



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARD

Literary Analysis

Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.4 Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on life, providing textual evidence for the identified theme.

Social Themes in Fiction

People often talk about social issues—such as poverty, racism, or crime—in a general sense, but how do these issues affect individuals' lives in reality? In 19th-century America, writers began to explore these issues in fiction.

Dramatizing Social Issues

Typical themes in literature deal with issues that are common to most people, such as the loss of innocence, difficult family relationships, or a new love. **Social themes**, however, deal with issues that concern a particular group of people, such as those in a certain neighborhood, geographical region, or religious community. These issues are usually specific to a time and place, but they may echo in other cultures and times as well. For example, the dynamics of Puritan society inspired a number of great literary works with social themes, from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953). While Hawthorne explored the effects of Puritan morality on individual lives, Miller chose to expose the wrongs committed in the name of righteousness during the Salem witch trials as a way to explore parallel events of his own time.



Two suffragettes, circa 1905, stand on an American city street, promoting women's rights.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, novels and short stories with a contemporary social theme typically dealt with issues that generated strong public reaction and debate for that era. These issues included industrialism, urbanization, and the displacement of Native Americans. In this way, literature became a powerful tool for social change.

Identifying Social Themes

Novels and short stories of the period often portray characters struggling against poverty, prejudice, and other social obstacles. One social issue in particular that emerged in the second half of the 19th century was the role of women in society. This issue preoccupied writers of many nationalities during this time and inspired feminist writers in the 20th century. All of the stories in this part of Unit 4 address this issue in one way or another. To help you identify the social themes in these and other stories, consider the following:

- Look for **characters** who have little control over their fate, and ask yourself what **social factors** contribute to their situation.

- Clarify the **conflicts** in the story and determine to what extent they are caused by forces beyond a character's control.
- Examine direct statements of a **character's or narrator's opinions** to see whether these provide clues to a theme.
- Think about the **author's reason** for writing the story. What was he or she trying to achieve?

Works that address social issues often focus on people who have few, if any, rights and privileges in society. The first-person narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" (page 768), although comfortably middle-class, has no control over her life. Early in the story, she explains her complete submission to her doctor and her husband.

So I take phosphates . . . and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

But what is one to do?

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Close Read

Based on the narrator's statements in this passage, how would you describe her relationship with the doctor and her husband?

In "The Story of an Hour" (page 760), the main character, after hearing that her husband is dead, reflects on the control he has exercised over her. Notice how her thoughts are a statement on the relationships between men and women in general.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature.

—Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour"

Close Read

How is this character's attitude different from that expressed in "The Yellow Wallpaper"?