

Introduction

[Thomas McCormack](#) is a playwright. Following the successful five-month run of his Off-Broadway play [Endpapers](#), Mr. McCormack has made [three of his plays available online](#) in an effort to connect with agents, actors, directors and producers who resonate with his work.

What you will not learn on Mr. McCormack's site is that prior to returning to a life-long love of playwriting, Mr. McCormack worked in the publishing industry, entering as a fiction editor and rising a decade later to become CEO of St. Martin's Press. You will also not discover that he wrote an important book titled *The Fiction Editor* during that time, drawing on his long experience in that capacity. I say it is an important book because *The Fiction Editor* addressed storytelling not from the point of view of criticism or marketing, but solely as craft.

Included in the original edition (recently revised and reissued as *The Fiction Editor, The Novel, and the Novelist*) was a chapter called *Axing Theme*. This chapter validated nagging doubts about theme that I had been battling for years, and liberated me from theme's nebulous thrall. In the revised edition this chapter became ['Theme' and Its Dire Effects](#), which it is my great privilege to present here, unaltered and in its entirety, courtesy a generous Tom McCormack:

"I have no objection to your posting the piece wherever you will -- the primary motivation behind my writing that book was not to get rich but to promulgate some helpful things I'd learned in many years of association with storytelling."

Mr. McCormack's arguments had a profound effect on me as a young storyteller, and saved me from a great deal of unnecessary creative torment. They also reminded me to trust my artistic and critical instincts because as a student I consistently balked at theme in exactly the manner that Mr. McCormack describes. If you know a student wrestling with theme in high school or college, please forward this document to them. If they are liberated, ask them to pass it on.

If you know someone who teaches theme in any discipline, please forward them a copy of Mr. McCormack's essay. Without their help and understanding – without unanimity among teachers at all levels as to what theme is and is not – this educational malpractice cannot be stopped.

[That is my goal.](#) It is a cause to which anyone who loves stories or literature should be unreservedly committed. It is time to put theme back in its proper place and focus the student and the teacher and the artist alike on the craft and joy of fiction. Therein lies the meaning.

[Mark Barrett](#)

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“Theme” and Its Dire Effects

Earlier I said that the concept of ‘theme’ was malignantly balled up. Part of the support for this doleful conclusion came from the examination of nineteen of the leading college textbooks that announced themselves as introductions to literature and its writing, and that talked about theme. I’ll quote from several of them in this Note. There have been texts—and new ones arise each year—that avoid the term ‘theme’ entirely, but the ones I inspected comprised, statistically, the huge majority of the instructionals assigned to undergraduates in America in the last generation.

Let’s start calmly: Each appearance of the word ‘theme’ in a literature appreciation textbook should be marked with that yellow crime-scene tape. Samples of the way ‘theme’ is taught should be sent to Atlanta so the Centers for Disease Control can get on it. We should all write to our congressmen; if we can mount a legislative campaign against smoking, surely we do as much for ‘theme’? (Late in the twentieth century the French volunteered their help, but they succeeded only in introducing a second virus.)

The way ‘theme’ is currently taught is actively harmful.

I seriously pursue this crusade here, albeit in condensed, almost outline, form, because I believe that what’s being done in classrooms stunts, and even kills, the ability and appetite of many of the best students. This deprives our globe of much talent that would otherwise find itself in writing, teaching, reading . . . and editing.

Their teaching of ‘theme’ is harmful because of what it leads *to*, and what it leads *away from*.

In the student’s mood and attitude, it leads to confusion, discouragement, and alienation.

In his knowledge it leads to error about what authors are trying to do, and about what is cherishable in fiction generally, and stories and novels individually.

It leads the student away from enjoyment, sanguine expectation, and trust in literature. It actually *reduces* the possibility of his focusing where the reward is.

It does this by forcibly thrusting on the student a concept that is fuzzy, arbitrary, trivializing, irrelevant, distracting, and ultimately deadening.

It's important to realize that this enforcement is executed by a figure who has immense authoritative ascendancy over the students. The student (initially) respects, trusts and obeys him. The more dedicated the student already is to reading, the more devoted he is to the idea of studying under the great professor, the man who *sees*, and *knows*, and who will convey the keys to appreciating great writers and great books. Because the professor is both lofty and wrong, the result is either sore disillusionment and withdrawal, or a kind of lobotomy, the disconnection of sensibility, replacing it with a soulless response and printout acquired from an insensate microchip.

To understand why this happens, we should first get down the definition of 'theme' that is generally taught. (We could begin by comparing the contradictions among texts—"The theme is the moral"; "The theme is never the moral"; "The theme is the subject"; "The theme is never the subject"—but each author would, justifiably, claim he should not be held responsible for what other authors say. Still, the point that there *are* disputes is worth mentioning for students' benefit, because the young mind confronting any textbook tends to accept it as factual, like a primer in history or mathematics. I'll content myself in a moment with noting the contradictions *within* texts.)

At first hearing, the notion sounds benign. The 'theme' of a work is said to be (Perrine:) *
[footnote to go at bottom of page: *See source references at the end of this Note.] "its controlling idea or its central insight"; (Hall:) "a central insight into human experience";

(Pickering:) “the central idea or statement about life that unifies and controls the work”;
(Trimmer:) “the central and unifying idea about human experience”; (Gordon:) “the main idea,
the abstract statement of what the work means, its significance . . . central meaning”; (Kane:)
“the central meaning.”

Its benignity begins to fade a bit as the student starts to realize he’s having trouble grasping the thing. He’s not sure what ‘meaning’ means here; or ‘idea’; or ‘significance’ . . .

So the authors go on, aiming to clarify things, and the dominant tack is to emphasize that the student arrives at the theme by *generalizing*, producing a general *statement* about the human condition as implied by the total story. (Perrine:) “It is the unifying generalization about life stated or implied by the story”; (Hall:) “the implicit generality the story supports . . . we express the theme by a sentence or two of generalization”; (Pickering:) “[Sometimes] theme is tied to a revelation of character and takes the form of a statement about that character and what the fate of that character may imply about people or life in general”; (Gordon:) “The statement of what a story means should be a general one, applying not only to the story, but also showing its relation to life”; (Brooks:) “not only an evaluation of the particular experience related in the story, but a *generalized* evaluation. Always the end of a successful story leaves us with an attitude to take toward life in general.”

The student seldom realizes it, but by this point he has already been deflected away from delight and understanding. But, innocent and eager, he presses on with his assignment: to derive a generalization about “life in general” from the particulars of the story.

Quite naturally, his first efforts tend to be in the form of a ‘moral’.

No, no, he’s told; you’re confused; a theme is not a moral; that’s not the kind of generalization about life we meant. (Pickering:) “To identify the theme [as] ‘crime doesn’t pay’

is to confuse theme with moral”; (Kane:) “Theme should not be confused with moral, a simple tag which can be abstracted as the ‘point’ of a narrative.”

The student’s eyes begin to blink; evidently there’s a difference between the ‘purpose’ and the ‘point’ of a narrative.

My main point (or purpose) right here is not to stress the *confusion* ‘theme’ causes so much as the *distraction*; still it’s worthwhile to exhibit these lines from Perrine bearing on ‘moral’:

“The theme is the purpose of the story.”

“The purpose is not to inculcate a code of moral rules.”

“Occasionally the theme may be expressed as a moral principle.”

So theme equals purpose, purpose is *not* moral, but theme can be moral.

It turns out that what Perrine is against is not a moral but the pursuit by the student for a moral, the “trying to wring from every story a didactic pronouncement about life.” This, Perrine warns, tends to reduce the story “to some dusty platitude.” Somehow it should be a “central generalization about life” without being a “didactic pronouncement about life.”

By now the student is bobbing his head, openmouthed, apparently rapt, while sneaking a glance to his left to see if the guy next to him is getting something he’s not.

Three more instructions about theme are usually put to him in these textbooks:

1. Theme should be in the form of a statement, a sentence. Not ‘the futility of envy’ but ‘Envy is futile.’
2. The theme must ‘account for’, ‘explain’, all the major details of the story.

3. Perrine: “We should avoid any statement that reduces the theme to some familiar saying.” Perrine claims his point is that quick settlement for an old verbal formula probably cuts the sharp corners off and “impoverishes the central meaning of the story.”

The student is beginning to learn something, not about literature, but about classroom tactics. Avoid the word ‘moral’. Convert all imperatives into declaratives. Make sure the theme is phrased so it’s not recognizable as a cliché. Cynicism, which is the correct response to manipulation, stirs.

‘Theme’ is not an incisor, it is a molar, and now we’re getting close to the nerve. The touchy center of the issue is: When the student finally picks his delicate, unsure, trepid way through to what the professor will accept as the ‘theme’, what’s he got? Perrine conveys professorial jitteriness about commonplace themes – and he well might, as we shall see.

Here is a selection of ‘themes’ as phrased by the authors of those textbooks:

(Perrine:) “War is horrible.” “Old age is often pathetic and in need of understanding.” “Motherhood sometimes has more frustrations than rewards.” “Loyalty to country often inspires heroic self-sacrifice.” “In springtime there occasionally comes to those upper-middle-class people whose lives are bound by respectability and regulated by conventions a peculiar impulse toward life, freedom and beauty; but the impulse is seldom strong enough to overcome the deep-seated forces of habit and convention.” “The soul of every man is mysterious in its origins and contains unfathomed possibilities for evil and violence as well as for innocence and love.” “The love of two people for each other is a more worthwhile object of desire than business success or financial prosperity.” “The theme of *Othello* may be expressed as ‘Jealousy exacts a terrible cost’.”

(Trimmer:) “Nature is not cruel; it is indifferent.”

(Gordon:) “People fooled twice may not respond a third time.” “Don’t call for help unless you need it.” “Death is the only ending for one who will accept no social responsibilities.” “A man cannot control fate by supernatural means.”

(Roberts:) “Human beings who are committed to caring for others may actually suffer for this commitment.” “Even if a commitment to the dead is strong, the commitment to life is stronger.” “The love of a man and a woman is so positive that it can literally rescue people from death.” “Selfless love may lead to bravery against hopeless odds.” “Women, with no power except their charm and beauty, are helpless against chance and bad luck.” “Racial barriers separate human beings and make them cruel when it would be to everyone’s interest to unite and to be helpful.” [On *Hamlet*] “A person doing evil sets strong forces in motion that cannot be stopped until everything in the person’s path is destroyed.”

(Abcarian:) [On *The Secret Sharer*] “The recognition of complex moral ambiguities is essential to maturity.”

(Barnet:) “Life and love are too strong to be buried alive.” “the quest for happiness”; “the difficulty of achieving self-knowledge”; “the fragility of love.” [Notice these last are not in statement form.]

(Packer:) “Frustrated desire in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, obsession in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*.”

Hall expresses the theme of Chekhov’s ‘Gooseberries’ this way: “People deceive themselves.” Then an instinct I’ll leave you to name prompts him to add: “And their overriding purposes distort their perceptions of reality.” What he adds is syllables.

While you ponder the depth, freshness, illumination, utility, and value of all these expressions, listen to these authors on the importance here:

(Hall:) “A story’s theme is its reason for being.”

(Perrine:) “Theme is the purpose of the story.”

(Packer:) “The theme is the point or meaning.”

(Brooks:) “The theme is what a piece of fiction stacks up to . . . the significance.”

I now submit that, given the themes expressed above, to teach young people that these are the reasons for the stories’ being; that they were the purpose, meaning, and significance for Shakespeare, Chekhov, Welty, et al.; and that they are what students must struggle to get out of them—this is a lesson of such mind-imploding fatuity as to amount to assault with a deadly weapon.

Ah, the protest will come, you obviously haven’t read us closely. We regularly admit that a theme is a poor, inadequate thing next to the work itself.

But I *have* read you closely, as closely as, I fear, countless bewildered students have, young minds who will feel there’s something wrong with *them* that they cannot reconcile the contradictory things they are hearing.

When Pickering says, “One of the marks of a great work of literature—a work that we generally regard as a ‘classic’—is the significance of its theme,” he is not let off the hook by saying two pages later, “The ideas that constitute a work’s theme may be relatively commonplace.”

When Perrine says, “Theme is the purpose of the story,” he does not insulate himself from indictment by saying just four paragraphs later, “We must never think, once we have stated the theme of a story, the whole purpose of the story has been to yield up this abstract statement.”

When Perrine advances the themes ascribed to him above (“War is horrible”, etc.), and we begin to frown, should our brow smooth over because he then double-speaks that one should abhor “dusty platitudes”?

To the student pertinacious enough to bring into juxtaposition statements that Perrine separately makes over the seven pages of his essay on theme, Perrine continually seems to want it both ways:

“Story writers’ first business is to reveal life.”

“A story’s *first* object is enjoyment.”

“Theme exists when an author has deliberately introduced some concept or theory of life that the story is meant to illustrate.”

“Good writers do not ordinarily write a story to ‘illustrate’ a theme.”

“Occasionally the theme is a moral principle.”

“A story is not a preachment.”

When Perrine says writers are “wary of spoiling a story for perceptive readers by ‘explaining’ it as some people ruin jokes by explaining them,” it doesn’t occur to him that students may ask: “Then why ask *me* to do it?” and that the instinct behind their question may not be laziness but indeed a suspicion that there is something ruinous in this. (If I seem prolongedly mean about Perrine, one of my reasons for dwelling on him is precisely the reason why he can ignore and survive my gnatish attention: His book, I’m told, was assigned to more college literature students than any other text over the past fifty years.)

Many of the textbooks’ authors at last admit that the long fuse of theme-pursuit leads, in the end, to a dud.

We’ve noted Pickering conceding that “a work’s theme may be relatively commonplace.”

(Hall:) “Simple summaries of theme are not adequate to describe great short stories.”

(Kane:) “Theme-statement is inevitably an oversimplification.”

(Heffernan:) “Most attempts to expound *the* theme of a story will leave us with a sense of dissatisfaction and incompleteness. A good story resists a convenient summation. When ‘boiled down’ to simple statements, the themes of most stories will not seem profound.”

Even Perrine: “The bare statement of the theme, so lifeless and impoverished when abstracted from the story, may seem to diminish the story to something less than it is. This dry statement is a poor thing beside the living reality of the story.”

The student, baffled, discouraged, sensing himself being robbed of the enjoyment he used to get from books, and feeling he has drifted from a literature class into one of those disembodied philosophy classes his mother warned him against, growls as he packs his bag. “Then why make us hunt for theme at all?” He is now on the edge of articulating an astonishing problem that none of the nineteen texts faces up to:

Never, despite their brief, abortive invocation of ‘significance’, do they show any correlation whatever between the quality of theme and the quality of the story. Hall staggers into the subject and, with evident unwitting, comes out on the wrong side: “Theme requires our attention because it is a story’s reason for being. Not all stories have themes [e.g., Poe’s ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’].” (Wait! the student cries. That means . . . what does that mean? That Poe’s story had no reason for being? What’s ‘reason’ mean here? No motive for Poe’s writing it? or no justification for Hall’s tolerating its existence?) Don’t worry; Hall will clear things up: ‘Morgue’ has no theme because “it will not lead to an insight into human character.” (Wait! Is this a defining factor in ‘theme’? What constitutes such an ‘insight’?) “Generally, stories without themes are inferior art. They can be well-written and pleasing, but they lack seriousness.” (But

suppose the ‘insight’ is a banality?) Don’t worry; Hall continues to clear things up: “On the other hand, not all stories with themes are serious works of art. Many popular stories develop commonplace or trite themes.” Now the student says more than “Wait!” He yells to Hall, “Stop and turn around! You just gave the theme to Chekhov’s ‘Gooseberries’ as ‘People deceive themselves.’ This ‘insight’ is quintessentially trite. And yet Sean O’Faolain could say, ‘I think Chekhov’s “Gooseberries” is the best short story ever written.’ Something’s wrong here. The theme is the story’s reason for being, and yet there can be stories with no themes. ‘Theme’ requires ‘insight’. But the insight can be a stunning platitude! So what good is the insight, and therefore what good is *theme* if there is effectively no correlation between its merit and the merit of the story?”

But Hall has not stopped and turned around. He has wobbled blandly on: “When you read a propaganda story, be wary of approving the fiction just because you agree with the politics. Don’t swallow bad art for the sake of worthy ideas.” Which really tears it finally: You can evidently have a terrific, noble, original ‘theme’ and a story that’s bad art.

So if trite themes can beget great art, and great themes can beget trite art, and no theme at all can beget Poe, what the hell use is this vivisectioning hunt for theme?

(A corollary: There must be ten thousand stories that, to a professor, would yield the theme ‘People deceive themselves.’ Ninety-nine percent of those stories are justifiably forgotten. But if theme is the significance of the story, why aren’t all these stories equally significant? Because the professors are wrong in their teaching: The significance, the purpose, the meaning, the reason for being of a story does *not* lie in its ‘theme’ but in something else.)

The authors have yet another rearguard answer at the ready: In the pursuit of theme, it’s not the destination that counts, but the journey.

(Pickering:) “It forces us to bring together and to understand the various aspects of the work; in this process we may notice things we had previously ignored or undervalued. The identification of theme, then, is a way to validate our understanding, to focus our response.”

(Trimmer:) “Sends us back to the story itself to reexamine our thinking about its central idea.”

(Hall:) “Reassures us that we are all reading the same story.”

(Perrine:) “Reveals to us aspects of a story that we should otherwise not have noticed and will thereby lead to more thorough understanding. The ability to state theme, moreover, is a test of our understanding.”

Perrine is dead wrong again. If a student reads *Othello*, and Perrine asks him to state the theme, and the student gives Perrine’s answer, “Jealousy exacts a terrible cost,” that may prove to *Perrine* that the student ‘understands’ *Othello*, but it wouldn’t prove it to me.

The motivation of these authors, to get the student to pay close attention, to focus, is a good one. Their technique, a search for ‘theme’, is a bad one. Because it makes the student attend to the wrong thing, it focuses him in the wrong way.

Flannery O’Connor: “People talk about the theme of a story as if the theme were like a string that a sack of chicken feed is tied with. They think that if you can pick out the theme, the way you pick the right thread in the chicken-feed sack, you can rip the story open and feed the chickens. But this is not the way meaning works in fiction. . . . The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is.”

(Amazingly, Pickering quotes this with approval, then goes on to give five suggestions for identifying theme, “the abstract, generalized statement or comment that the work makes.” And this man is teaching our children how to read?)

O’Connor is saying categorically that her ‘meaning’ cannot be conveyed in any abstract statement. Her ‘central insight’, her ‘purpose’, the reason for her story’s being is *not* a generalized statement about life, and to lead students into looking for it that way is to *mislead* them. O’Connor does have a ‘central meaning’, and it’s something like this: What you get when you go after the piece of string is a piece of string, not my feed; if I wanted to convey a nonfiction generalized abstraction I could write my own essay.

Susan Sontag: “By reducing art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art This philistinism of interpretation is more rife in literature than in any other art Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art The function of criticism should [not be to] show *what it means*.”

The charge before the court has been that the way ‘theme’ is taught confuses, discourages, and alienates students; that it misleads them about what authors are trying to do, and about what is to be enjoyed and cherished in literature; and that it actively *reduces* the possibility of their focusing on what’s valuable in a literary work.

I hope the case has been made that the alert student, confronted with such lazy, irrational, and irrelevant nonsense as we’ve seen, has grounds for saying at last, “The hell with this,” and walking away. (An alarming corollary: The students who endure and even embrace this inanity, and who are thus allowed to go on through advanced degrees to become the next generation of professors and textbook writers, are likely to be precisely the *wrong* sort of teachers of literature in the future.)

And I think it's safe to say that the immense majority of published writers would join O'Connor in saying that the 'theme' tack won't even come close to causing students to put their focus where the writer would like them to.

We can paraphrase the expressed sentiments of certain other authors: "I wanted to convey what it was like to be in that jungle war, what it felt like to be under fire, and how it brought out different things in different men. My 'meaning' was not 'war is hell'; some men did not find it so, or not in the same way. It degraded some men, but I saw others sober up, actually take on a strength and decency. But my 'meaning' certainly wasn't that men differ, or that extreme pressure reveals the true man. I didn't write the book to convey a two-cent platitude like that. What I wanted was for the reader to *be there*, to experience. A novel shouldn't have to reduce to one general truth; most of the best books I've read seem to contain a thousand truths."

Grinding my own objective, I'd say that what guided a writer like this one was not a "unifying generalization about life", but a master-effect-wanted.

"I feel despair every time I think of some pundit saying that the theme of my book is that being widowed teaches such and such—the unfairness of life, the guilt the survivor feels, something like that. As I wrote the book I had no ulterior agenda; I was constantly seized only with the need to make the reader feel and understand what my so-called heroine was going through. That's why I chose the POV I did. It did involve guilt and rage, but it also involved lots of other things that I felt profoundly but for which I could never think of any words except the way I told the story in the book. If there was anything like a 'purpose' beyond that, it was to say to a lot of people out there, 'You are not alone.'"

Now hear a robust, literary athlete whose novels always feature a compelling story that thunders on like a boulder down a mountain, bowling irrelevancies out of the way; he's a

professional curmudgeon who jeers at theme (and would jeer at axiom if led to it): “Theme is spurious merchandise hawked by camp followers. I just tell my story; let the tweedy clerics in elbow patches invent its ‘meaning’. They have to do that because if a preacher’s got no enlightenment to sell he doesn’t get dinner.”

Of course, I would claim even this curmudgeon is guided by a master-prelibation that’s so strong he never has to put it into a mission-statement as a clarifier and reminder—though if I said so he’d just laugh genially and dump his whiskey in my lap. And I would further claim that a student of his work would profit from a detailed examination of just how he gets the effects he does. But I would *not* claim there was any adult benefit in trying to extract a generality that “leaves us with an attitude to take toward life in general.”

The remaining counts in the indictment—that the professors’ “theme” hunt misleads the student about, indeed positively shields him from, a good book’s best reward—is something that would be corroborated by many adults looking back on their school days. Picture the student, told that he must derive an abstract generality that “accounts for” and “explains” all the major details of a story. He figuratively dons his white clinician’s smock and knuckles down to his grim task. He lays the tale out on a slab and begins his joyless dissections—not in search of its beauty of feature, grace of movement, charm of voice, vitality of nature, but in search of its ‘idea’; in search not of its feeling but of its ‘statement’; not of what it does, but of what it ‘says’.

When he has finished his examination, he then must write up his report, a tricky business requiring that all the x ’s, y ’s, and z ’s be encompassed in the algebraic formula. In the end it no more conveys the meaning of what’s on the slab than the coroner’s report that starts, “A well-nourished Caucasian female of one hundred eighteen pounds, aged between twenty-five and thirty . . .”

But at last he's completed his assignments. It took concentration. He had to lay aside a lot of distracting flesh, but he's done it, he's found the theme and extracted it. He's written it up. I'm finished with this one, thank God, now I can go home.

Anecdote: Many years ago, when I was taking a writing class in college, an extraordinarily shy fellow student wrote a story in which the climactic moment had the heroine on a horse in dense woods. She bids the horse to jump a hurdle of obscuring brush and he will not do it. She is agitated, he is adamant, during a subtly D.H. Lawrenceian battle of wills. At last the woman gets off the horse and exasperatedly pokes through the brush—to discover a hundred-foot drop onto railroad tracks. I can only tell you that the story, which was admittedly lacking in adult polish, had an eerie, dark intimacy—as many of Lawrence's own stories do. But the instructor wanted something else. "What are you *saying*?" he badgered. "What is the story *saying*?" The wretched girl stood rigid at the front of the class, voiceless, violated, staring at her hands as the instructor reached the point of chuckling at her. "What are you *saying*? That animals are smarter than people?" And he laughed out loud. At last she raised her head and turned her eyes on him in one of the most final looks I've ever seen. "Yes," she said, and she walked out of the classroom and we never saw her again.

I've conceded that the goal of getting the reader to pay closer attention is a good one. The assumption of the professors is that, by compelling the student to crawl back over the narrative in the effort to ensure that all the 'major details' are 'accounted for' by the theme, one forces the student to focus on each scene, each character, every element in the book. But I've argued that, because during this crawl his focus is kept on the thin, flat, ideational plane, he's likely to miss the essential lovable things, like a chemist analyzing the molecular structure of different ice

creams. It calls to mind the old days when history teachers figured that they'd do the job by compelling students to memorize a thousand names and dates.

But at least the chemist and historian inculcate some facts that may ultimately have some narrow use. The English professor in the end abandons that claim. He knows that themes like 'People deceive themselves' and 'Jealousy exacts a terrible cost' are indefensibly meager payoffs.

Now, having dismissed theme as an end and also as a pedagogic means, it would seem meet for me to suggest an alternative technique. The technique should serve to get the student to pay the closer attention I approve of, but also to ensure that the focus is brought to bear where the true reward is.

The approach I'd recommend is based on two things. The first is the schema of art described in the essay, in which I say that the first stage is prelibation—an intuition of an effect-wanted—followed by imagination's conjuring of narrative to produce that effect, and then by sensibility's judgments on those conjurings. This maintains that the aim of the artist is to produce an effect on the reader's head, heart, or gut.

The second is my own experience that the most rewarding critics for me, over the years, have been those who often do no more than *point*. When Cowley says to me, just go back and read the list of people who attended Gatsby's party, just savor how Fitzgerald describes them, it'll be worth it—he does me a profound service. If a great appreciator like Cowley tells me it will be worth it, just for itself, and not because it's necessary as step #7 in the derivation of an abstract generality, the very freedom from ulterior function enhances vision. To see the true color of the painting, do not wear glasses tinted with other intent. Sontag was right.

But then I must back down a bit and concede this teaching can't be done solely with the index finger.

What I recommend, then, is *approaching the work of fiction with a program of questions devised to focus the reader on the effect achieved, and how the author achieved it.*

For example, each character has a certain impact on us, the readers. To clarify how that impact is achieved, certainly notice what he says and does, what we're told about him; even ask crafty questions: What does he want or promise? What does he do to get it? What result does he cause? Why do we like or dislike him?

Move on to circuitry: How does he braid or conflict with others in the cast?

Examine the jolt-producers, and how they plug into jolt-receptors.

Then, really to clarify the appreciation of effects on us, and how the author is causing them, the gifted instructor, as rare teachers through the ages have when they were not fouled in the lines of theme, might bid his most gifted students to ask: *How would the story and our response be different if such-and-such were different?*

The instructor might help students to imagine a character different, or missing entirely. What happens to the circuitry? Imagine what would be the story-effect of a new character: Hamlet's sister.

Examine each scene. First ask: Do we like it? Then ask: Why? The answer to this question always takes the form, ultimately, of simply pointing at things and taking a stand: I love this sentence; I love what she says, what he does; I think this description is great.

Sometimes crafty, gridlike questions about the scene help us push below the general pleasure to the specific credit in the narrative. How does the scene reveal or change character, circuitry, or situation? Are things different at the end of the scene from how they were at the

beginning? How much of the vital feeling stems from this advancement, from our observation that something is really *going on*, things are *happening*? Always the aim is to notice the effect on us, the readers, as we contemplate each element of the narrative, notice the gustant pleasures each gives, the salivancies generated and *how* they're generated. (How different would we feel if this tease, hint, threat, possibility were never introduced?)

This appreciation can be applied on a page-to-page level; at book's end, as we consider its total effect, the same questions, or some new questions of the same sort, arise. To raise your appreciation of the book *as is*, ask: How would we have felt about it if Fitzgerald had Daisy leave Tom and run off forever with Gatsby? Suppose we conjecture something about FSF's *master-prelibation*? If we try to articulate it, work up its verbal expression, the statement of the master-effect wanted, would it really differ from a professor's *theme*? Try it. It would.

The themes that academia has advanced for *The Great Gatsby* take forms like these: "You cannot recover the past." "The great American Dream has failed." "The pursuit of false gods leads to destruction."

Academia may publicly abjure 'morals', but (as the newly cynical student perceives) the majority of professors' themes *are* morals, albeit in the disguise of declarative generalities.

The statement of objective takes a form that may or may not include a reminder of what the author wants the reader to *see*, but it certainly includes what he wants the reader to *feel*. Fitzgerald wanted the reader to feel, among other things, the difference between the American aristocracy—that is, those raised on vintage, respectable money—and those who weren't, and the unbridgeable gap between the two. He wanted to convey the permanence of those two backgrounds, how Daisy's very voice had "the sound of money" in it. But it was more than that. Respectable money brought with it a callous regal presumption that the plebeians were there to

be utilities, you were polite to them, you treated them awfully well, of course, but we know what they *are* after all, don't we? You could seduce them, but love them? Feel them as equals? Well, the way you could love a good servant or a good horse, maybe. But sit down to dinner with a horse?

And FSF wanted the reader to feel that paradoxically seductive power as it cast its spell on the plebeian. Jay Gatsby, born James Gatz, is hypnotized by Daisy's aristocratic, golden-girl aura. How could that be, a hardheaded gangster like him, sappy-romantic about this feather-light girl? But it's precisely one of FSF's aims to convince you, to make you feel and believe in the spell. And to make you feel that a total marriage of true minds can never be, between those classes. Jay could never, in the end, get Daisy away.

I'm aware that all this, and more that FSF wanted to effect in his readers, can be reduced to declarative sentences about such things as the instinctive presumptions of the rich and the emotional thralldom of the unanointed. Fitzgerald would not say such sentences are all false, but he wouldn't say they are the "truth" he was after either. His aim was not to convey a cerebral generality; what he wanted to impart was how these things *felt*. The heart has its reasons, and they are not embodied in a sociologist's line.

And thus his objective would be shaped for, and aimed at, something deeper than the cortex.

The professors accept 'Jealousy exacts a terrible cost' as the theme of *Othello*. Would Shakespeare have accepted it as his objective in writing the play ?

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