

Journalism/Creative Writing Extended Project Poetry Track

Step Three: Author's Purpose and Theme

Before we get too much further, I want to take a day where you think about your purpose in writing this collection of poems. We want this collection to be well-crafted, not just thrown together because we think writing is fun. To do this, we're going to think through *why* you're writing and *how* you're going to communicate your purpose to the reader through theme.

Don't let the academic-sounding term throw you off. The "theme" of a story simply refers to its main topic or central idea. I suppose the major theme of a given work is the sum of all its ideas. Whether you like it or not, your collection has a theme, because all collections ultimately have one major idea, regardless of if you're writing a narrative collection or a thematic collection. This is because we as writers are fueled by ideas.

Before you even begin work on your collection, you should identify what your theme is. Ask yourself what, underneath all of your individual poems, is your collection really about. Is it about how love conquers all? Is it about the complicated relationship between mothers and daughters? Good versus evil is a common theme. Is your story about how evil never triumphs and good always wins? Is it about how evil triumphs despite good? Any of these make excellent examples of themes. Of course, your collection may have more than one theme. But you should at least identify one "main theme," or major idea, that your collection will focus on.

If you're writing a narrative collection:

Take a look at the main character(s) you've thought up so far, and ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is my character at the beginning?
- What are their flaws, and what holds them back from happiness or fulfillment?
- How do the events of my narrative shape my character for the better or the worse?
- Do they overcome their characters flaws and the obstacles that stand in their way? How so?
- Who has my character become by the end of the story?

Once you've answered these questions, review what you've written and try to identify any themes that naturally arise. What are you trying to say about these topics? Voila! Just like that, you've found your thematic statement — one that you've already built directly into your story.

If you're writing a thematic collection:

Finding theme should be much more simple because that's what you're basing your collection off of.

How to weave the theme into your collection

A solidly presented theme will emerge through many different facets of your collection. Start thinking about how your theme will become apparent to your readers. Some of these ways include:

- Through characters' actions, thoughts and speech
- Through symbolic use of the environment
- Through repeating ideas
- Through highlighting symbols or landmarks
- Through contrasting values

The question then becomes how, exactly, do you build a theme into your work? One main way is through **motifs** and **symbols**. Let's look at each one in turn.

A **motif** is a recurring structure, symbol, or literary device that helps develop and inform your theme. The more a motif turns up in a story, the more prominently it will factor into your theme. For instance, taking *The Great Gatsby* as an example (I know it's not poetry, but since most people are familiar with it...), some of its motifs include geography (the East Coast represents decadence and cynicism, while the West represents more traditional, straightforward "American" values) and the weather (the changing weather patterns reflect the shifting tone and mood of the characters and the story).

A **symbol**, on the other hand, is an image, a character, an object, or figure that represents something beyond whatever is just on the surface. At the end of the first chapter of *Gatsby*, the narrator, Nick Carraway, observes Jay Gatsby emerging from his mansion at night. Carraway considers calling out and introducing himself, but thinks better of it: "I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness." This green light makes several appearances during the novel, most notably again at the very end: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us." Clearly, the light resembles something more than just a green light. It represents Daisy, who in turn represents Gatsby's unattainable American dream. Further, green is the color of money and envy, two things that Gatsby struggles with throughout the novel. The light is a symbol, deepening the story's themes.

Think through the basic ideas for your collection you have floating around in your mind right now. Then think of your main theme (sum of all your ideas). How are you

going to get your point across? Think through some of these options given above and make some notes below, on a separate sheet of paper, or on your laptop of ways you can incorporate different tools to get your theme across throughout your story.