Asking the Right Questions – Teaching Literature with Socratic Discussion

Adam Andrews, Director
The Center for Literary Education

(The following is an excerpt from Teaching the Classics: A Socratic Method for Literary Education)

The theme of a story is the underlying idea or philosophy that the story grapples with. Often (though not always), the author will articulate a particular opinion or perspective concerning that idea, which becomes part of the theme as well.

It’s important to distinguish the idea of theme from some similar concepts. First, the theme of a work is not the same as the subject of the work. While the subject may be compared to the parts of a telephone – dial, mouthpiece, receiver – the theme corresponds to the idea behind the telephone, which is communication. Similarly, the subject of Dickens’ Great Expectations is the career of its main character, while its various themes include Ambition, Loyalty and Prejudice.

One reason why the great works of Western literature have endured in popularity and influence down through the centuries is that they deal with themes which are relevant to human experience in every age of the world. Though often written about strange times and strange people, they have the power to move us because they wrestle with questions that trouble us, too.

Some Universal Themes

- Prejudice
- Betrayal
- Innocence
- Materialism v. Idealism
- Generosity of Human Nature
- Wisdom of Age
- Pride & Humility
- Alienation
- Ambition
- Authority
- Family Relationships
- Good vs. Evil
- Growing Up/Coming of Age
- Fear
- Honor
- Survival
- Loyalty
- Struggles with the Conscience
- Disillusionment
- Compromise
- Human Integrity
- Human Frailty
- Youth vs. Age
- The Nature of Faith
- The Nature of God
- Innocence vs. Experience
Also important to remember is that the theme of a story is not the same as the moral of the story. Not all stories are written to teach a moral lesson, and it’s not necessary that they do. There is a crucial difference, after all, between a sermon and a story. Both are good, but it is not necessary that every piece of writing be a sermon in order to be good, true, and beautiful. Though not all books have a moral, almost all have a theme of some kind. An author doesn’t have to have answers for life’s questions before he writes a book. Some authors are only good at asking the questions! If he has been properly trained, the reader will recognize the questions, and evaluate them from his own perspective. Often, the most powerfully thematic works do no more than hint at the author’s perspective. In literature, as in teaching, a well placed question is sometimes more eloquent than the deepest sermon.
The Biggest Bear by Lynd Ward: Story Chart

- **Exposition:**
- **Rising Action:**
- **Climax:**
- **Denouement:**
- **Conclusion:**

**Themes:**

**Setting:**

**Characters:**

**Conflict:**

**Plot:**
The Biggest Bear by Lynd Ward
Discussion Notes on Theme


2. In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are they children? Are they just passing into adulthood? Are they already grownups? Does setting the story in this particular time of the characters’ lives make the story better? (Question 2e.)

3. What does the protagonist think is the most important thing in life? How do you know this? Does the protagonist say this out loud, or do his thoughts and actions give him away? (Question 3m.)

4. What does the protagonist want? Fill in the blank: This story is about the protagonist trying to ________. (Question 5a.)

5. Do his objectives or goals change throughout the story? How? Why? (Question 5f.)
6. Which category(ies) of conflict are most applicable to this story? (Question 6g-k.)

7. What does the protagonist learn? Does he begin to act differently? In what way? (Question 11b.)

8. Is he changed in his mind or heart by the events of the story? (Question 11a.)

9. Does the story seem to deal with one of the universal themes listed in lesson 6 of this syllabus? (Question 13a.)

10. Does the story merely call the reader’s attention to a theme without trying to solve anything? (Question 13c.)
Theme in Adult Literature

A partial list of themes in the four adult works we have studied is presented here. Notice the relatively small number of themes addressed by these widely disparate works. Though they have little in common in terms of genre, style, subject matter or historical context, they all deal with similar themes! This is a clue to the mystery of “the classic.”

**The Iliad**
- The Devastating Effects of Bitterness
- Free Will and Fate
- Loyalty and Friendship
- The Love of Fathers for their Sons

**Macbeth**
- Ambition and its consequences
- Treachery and Betrayal
- Guilt and Remorse
- Free Will and Fate

**Great Expectations**
- Lost Innocence/Coming of Age
- Ambition and its Consequences (See James 4:4)
- Loyalty and Friendship
- Treachery and Betrayal
- The Immaturity of Youth
- The Power of Kindness and Sacrifice

**To Kill a Mockingbird**
- Lost Innocence
- The Power of Kindness and Sacrifice
- The Brotherhood of Man
- Good versus Evil