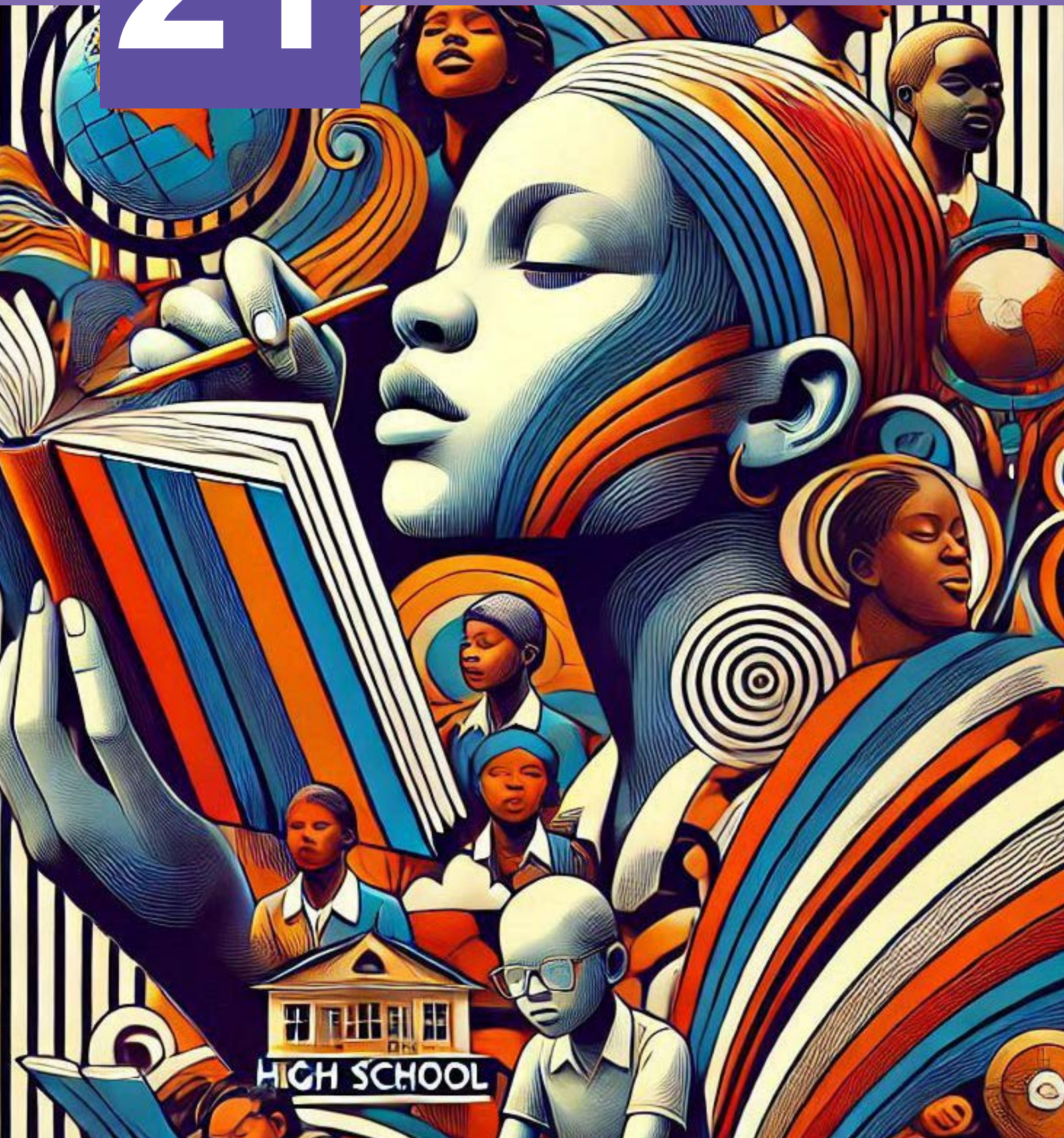


SECTION

21

THEMES



NARRATIVE, DRAMA, POETRY

INTRODUCTION

You were introduced to the genres or types of literature in our past lessons. You also learned in some of the past lessons that the genres of literature are the types of literary works that share specific and sensitive characteristics, themes and styles or structures. In this week's lesson, we are going to learn about themes.

Every genre of literature is characterised by elements such as themes, subject matter, settings and figures of speech. Our focus of study for this week is African Poetry and its themes.

By the end of this section, you will be able to

- Identify and discuss the dominant themes in two African poems and how the themes contribute to meaning.

Key Ideas

- *Genres of Literature:* Literature is divided into genres based on style, form and content. The main genres of literature are Drama, Prose and Poetry.
- *Poetry:* Poetry is the genre of literature that uses language in a creative and imaginative way to express thoughts, feelings and ideas. There could be stories or narrations hidden in the few lines that poems convey.
- *Themes:* In Poetry, themes can be seen or said to be the central ideas, messages, or underlying subjects that a poem explores. There are specific themes that are associated with African poems.

DOMINANT THEMES IN AFRICAN POEMS

Themes

The theme of a poem is the main idea or message the poet wants to share. It is the central idea in the poem. It helps readers think more deeply about the poem.

In African poetry, the themes often focus on important topics like colonialism (when countries were taken over by other countries), tradition, freedom, negritude, migration and exile, urbanisation, nature, religion, values, patriarchy, corruption, death and mourning, pride and nationalism, displacement, personal experiences and African unity.

Aside these, African poets also explore common human experiences like love, betrayal, death and corruption.

Some of the most common themes in African poetry are colonialism, tradition, unity, displacement, freedom and pride in one's country.

How to identify themes in a poem

The following steps will guide you to identify themes in poems with ease.

1. Read the poem carefully

Read the entire poem and pay attention to the overall feeling or message that the poem carries.

Example:

*"I hear the drum,
It calls my name,
The village dances,
I feel at home."*

Message: The above poem talks about drums, dancing and feeling at home.

2. Look for repeated ideas. A theme is a central or recurring idea in a text (poem). Once you find this repeated idea(s) or words, you are so close to identifying the theme of that poem or text.

Identification: Find out if certain words or ideas appear more than once. This often shows that the poet finds those words or ideas important.

Example: The words "drum", "village dances" and "home" stand out. The poet repeats the feelings of connection to the village.

3. Ask yourself what the poem is mostly about.

To do this, just summarise the poem or re-tell it in one or two sentences. Think about what the poet is trying to say.

Example: This poem is about the feeling of belongingness and the power of cultural traditions.

4. Connect the poem to bigger ideas.

Connect the poem's message to bigger ideas like love, freedom, nature or tradition. Since this is an African poem, connect the ideas to some of the common themes in African poems such as tradition.

Example: The bigger idea in this poem is tradition and cultural identity.

Note: If at this point, you have been able to identify the theme(s) in a poem, well done. If you have not been able to, do not worry, the remaining steps below will give you the help you need.

5. Check for emotions and imagery.

It is sometimes not easy to predict themes based on the four steps above. If that happens, you need to pay close attention to the emotions and imagery. Pay attention to how the poem makes you feel and what images or pictures it creates in your mind.

Example: The poem creates a happy, peaceful image of community life. This adds to the theme of belonging and culture.

6. Find the poet's message or moral lesson.

Ask yourself – what does the poet want the reader to learn or think about?

Example: The poet wants to show how traditions bring people together and give them a sense of home.

Final theme: The poem's main theme is tradition and belonging.

ACTIVITY 21.1

1. In groups of four, pick either of the poems below and identify the dominant themes using the steps above.
2. Paste the themes on the walls of your class for gallery walk. Read the responses from other groups and provide constructive feedback to them.

Once Upon a Time

Gabriel Imomotimi Okara

Once upon a time, son,
 they used to laugh with their hearts
 and laugh with their eyes:
 but now they only laugh with their teeth,
 while their ice-block-cold eyes
 search behind my shadow.
 There was a time indeed
 they used to shake hands with their hearts:
 but that's gone, son.
 Now they shake hands without hearts
 while their left hands search
 my empty pockets.
 'Feel at home!' 'Come again':
 they say, and when I come
 again and feel
 at home, once, twice,
 there will be no thrice-
 for then I find doors shut on me.
 So I have learned many things, son.
 I have learned to wear many faces
 like dresses – homeface,
 officeface, streetface, hostface,
 cocktailface, with all their conforming smiles
 like a fixed portrait smile.
 And I have learned too
 to laugh with only my teeth
 and shake hands without my heart.

I have also learned to say, 'Goodbye',
 when I mean 'Good-riddance':
 to say 'Glad to meet you',
 without being glad; and to say 'It's been
 nice talking to you', after being bored.
 But believe me, son.
 I want to be what I used to be
 when I was like you. I want
 to unlearn all these muting things.
 Most of all, I want to relearn
 how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror
 shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs!
 So show me, son,
 how to laugh; show me how
 I used to laugh and smile
 once upon a time when I was like you.

MAKOLA

Theresa Ennin

Head bent, rags all around the upside-down pan
 Picking her nose, shuffling her feet, oblivious to the bustle and the calls of the
 driver's mates.
 This morning, she quarrelled with the husband
 Why wouldn't he understand that her work is very tedious and involving?
 Why must it all be on his terms, at his convenience?
 "Move out of the way, move out, I say" shouts the cart pusher
 None cares about his agitation.
 The sweat runs down his face, tiny rivulets of disappointment and fear
 They snake down and glide effortlessly into his dirty t-shirt
 His tongue peeps out and licks the beads of sweat on his lip.
 That young girl with the thin arms balances a bowl of sachet water on her
 head
 The runny-nose baby at her back is supported with a faded ATL cloth.
 He holds in his hands a battered teddy with an eye missing.
 The baby whimpers, she tries to soothe him by patting his leg.

He refuses to be soothed and gives out a loud yell.

“Put him to the breast”, one woman counsels.

“I can’t”, she says, “I have no breast milk.”

3. In your groups, read the poem below written by an African Poet titled, ‘The Master Brewer’. After reading, identify the themes following the steps above.

The Master Brewer

By Prof. Lade Worsonu.

There is distillery in our brains,

Its cane and malt, its hops and grains

Are the stuff our lives are made of.

Blizzard and snow, bush fires or drought

Matches won by penalty shoot-out

Fortunes lost at toss of a coin

Over these and their likes, you are no doyen.

The fuel for this distillery?

Your emotions. Willy-nilly

You stoke the fires as you vent your spleen.

And another dram drip into the vat-unseen

The master brewer is not the stars

Not yet the gods. He is you, your very self.

The final brew has no choice. It must be

Bitter bile or sweet honey. But you can choose

The magic potion, which can vouchsafe the taste:

Your intentions, your memories and your reactions.

4. Listen to the version on YouTube: [The master brewer by Lade Worsonu poem](#) Confirm your responses after watching the video.
5. Still in your groups, write down how the dominant themes you identified in the poem contribute to the meaning of the poem.
Ensure that each member contributes to the discussion. Respect everyone’s views.
6. Make a PowerPoint presentation based on your responses to the whole class for feedback.

Review Questions

1. List the steps in identifying themes in your own words.
2. Identify two themes from the poem 'The Master Brewer' and give a step-by-step guide on how you identified the themes you have mentioned.
3. How do the themes you identified contribute to the meaning of the poem.
4. Choose a simple African poem that has not been discussed in class and identify the themes in the poem using the steps you have been given and write how you were able to identify the themes in your choice of poem.

Answers to Review Questions

1.

- a. Read the poem carefully
- b. Look for repeated ideas
- c. Ask yourself what the poem is mostly about.
- d. Connect the poem to bigger ideas.
- e. Check for emotions and imagery.
- f. Find the poet's message or moral lesson

Note: If a student lists only four out of six steps, award full marks to them.

2. Tradition and Cultural Pride Change and Modernisation

How I identified the two themes above

- a. Reading the Poem Carefully – I started by reading the entire poem to understand what it was about. I noticed the poet described the process of brewing palm wine in detail. The focus on the brewer's skills and the importance of his role stood out to me. This made me think the poem was celebrating tradition and cultural pride.
- b. Noticing Repeated Ideas – I saw that the poem kept returning to the idea of how the brewer follows old, traditional methods. The repeated mention of the brewing process and the respect given to the master brewer made it clear that tradition was important.
- c. Spotting Hints of what the poem is about – As I continued reading, I noticed subtle references to how modern methods or influences might affect the brewing process. This made me think about change and modernisation as another theme. I felt the poet was trying to show how things are shifting, and there might be a loss of traditional skills.
- d. Connecting the poem to the bigger picture – After reading the whole poem, I thought about how the brewing process could represent African traditions in general. I realised the poem wasn't just about making palm wine – it was also about preserving culture in the face of modern changes. This helped me connect the themes to larger ideas. I then ended up with the themes tradition and cultural pride and change and modernisation.

3. Tradition and Cultural Pride – This theme highlights the value of traditional skills and knowledge. By focusing on the master brewer's craft, the poem shows how cultural practices are a source of identity and pride. The detailed descriptions of the brewing process celebrate the richness of African traditions, making readers appreciate the importance of preserving cultural heritage.

Change and Modernisation – The theme of change adds depth to the poem by showing how traditional practices are slowly being replaced or threatened by modern

influences. This creates a sense of tension, suggesting that while progress is inevitable, it can lead to the loss of valuable customs and skills.

4. The choice of poem should be at the learner's discretion. Teacher can suggest sample poems for learners' use if need be. The learner is expected to give responses like they did in question 2 (above).

Extended Reading

- *Understanding the Subject of a Poem* by The Poetry Center and John Timpane.
- *Poetry for Dummies* Cheat Sheet
- *Snuggling up to the Language of Poetry*

References

- Pooja, T. U. (2018, September 1). Poem & analysis of "Once Upon A Time" by Gabriel Okara. Sahyadri English Literature. <https://sahyadriliterature.blogspot.com/2018/09/poem-analysis-of-once-upon-time-by.html>

Acknowledgements



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