

# The art of integrating theme and story

Let ideas and attitudes emerge naturally from your fictional elements

By Paola Corso

**W**HEN ASKED WHAT their short story is about, writers often recite a chronology of events because they equate plot with theme. But it's not the who, what, where and when but the *why* that gives meaning and elevates your writing to a thematic level. Finding the significance behind what happens in a story will give it dimension and resonance.

So how do you take a thematic abstraction and make it accessible to readers without spelling out too much or leaving them clueless? The key is to incorporate ideas and attitudes so they're organic to the story rather than imposed. No reader wants to feel an author is preaching to her with all the answers. What we can do, however, is raise the right questions in our stories. As playwright Friedrich Durrenmatt once said, "A writer doesn't solve problems. He allows them to emerge."

Thus, the goal is to illustrate theme through literary devices rather than belt out a thesis statement. Besides, if we'd rather convey our ideas using a direct approach, we can write an essay. We've got to show, not tell. Write with a direction, not an agenda. This will allow theme to evolve out of the story elements—characters, conflict, setting, images, etc.—so that it's earned

rather than contrived.

Here are some steps to help you incorporate theme into your story so that it will be thought-provoking as well as register an emotional impact. And if you do your job well, not only will readers be engaged in your story; they'll go back and reread it to contemplate its deeper meaning.

**1 Embed your theme in characters.** Put some meat on your theme by fleshing out your characters. Convey your ideas and pose your questions through the names you give them and physical appearance, what they wear, or how they move.

For example, Sherwood Anderson's story "Hands" explores the salvation of touch and features what he called "grotesques," or psychologically isolated people, such as a schoolteacher with the first name Wing who touches his students with his fluttering, birdlike "nervous little hands." This is misunderstood as being erotic. He's run out of town, and lives alone, afraid to get close to people for fear his expressive hands will betray him again.

**2 Make your theme talk.** Theme can be illuminated through dialogue. Not just what is said but how it's said. And let it come out of the predicament

rather than put words in your character's mouth. This way, dialogue will sound natural, not like an author's message over a loudspeaker.

Take the theme of judgment and language in Tobias Wolff's story "Bullet in the Brain," which is set in a long bank line minutes before closing where a harsh book critic overhears "stupid conversations." Wolff uses dialogue to reinforce the violence of language. Many of the quotes have critical adjectives such as "Damned unfair" and "Unforgivable," or ironic statements like "How nice" or "Oh, bravo"—until a man with a pistol tells everyone to "Keep your big mouth shut." Despite the warning, the critic can't help heckling the robber—who's holding him at gunpoint—with his acerbic wit, as if he were critiquing a book or film, and he is shot to death. Each line of dialogue is like a bullet fired from someone's mouth before a real one is fired from a gun.

**3 Establish a setting or atmosphere to help convey theme.** Another way to illustrate theme is to give your characters' ideas and attitudes space to breathe. Create a setting, mood or atmosphere that's a good home for your theme.

One of the stories in my book *Giovanna's 86 Circles*, which

explores the theme of finding the magic in everyday life, is set in a hospital laundry with a morning low of 99 degrees. I describe how blinding clouds of heat travel from the dryers, how workers sweat so much they wrap cold rags around their heads to keep from fainting. Not only did I choose this setting because I worked in such a laundry and experienced the heat; it's also a good place for a worker to imagine she sees something extraordinary through the veil of steam, since the story explores the necessity of dreams to relieve stress at work.

**4 Weave theme into your conflict.** Your characters' struggle can raise thematic questions. What is the significance of what they want, what actions do they take to fulfill their desires, what obstacles are in their way?

Consider Mary Hood's short story "How Far She Went." The title conveys the significance of just how far a granddaughter and her grandmother's relationship goes from misunderstanding and hatred in the beginning to the love and respect they have for each other at the end. It also suggests what lengths they must go to get there. Not only is this story a superb example of the domino effect, with one action creating a reaction that causes another action and so on until they escalate into a dramatic finish; each conflict is also a point on the map that charts the thematic distance traveled in order for these two to get close.

**5 Use strong, efficient symbols—the building blocks of theme.** A symbolic object isn't just an object in a story that is enriched with theme. It represents something larger than itself and is a shortcut to meaning.

There's a crucial moment in Mary Robison's story "Yours" about coping with death when a married couple is carving Halloween pumpkins. The jack-o'-lantern faces along with the comparison made between

hers and his reveal character, and how one spouse accepts she will soon die while the other is filled with anger and self-hatred.

**6 Give your characters theme-based actions.** What your characters do can help activate theme. They can be literal actions or symbolic actions, subtle or grand, that put your theme in motion as well as your characters.

Dino Buzzati's story "The Falling Girl" comes to mind. It illustrates that life is a journey by having a girl take the plunge from the top of a skyscraper. The building is like a timeline and the floors she passes on her descent are windows for viewing the process of aging.

**7 Put discoveries and epiphanies to work.** Perhaps the handiest way to add a thematic layer to your story is to give your characters some time to reflect on

all of the points I've mentioned earlier. Give them an internal life. Let them ponder who they are, what's been said, what's the problem, where they are, and what they've done. Of course, this isn't a mental billboard that flashes in their mind with a generic theme summed up as if it were inside a fortune cookie. These are epiphanies that are specific to your characters, discoveries with thematic resonance that they and only they can make in the context of their circumstances. #

### Paola Corso

Paola Corso's collection *Giovanna's 86 Circles* won the Best Short Stories of 2005 in the Montserrat Review and was nominated for a Pushcart Press Editors Book Award.

 [writermag.com](http://writermag.com)

For Workout and Resources, go to *the Writer* Web site and click on Online Extra.

## Before and After

### Passage yields a deeper meaning

#### Problem

One of the short stories in my book *Giovanna's 86 Circles*, which explores the theme of finding the magic in everyday life, is set in a steamy hospital laundry. My first paragraph was descriptive but didn't mine the significance of the setting as a place to dream. Here's what I started with:

The morning low was ninety-two degrees, but the temperature in the hospital laundry room started to rise as soon as steam escaped from the open lids of washers and spread when the wet loads were carried over to the dryers.

#### Solution

I expanded the setting and created a place where a worker could use her imagination, since the story explores the necessity of dreams to relieve stress at work. Here's what I added:

The laundry room had no ceiling or floors, nothing ahead of me and nothing behind. All I saw were the feet I stood on, laced up in my new Converse for gym class, and the cloud that kept passing through. I imagined I was in the heavens, standing on the wing of an airplane because I wanted to feel the breeze from being in flight, to fly away from the rows of dryers, each one a rotating circle of heat. As if one burning sun in this world wasn't enough.

—Paola Corso