**Reading Skill: Identifying Theme in a Text**

During our short story unit, we began to investigate theme. We learned that topic and theme are different. The topic is what the story is about, whereas the theme is the idea the author wishes to convey *about* the topic – the lesson or message about that topic.

For example, let’s take a look at “The Sniper”:

**Topic –** war  **Theme –** civil war divides families

Because theme is complex and is up for interpretation, it cannot be expressed in a single word. It must be written as a longer piece with evidence from the text to support. In high school, you will write entire essays on the theme of a short story, poem, or novel. For now, we will practice writing a half page piece to express your interpretation of theme supported with evidence from the text.

**Here is a mentor text for theme in ”The Sniper”:**

Liam O’Flaherty’s “The Sniper” is set during the Irish Civil War in the 1920s, but mainly focuses on the rooftops of the Four Quarts in Dublin, where two snipers find themselves at war with one another. Towards the end of the story, the Republican sniper comes out victorious, but he begins to change. He looks over the rooftop, sees the people he had killed, and feels sorry for what he has done. He begins to curse at himself and at the war, and “The lust of the battle died in him. He became bitten by remorse.” (p. 4) Sudden curiosity as to who he had killed begins to rush through his head. Dodging gunfire behind him, he reaches the corpse and throws himself at it, as if he had been killed too. Finally, “the sniper turned over the dead body and looked into his brother's face.” (p. 4)

The theme of the story is that war reduces people to objects and leads us to treat each other just as targets, and nothing more. The author shows us this when the sniper realizes what he has done; he feels awful and the thought of war disgusts him. When the main character says that he's killed his brother, the human element is highlighted, and it reminds us that when it comes to war, we are all “brothers” fighting one another.

**This mentor text includes:**

* The author’s first and last name
* The title of the story – remember that for a novel, you underline or italicize the title (*The Outsiders* or The Outsiders)
* A very brief summary of what the story is about
* An interpretation of the theme (stories can have many themes)
* Evidence from the text to support the theme (including quotes with page numbers)

**Now it’s your turn to write a short piece on theme. Follow the instructions on the back of this page.**

**Question:** In your opinion, what is the primary theme of *The Outsiders*?

**Step One:** Fill in this chart.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Possible themes of *The Outsiders*** (Write down all possible themes you can think of, then circle the one that you think is most important) |  |
| **Evidence to support the theme** (Events and quotes from the text that support the theme you have chosen. Be sure to include page numbers after each quote) |  |

**Step Two:** Write a rough draft of your thematic piece on loose-leaf. It should be at least ½ page single spaced and include quotations to support. Use the mentor text to help you.

**Step Three:** Revise your thematic piece.

**Step Four:** Type your thematic piece and email it to krista.cabel@nbed.nb.ca