as if they’d been cut”

She chooses words and images to support and nurture her themes about femininity, sexuality, and the oppression of women.

Here’s a visual example of how to choose and layer images: [Derek’s video](#) – my son-in-law Brad made this little wedding video for my son Derek’s wedding. As you watch this, see if you can find a repeated image.

Did you find a repeated image?

- when the groom bends the bride way back to kiss her, both putting her in peril of falling and at the same time holding her against falling
- when the groom keeps the bride from falling off the railway tracks
- the flowers falling out of the dad’s hands
- the bride falling into Derek’s arms
- the wedding party leaping/falling
- and finally, the kid jumping off the bridge, which apparently is how kids in small town Alberta entertain themselves

A thematic question might be, how is love like falling and leaping? How do the elements of risk and joy in committing to another person work together? In this way, I feel this little home video becomes something a little bit special.

Brad, the videographer, didn't know that kids were going to be jumping off the bridge when he started filming, of course. But when it happened, that central image helped him choose which footage to use out of many hours of footage. From there he allowed it to help him choose the music.

In the same way, we discover theme partly by paying attention to the small but extraordinary moments, the moments that surprise you, when your subconscious is at work. And then nurture theme in construction and revision. One way, I hope I have shown, is through the use of imagery.

2. Theme can be revealed at the sentence level through the careful use of thematic passages

A thematic passage is a small moment in the book when the writer reveals the question she's grappling with. Sometimes they're long passages. Sometimes they can be very concise, a sentence or two.

Here's a short one from *How It Went Down*: **"People make mistakes. They look at the surface of things and see what they want to."**

Here's a short one in *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban: **"Words! Theywl move things you know theywl do things. Theywl fetch."**

Here's a bit longer one from **Linda Urban's *A Crooked Kind of Perfect***:

"Perfection itself is imperfection. That's what Horowitz said. The voice-over guy said that Horowitz meant that it wasn't enough to get all the notes right. When you play the piano, you have to get the heart right. Which is harder than getting the notes right. Each note can only be right in one way. A B-flat is a B-flat is a B-flat. A robot can get a B-flat right.

But getting the heart right is something only a person can do. And the ways to do it are as many and as different as there are people in the world.”

Here’s one from **Wolf Hall**, by Hilary Mantel. One of the themes asks question about the power of silence to shape individuals and to shape history.

Here’s the thematic passage:

“This silence of More’s, it was never really silence, was it? It was loud with his treason; it was quibbling as far as quibbles would serve him, it was demurs and cavils, suave ambiguities. It was fare of plain words, or the assertion that plain words pervert themselves; More’s dictionary, against our dictionary. You can have a silence full of words. A lute retains, in its bow, the notes it has played. The viol, in its strings holds a concord. A shrivelled petal can hold its scent, a prayer can rattle with curses.” End quote.

So once you have come to a question you are grappling with in your story, it may be useful at certain dramatic points to use thematic passages. These can be some of the most beautiful moments in your work. However, I would caution you about thematic passages with this quote from John Gardner: “Even on the subject of high seriousness, we must beware of reckless high seriousness.” End quote. Using thematic passages has to be done with taste and the lightest of hands, but there it is for your consideration.

3. Theme can be developed at the structural level with the use of palimpsest.

Between the 7th and 15th centuries, when writing materials were scarce and expensive, monks began writing over old obsolete texts. They took old Greek manuscripts that they couldn’t read or understand, scraped off the old words and reused them. Sometimes, however, the **old words would leak through and become visible in the newer text**. This is the literal meaning of palimpsest.

Nowadays, palimpsest is used as a literary term to denote intertextuality, how all stories take place in relation to other works. I am using the term as a writer to mean the deliberate use of another work to illuminate the theme of a story.

Examples are *Ulysses* by James Joyce, which is in an intertextual conversation with Homer's *Odyssey*; Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* with *Don Quixote*; *Wide Sargasso Sea* with *Jane Eyre*. The themes of the first text challenge and enhance the second.

I used palimpsest with *My Book of Life by Angel* – my story carried some of the thematic weight of *Paradise Lost*, which weighs in on Eve's culpability. Once I discovered that I was in conversation with this text, I made it an essential element of the story, and in this way some of the thematic weight of that story got behind my little story. I used the libretto of the *Magic Flute* in *Tom Finder*, and of course *Calvin and Hobbes* in *Calvin*.

This works for picture books, too, of course. I loved the wordless picture book *Journey* by Aaron Becker. It is the story of a lonely girl who draws with her red marker a magic door on her bedroom wall and through it escapes into a world of danger and adventures. She uses her marker to create a boat, a balloon and **a flying carpet that saves her and a boy she meets**. I've never seen anyone talk about this boy she meets – this boy who owns a marker of his own – a purple one. I'm pretty sure if I asked him, he would tell me his name was Harold. *Journey* is enriched by the thematic questions in *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, which are about leaving home, and finding or making our way home again with the riches of adventures.

Palimpsest is not for every book or even most books or perhaps even many books, but if you find you are engaging with another text, it's something to consider. It may be your subconscious telling you something.

So I've spoken of three techniques of supporting your themes, at the word level through the use of word choice, repetition and imagery, at the sentence level through the use of thematic passages, and at the structural level through the use of palimpsest. These methods are certainly not the only ways. As I said, these are just the ways I've chosen to discuss today.

I'd like to go back to the question I only touched on, which is, at what point in the process does the writer begin to shape theme.

The real answer is that it's as individual as the writer. For me, it's a bit like most of my brain is a child who has been given permission to draw a big picture, and she can put anything she wants in this picture, with any kind of medium. She does play, she does wish-fulfillment, she does her worst fears and her greatest pleasures on that paper. And while she's doing that, some other part of my brain is watching... like a child psychologist, perhaps, and she's thinking, why did does this child choose to paint the sun black? Why is mommy so much bigger than daddy? *Part* of me is trying to figure out *most* of me, and I won't really know until the drawing is done. Or the first or second draft is done.

Margo Lanagan says she begins a project with a question in mind. But note, it's a question, not an agenda.

Two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, David McCullough said this: "People ask me when I start one of these projects, what is your theme? I haven't the faintest idea. That's why you're writing the book, it seems to me, to find out. To me, it's a journey. It's an adventure. It's traveling in a country you've never been in and everything is going to be new, and because of that, vivid. And don't make up your mind too soon. Let it be an experience." End quote.

We read the work a hundred times. We ask ourselves, why do I feel compelled to write this story? What am I asking myself or the world? How is this book part of the universal conversation? We ask our book the Liz Garton-Scanlon questions, **Hey, little book, what are you about? What's going on with you, anyway?**

You may find, as you write many books, that you write about the same theme again and again. Richard Russo said, "When I look back over my novels, what I find is that when I think I'm finished with a theme, I'm generally not. Usually themes will recur from novel to novel in odd, new guises." That has certainly been true for me. The questions I am interested in have the power to continually challenge me.

Percy B. Shelley said, “The great instrument of moral good is the **imagination**.” That is what is needed – imagination! Henry James said, “...the only condition that I can think of attaching to the composition of the novel is... that it be interesting.” That is what is needed – to be interesting. Be imaginative! Be interesting! And then, ask the Universe a question.

Thank you.