

# Themes from Studying Narrative



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# T H E M E S   A N D   M O T I F S

Story is the events in the order in which they happened. Narrative is the way in which the writer chooses to tell the story and the techniques they use to do this. (Plot, the relationship between the different events in the story – the cause and effect – can be seen as part of the construction of the narrative.) Another important distinction is between the subject of a narrative and its themes.

These activities will help you explore these distinctions.

## WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Included here are snippets from reviews of some of the texts set for advanced study.

1. Read the reviews and identify what it is that the reviewer has chosen to highlight or draw the reader's attention to. What sort of words do the reviewers use? Do they have anything in common?

### REVIEW FRAGMENT 1

a concentration on the tension between romance and realism, private and public, money and love, aristocrat and bourgeois, and individual and society

### REVIEW FRAGMENT 2

obsession, misery, erotic passion and jealousy

### REVIEW FRAGMENT 3

a disillusioned novel

### REVIEW FRAGMENT 4

the callous indifference of wealth

### REVIEW FRAGMENT 5

an intimate account of family and friendship, betrayal and salvation

### REVIEW FRAGMENT 6

nobility in the face of trauma

### REVIEW FRAGMENT 7

study of perception and behaviour

### REVIEW FRAGMENT 8

fierce cruelty and fierce yet redeeming love

Each of the review snippets stands back from the detail of the narrative, drawing attention to the underlying issues or ideas running through the narrative.

2. Read the short dialogue below and talk about the ideas it raises about interpreting texts:

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?	<p>A: What have you been reading?</p> <p>B: I've just finished a terrific novel – you really must read it.</p> <p>A: Great. What's it about?</p> <p>B: Well it begins with this family in a small town. There's five daughters and the mother wants to marry them off to rich men, then a rich man arrives in the village ...</p> <p>A: No – don't tell me what happens. Just tell me what it's about.</p> <p>B: OK, well it's told in the third person, in a really engaging amused, sort of ironic voice, but it includes a lot of dialogue which sort of lets the characters speak for themselves – in these sections the narrator doesn't comment on what is said but leaves it to the reader to pass judgement...</p> <p>A: Sounds like it's written in a really interesting style but I still haven't got a lot of idea what it is about. Is it about friendship or love or family conflict, or class and status, or revenge ...? Just give me a sense of what this story is about.</p> <p>B. OK it's about love and marriage. It's about snobbery and class. It's about the dangers of judging people too quickly.</p>
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Included here are two tiny, complete narratives by Margaret Atwood and Ernest Hemingway.

3. In pairs, choose one of the narratives and talk about your response to it. What do you think is the story behind each narrative? What do you think it is about? Annotate the narrative with your ideas.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY	For sale: baby shoes, never worn.
MARGARET ATWOOD	Longed for him. Got him. Shit.

4. As a class, listen to the two narratives being read aloud and share your responses. Talk about the similarities or differences in your interpretations of what each is about.

In discussing what the story is about, you have been thinking about the narrative's themes or underlying ideas and issues.