

THEMES in Literature

Your job in the following assignments will be to perform as a Comparatist, juxtaposing literary themes from several different cultural environments. In comparing and contrasting these themes, consider the time and cultural backgrounds from which each of themes being created. Are certain of the themes you meet message-bearers, whose acts and adventures are carried out in the service of idea or ideal, while other themes seem to rise from the folk-oral traditions? Are some of these themes reflect national (or religious or military) ideals?

Epics

Please read the following epics from your textbook:

Homer (*Iliad; Odyssey*)
Virgil;*Aeneid*;
Gilgamesh;
The Ramayana;
The Mahabharata)

Analyze, compare and contrast the following heroes and heroines in these six ancient epics. You will notice that the first three epics all derive from the western mythological tradition, the fourth from Mesopotamia; the fifth and sixth from India; in other words you may expect to find different world-view perspectives at work in the three categories. Do you? Do certain of these epics seem to you modern, to speak to our own time? What issues from our own time seem to be addressed here? How do plot and characterization differ in ancient *Indian* or *Mesopotamian* epic literature, from their deployment in Greek or Roman texts? Is Gilgamesh, the warrior-searcher-philosopher, comparable to Odysseus? Is the tortured warrior psychology of Arjuna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, at all comparable to the psychology of Achilles in the *Iliad*?

Optional themes for consideration

Friendship: What role does friendship play in the develop of character in ancient epic? Compare and contrast the theme of friendship in three ancient epics. Hint: Achilles and Patroklos; Aeneas and faithful Achates; Gilgamesh and Enkidu; Arjuna and Krishna. (Any close female friendships?)

Love: Compare and contrast three ancient epics in which love is a major part of the theme: you may need to distinguish among 'true love,' 'political love,' 'lust,' etc. Would Dido and Aeneas be lust or politics? Sita and Rama? Draupadi and her husbands? Hector and Andromache?

Duty Compare and contrast three ancient epics in terms of their presentation of duty. Does Aeneas surge to the front? How about Arjuna? What about Rama with his immediate compliance to the orders he should leave home for the forest? Achilles and the orders he follows from the gods? Is that fulfilling one's duty? Write this carefully, and with attention to advance planning of your discussion.

Folly Compare and contrast the treatment of folly in three ancient epics. You may need to search for examples; they will be rewarding. Consider the suitors' behavior in the *Odyssey*, the confidence of Gilgamesh that he can find immortality, Rama's refusal to accept Sita's chastity, Dido's intemperate affair with Aeneas, Achilles' insistence on keeping his girlfriend, when commanded to release her.

Drama Please read the following plays from your textbook:

Aeschylus (*Agamemnon, Eumenides*);
Sophocles (*Oedipus Rex, Antigone*);
Euripides (*Medea*).

Analyze, compare and contrast the following characters from your textbook: Agamemnon; Orestes; Oedipus; Antigone; Medea. The ancient Greek dramatist dealt with inherited myths and myth-figures, but within this tradition he was able to tweak and shape characters in many ways. He would have several versions of a character like Agamemnon in his head, as he went about forming his own personal interpretation of the character. Try to see what particular tweak Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides applied to each of these characters, and then see what each triad--heroes; heroines--has in common among its three members, all characters in Greek drama. Are there sharp differences among each group of three characters?

Optional themes for consideration

Revenge Compare and contrast the treatments of revenge in the five Greek tragedies considered above. How does the desire for revenge differ between Orestes and Medea? Is Agamemnon vengeful?

Love Does love factor into the Greek tragedies we have considered? Is there any example of love included? What would you call Antigone's relation to her fallen brother?

Duty Compare and contrast the treatments of duty among the characters in the Greek tragedies considered above. Who is most concerned about doing their duty? Is duty enjoined by gods, onto some of these mortals?

Flaws Tragedy is about bad things happening to people. Aristotle thought this usually happened because people had some kind of tragic flaw which brought them down. Do our tragic characters, above, have flaws that bring them down?

Lyric

Please read the following five sets of poems :

Book of Songs (1000-600 B.C.E.) Chinese
Egyptian Lyrics (1290-1078 B.C.E.) Egyptian
Hebrew Psalms (6th century B.C.E.) Hebrew
Sappho (6th century B.C.E.) Greek
Catullus (1st century B.C.E.) Roman

Analyze, compare and contrast the main themes of those five sets of poems. In the lyric, the author him or herself is the main character, telling you his or her feelings, pointing out this or that about the world, or generally venting emotions. In other words, a lyric poem is about the feelings of the person who creates it? This is in contrast to the epics where the main character of is normally the 'hero' or 'protagonist,' in whom the author (frequently a collective author, in oral traditions), invests his main points and critical narrative actions. When we read the *Iliad* we are likely to pay attention to the character of Achilles, rather than of Homer. When we read *The Book of Songs* we are reading the mind of the creator of the poem in question.

Optional themes for consideration

Friendship Compare and contrast the feelings of friendship dominant in the poems above. Is it easy to distinguish praise and love from friendship in the examples you choose?

Love Compare and contrast the feelings of physical longing and lust, in the poems above. Are physical desires and love kept separate in these works?

Duty Some of the poems in *The Book of Songs* deal with dignity, gravity, mature virtues. Compare and contrast these poems, in *The Book of Songs*, with treatments of duty in the other sets of poems? Has Catullus a sense of duty?

Worship Contrast and compare the view of worship that can be found in the above poems. Is the worship you find here all 'religious,' or is it of different kinds?

Fiction

Please read the following piece of ancient fiction from your textbook:

Petronius, *Satyricon*

Though there is little ancient fiction in our text, it is not that none existed. Some did--late Greek pastoral tales; Indian tales within epics--but the above partly incomplete story by Petronius, *The Satyricon* (late first century C.E.) has a modern narrative quality that sets it apart, making part of it feel like a modern novel. That part is the banquet of Trimalchio, a former slave who has been freed, has hit it rich, and likes the idea of having great fun for the rest of his life. Do you think this tale would capture readers today? *If you didn't know the actual date of this story, would you be able to guess that it is not of our moment? How would you know?*

Your theme: The narrator of *The Satyricon*, and his attitude toward the banquet he describes.

Alternate themes for consideration:

Friendship: Do you find evidence of friendship in this tale? Does Trimalchio prove to be friendly toward his guests? Is Encolpius the narrator friendly toward Trimalchio? Does Trimalchio feel compassion for slaves--he is a former slave--and sympathize with them because he has been in their shoes?

Folly: Is Trimalchio's banquet one big act of folly--pure madness, without purpose or limit--or is it more carefully thought out than that? Is the choice of dishes reasonable and guided by what we would consider principles of healthy nutrition? Or is it over the top extravagant? Please explain.

Sexuality: The narrator is big time gay, as we learn at the start--before the excerpt in Bedford begins--and smoothly introduces us into a world of sexual license, at the banquet. Is Trimalchio gay? Or multi-sexual? What about the guests? Is anyone startled when Trimalchio pisses, then wipes his hands on the slave boy's hair? Is there any voice of sexual restraint, at the banquet?

Social consciousness: Has Trimalchio invited an 'upper class' group to his banquet? Is Trimalchio himself anxious to hide his background as a slave, a lower classer, or does he flourish in the genuine freedom given former slaves in ancient Roman society? Are class and social attitudes on display among the guests at Trimalchio's banquet?