

Message and Meaning

UNIT

4



THEME

- In Fiction
- In Poetry
- In Nonfiction
- Across Genres

UNIT 4 *Share What You Know*

What are life's big **LESSONS?**

You can't find them in a textbook. You can't discover them in a class. The way you will learn life's most important **lessons** will be through your own experiences and through encounters with the words, accomplishments, and ideas of others. Sometimes these lessons, or themes, will show up in the fiction you read and the movies you watch.

ACTIVITY Think of a book or a movie that taught you something about life or human nature. Then answer the following:

- What lesson or theme was the author or director trying to express?
- Does the lesson reflect what your experience has shown you to be true?
- Does the lesson apply to other times and other places?





Preview Unit Goals

LITERARY ANALYSIS

- Identify and analyze theme, including the roles of setting and character
- Identify and interpret symbol
- Interpret symbol and theme
- Identify and interpret verbal irony
- Analyze and compare authors' messages across genres
- Identify characteristics of a persuasive essay

READING

- Make inferences and draw conclusions
- Monitor comprehension
- Analyze reasons and evidence

WRITING AND GRAMMAR

- Write a comparison-contrast essay
- Use transitions to clarify the relationships between ideas
- Use adverbs to add descriptive detail
- Use subordinate clauses to improve sentence flow

SPEAKING, LISTENING, AND VIEWING

- Participate in a group discussion

VOCABULARY

- Understand and use connotation and denotation of words
- Use prefixes to help unlock word meanings

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

- theme
- verbal irony
- persuasive essay
- symbol
- connotation

Theme and Symbol

When a friend inquires about a movie you saw recently, you might describe it by saying something like “It’s about a Guatemalan girl who moves to New York and adjusts to life in an unfamiliar world.” While it is true you’ve described the *topic* of the movie, you’re not communicating its *big idea*. If you continue by saying “It’s really about finding a way to fit in without losing your uniqueness,” you are talking about theme. A **theme** is an underlying message about life that a writer wants to convey. Whether that message is about fitting in, love, or another timeless topic, it can often prompt you to think about human nature in a new way.

Part 1: Universal Themes in Literature

Despite the diversity in the world, many themes show up again and again in literature, no matter what the culture, time period, or country. These **universal themes** deal with emotions and experiences that are common to all people. For example, the theme “With great power comes great responsibility” has been explored in stories as varied as ancient epics and today’s comics.

“WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”



Valmiki’s *Ramayana*
India
c. 250 B.C.



Virgil’s *Aeneid*
Rome
c. 20 B.C.



Spider-Man
United States
1962–present

Theme and Symbol A writer has many tools he or she can use to develop a theme. Symbols, for example, can powerfully reinforce a theme. A **symbol** is something concrete—a person, place, object, or activity—that represents an abstract idea. For example, a bird flying in the sky might represent a character’s individuality and freedom. Here are some other examples of symbols and the ideas they might communicate:

- a bleak winter setting (isolation or death)
- a small child (innocence)
- a physical challenge, such as climbing a mountain (a character’s emotional growth)

MODEL: THEME AND SYMBOL

In this story, a poor farm girl named Sylvia meets a hunter in search of a rare bird. Wanting to impress the hunter, Sylvia decides to help look for the heron. In the end, however, she makes a difficult choice—to protect the bird. As part of her initial effort to help, Sylvia climbs a tree to look for the heron. As you read, consider what the tree and Sylvia’s climb might symbolize.

from *A White Heron*

Short story by Sarah Orne Jewett

Half a mile from home, at the farther edge of the woods, where the land was highest, a great pine tree stood, the last of its generation. Whether it was left for a boundary mark, or for what reason, no one could say; the woodchoppers who had felled its mates were dead and gone long ago, and a whole forest
5 of sturdy trees, pines and oaks and maples, had grown again. But the stately head of this old pine towered above them all and made a landmark for sea and shore miles and miles away. Sylvia knew it well. She had always believed that whoever climbed to the top of it could see the ocean; and the little girl had often laid her hand on the great rough trunk and looked up wistfully at those
10 dark boughs that the wind always stirred, no matter how hot and still the air might be below. Now she thought of the tree with a new excitement, for why, if one climbed it at break of day, could not one see all the world, and easily discover whence the white heron flew? . . .

There was the huge tree asleep yet in the paling moonlight, and small and
15 silly Sylvia began with utmost bravery to mount to the top of it. . . .

The way was harder than she thought; she must reach far and hold fast, the sharp dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons, the pitch made her thin little fingers clumsy and stiff as she went round and round the tree’s great stem. . . .

20 The tree seemed to lengthen itself out as she went up, and to reach farther and farther upward. It was like a great mainmast to the voyaging earth; it must truly have been amazed that morning through all its ponderous frame as it felt this determined spark of human spirit wending its way from higher branch to branch. Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage
25 this light, weak creature on her way! The old pine must have loved his new dependent. More than all the hawks, and bats, and moths, and even the sweet-voiced thrushes, was the brave, beating heart of the solitary gray-eyed child. And the tree stood still and frowned away the winds that June morning while the dawn grew bright in the east.

30 Sylvia’s face was like a pale star, if one had seen it from the ground, when the last thorny bough was past, and she stood trembling and tired but wholly triumphant, high in the tree-top. Yes, there was the sea with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it, and toward that glorious east flew two hawks. . . . Truly it was a vast and awesome world!

Close Read

1. What is special about the pine tree? Cite details in the first paragraph to support your answer. One detail has been boxed.
2. Find three details in lines 14–32 that suggest just how challenging Sylvia’s climb is. What might her climb symbolize?
3. Consider Sylvia’s decision to protect the bird, as well as the symbolic meanings of the tree and the climb. What might the writer be saying about how people should treat their natural surroundings?

Part 2: Identify Theme

Sometimes the theme of a story is stated directly by a character or the narrator. Most of the time, however, the theme is implied, and readers must analyze elements in the text—for example, the setting, the characters, and the symbols—to uncover the story’s deeper meaning. Use the questions shown to identify and analyze the theme of any story you read.

CLUES TO THEME

TITLE

The title may refer to a significant idea explored in the story. Ask

- To what in the story does the title refer?
- What ideas or symbols does the title highlight?
- Does the title have more than one meaning?



CHARACTERS

Characters’ actions and motivations may reflect the message of the story. Ask

- What are the main character’s key traits and motivations? Consider how the writer might want readers to feel about the character.
- How does the main character change?
- What lessons does the character learn?



PLOT AND CONFLICT

A story revolves around conflicts that are central to the theme. Ask

- What is the main conflict in the story?
- How is the conflict resolved?
- Is the resolution portrayed as a positive or a negative outcome?



SETTING

The setting’s significance to the characters and the conflict can suggest the theme. Ask

- How does the setting influence the characters?
- How does the setting affect the plot?
- What larger idea or issue might the setting represent?



IMPORTANT STATEMENTS

The narrator or the characters may make statements that hint at the theme. Ask

- What key comments do the characters or the narrator make? Take note of statements about values and ideas.
- What message or attitude about life do these statements reveal?



SYMBOLS

Symbols can powerfully reinforce the theme. Ask

- What characters, objects, places, or events have symbolic significance in the story?
- What ideas do these symbols communicate?

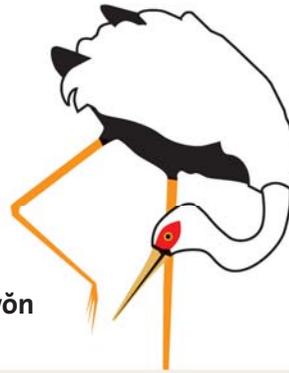


Remember, some works of literature have more than one theme, but typically only one is dominant. When you describe a theme of a work, be sure to use one or two complete sentences, not single words or phrases. For example, “love” expresses a topic, not a theme. “People often find love where they least expect it,” however, is a valid way to state a theme.

Part 3: Analyze the Literature

As you read the following story, use the questions provided to help you identify the theme and understand the symbolism of the cranes.

CRANES



Short story by Hwang Sunwŏn

BACKGROUND This story takes place at the end of the Korean War (1950–1953), a civil war that pitted the Communist government of North Korea against the more democratic government of South Korea. At the end of World War II, the Korean peninsula had been divided along the line of 38° north latitude, commonly called the 38th parallel. During the Korean War, intense fighting along this border shifted control of nearby villages back and forth between the North Koreans and South Koreans. One of these villages is the setting of “Cranes.”

The northern village lay snug beneath the high, bright autumn sky, near the border at the Thirty-eighth Parallel.

White gourds lay one against the other on the dirt floor of an empty farmhouse. Any village elders who passed by extinguished their bamboo pipes first, and the children, too, turned back some distance off. Their faces were marked with fear.

As a whole, the village showed little damage from the war, but it still did not seem like the same village Sŏngsam¹ had known as a boy.

At the foot of a chestnut grove on the hill behind the village he stopped and climbed a chestnut tree. Somewhere far back in his mind he heard the old man with a wen² shout, “You bad boy, climbing up my chestnut tree again!”

The old man must have passed away, for he was not among the few village elders Sŏngsam had met. Holding on to the trunk of the tree, Sŏngsam gazed

1. **Sŏngsam** (səngˈsämˈ).

2. **wen**: a harmless skin tumor.

Close Read

1. The title of this story is one clue to the theme. As you read, look for details that explain the significance of birds known as cranes.

2. The boxed details describe a peaceful setting—not one you might expect in a story about war. Which details in lines 1–8 suggest that the residents are unsettled by their seemingly calm surroundings?

up at the blue sky for a time. Some chestnuts fell to the ground as the dry
15 clusters opened of their own accord.

A young man stood, his hands bound, before a farmhouse that had been converted into a Public Peace Police office. He seemed to be a stranger, so Söngsam went up for a closer look. He was stunned: this young man was none other than his boyhood playmate, Tökchae.³

20 Söngsam asked the police officer who had come with him from Ch'önt'ae⁴ for an explanation. The prisoner was the vice-chairman of the Farmers' Communist League and had just been flushed⁵ out of hiding in his own house, Söngsam learned.

Söngsam sat down on the dirt floor and lit a cigaret.

25 Tökchae was to be escorted to Ch'öngdan⁶ by one of the peace police. After a time, Söngsam lit a new cigaret from the first and stood up. "I'll take him with me."

Tökchae averted his face and refused to look at Söngsam. The two left the village.

30 Söngsam went on smoking, but the tobacco had no flavor. He just kept drawing the smoke in and blowing it out. Then suddenly he thought that Tökchae, too, must want a puff. He thought of the days when they had shared dried gourd leaves behind sheltering walls, hidden from the adults' view. But today, how could he offer a cigaret to a fellow like this?

35 **O**nce, when they were small, he went with Tökchae to steal some chestnuts from the old man with the wen. It was Söngsam's turn to climb the tree. Suddenly the old man began shouting. Söngsam slipped and fell to the ground. He got chestnut burrs all over his bottom, but he kept on running. Only when the two had reached a safe place where the old man could not overtake them
40 did Söngsam turn his bottom to Tökchae. The burrs hurt so much as they were plucked out that Söngsam could not keep tears from welling up in his eyes. Tökchae produced a fistful of chestnuts from his pocket and thrust them into Söngsam's . . . Söngsam threw away the cigaret he had just lit, and then made up his mind not to light another while he was escorting Tökchae.

3. **Tökchae** (tək'jä').

4. **Ch'önt'ae** (chən'tä').

5. **flushed**: driven from hiding.

6. **Ch'öngdan** (chəng'dän').

Close Read

3. What do you think motivates Söngsam to take Tökchae with him? Explain your answer.

4. What does Söngsam's flashback to his childhood in lines 35–43 tell you about Tökchae's character and their friendship?

45 They reached the pass at the hill where he and Tökchae had cut fodder⁷ for cows until Söngsam had to move to a spot near Ch'önt'ae, south of the Thirty-eighth Parallel, two years before the liberation.

Söngsam felt a sudden surge of anger in spite of himself and shouted, "So how many have you killed?"

50 For the first time, Tökchae cast a quick glance at him and then looked away. "You! How many have you killed?" he asked again.

Tökchae looked at him again and glared. The glare grew intense, and his mouth twitched.

"So you managed to kill quite a few, eh?" Söngsam felt his mind becoming clear of itself, as if some obstruction had been removed. "If you were vice-chairman of the Communist League, why didn't you run? You must have been lying low with a secret mission."

Tökchae did not reply.

"Speak up. What was your mission?"

60 Tökchae kept walking. Tökchae was hiding something, Söngsam thought. He wanted to take a good look at him, but Tökchae kept his face averted.

Fingering the revolver at his side, Söngsam went on: "There's no need to make excuses. You're going to be shot anyway. Why don't you tell the truth here and now?"

65 "I'm not going to make any excuses. They made me vice-chairman of the League because I was a hardworking farmer and one of the poorest. If that's a capital offense,⁸ so be it. I'm still what I used to be—the only thing I'm good at is tilling the soil." After a short pause, he added, "My old man is bedridden at home. He's been ill almost half a year." Tökchae's father was a widower, a poor, hardworking farmer who lived only for his son. Seven years before his back had given out, and he had contracted a skin disease.

"Are you married?"

"Yes," Tökchae replied after a time.

"To whom?"

75 "Shorty."

"To Shorty?" How interesting! A woman so small and plump that she knew the earth's vastness, but not the sky's height. Such a cold fish! He and Tökchae had teased her and made her cry. And Tökchae had married her!

"How many kids?"

80 "The first is arriving this fall, she says."

Söngsam had difficulty swallowing a laugh that he was about to let burst forth in spite of himself. Although he had asked how many children Tökchae

7. **fodder:** coarsely chopped hay or straw used as food for farm animals.

8. **capital offense:** a crime calling for the death penalty.

Close Read

5. Reread lines 45–64. How has the war affected Söngsam's opinion of his former friend? Cite details that helped you to understand Söngsam's view of Tökchae.

6. What details in lines 65–80 remind Söngsam that Tökchae has a human side? One detail has been boxed.

had, he could not help wanting to break out laughing at the thought of the wife sitting there with her huge stomach, one span around. But he realized that this was no time for joking.

85

“Anyway, it’s strange you didn’t run away.”

“I tried to escape. They said that once the South invaded, not a man would be spared. So all of us between seventeen and forty were taken to the North. I thought of evacuating, even if I had to carry my father on my back. But Father said no. How could we farmers leave the land behind when the crops were ready for harvesting? He grew old on that farm depending on me as the prop and the mainstay of the family. I wanted to be with him in his last moments so I could close his eyes with my own hand. Besides, where can farmers like us go, when all we know how to do is live on the land?”

90

Söngsam had had to flee the previous June. At night he had broken the news privately to his father. But his father had said the same thing: Where could a farmer go, leaving all the chores behind? So Söngsam had left alone. Roaming about the strange streets and villages in the South, Söngsam had been haunted by thoughts of his old parents and the young children, who had been left with all the chores. Fortunately, his family had been safe then, as it was now.

95
100

They had crossed over a hill. This time Söngsam walked with his face averted. The autumn sun was hot on his forehead. This was an ideal day for the harvest, he thought.

When they reached the foot of the hill, Söngsam gradually came to a halt. In the middle of a field he espied a group of cranes that resembled men in white, all bent over. This had been the demilitarized zone⁹ along the Thirty-eighth Parallel. The cranes were still living here, as before, though the people were all gone.

105

Once, when Söngsam and Tökchae were about twelve, they had set a trap here, unbeknown to the adults, and caught a crane, a Tanjöng crane.¹⁰ They had tied the crane up, even binding its wings, and paid it daily visits, patting its neck and riding on its back. Then one day they overheard the neighbors whispering: someone had come from Seoul¹¹ with a permit from the governor-general’s office to catch cranes as some kind of specimens. Then and there

110

Close Read

7. Line 101 marks a change in Söngsam’s behavior. What does this change reveal about what’s going on inside him? Reread lines 95–100 and explain what motivates the change.

9. **demilitarized zone:** an area—generally one separating two hostile nations or armies—from which military forces are prohibited.

10. **Tanjöng** (tän’jöng) **crane:** a type of crane found in Asia.

11. **Seoul** (söl): the capital and largest city of South Korea.

115 the two boys had dashed off to the field. That they would be found out and punished had no longer mattered; all they cared about was the fate of their crane. Without a moment's delay, still out of breath from running, they untied the crane's feet and wings, but the bird could hardly walk. It must have been weak from having been bound.

120 The two helped the crane up. Then, suddenly, they heard a gunshot. The crane fluttered its wings once or twice and then sank back to the ground.

The boys thought their crane had been shot. But the next moment, as another crane from a nearby bush fluttered its wings, the boys' crane stretched its long neck, gave out a whoop, and disappeared into the sky. For a long while
125 the two boys could not tear their eyes away from the blue sky up into which their crane had soared.

"Hey, why don't we stop here for a crane hunt?" Söngsam said suddenly. Tökchae was dumbfounded.

"I'll make a trap with this rope; you flush a crane over here."

130 Söngsam had untied Tökchae's hands and was already crawling through the weeds.

Tökchae's face whitened. "You're sure to be shot anyway"—these words flashed through his mind. Any instant a bullet would come flying from Söngsam's direction, Tökchae thought.

135 Some paces away, Söngsam quickly turned toward him.

"Hey, how come you're standing there like a dummy? Go flush a crane!"

Only then did Tökchae understand. He began crawling through the weeds.

A pair of Tanjōng cranes soared high into the clear blue autumn sky, flapping their huge wings.

Translated by Peter H. Lee

Close Read

8. In what ways is Tökchae like the crane? Cite specific descriptions of the crane that could also apply to Tökchae.

9. Why does Söngsam push Tökchae to flush a crane?

10. What might the two cranes symbolize? Use details from the text to support your answer.

11. Considering the clues in the story, what do you think the writer is saying about friendship? State the story's theme and cite details that helped you arrive at your conclusion.