

The Role of Themes in Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and John Cheever's "The Swimmer"

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Abstract

This study briefly examines the importance of interpreting themes in literature. The discussion of themes will be limited to Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and John Cheever's "The Swimmer." On the one hand, the study focuses on the themes of redemption, sin, and sense of responsibility in Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp." On the other hand it focuses on the themes of passage of time, social class, and delusion in John Cheever's "The Swimmer." In the first place, the study will introduce the significance of interpreting literary themes and how they are connected with the authorial fictional or non-fictional styles. The significance of interpreting of literary themes, consequently, unravels the necessity of exploring the text's implied meanings and ideas which reflect the authors' obsession with depicting reality as it is via precise narrative descriptions. The study's methodology will be a textual-contextual analysis of the selected work's themes to provide the reader's with obtrusive example of how themes play a crucial role in identifying the critical nature of literature as a whole.

Key words: Delusion; Passage of time; Redemption; Sense of responsibility; Sin; Social class; Theme

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1. INTRODUCTION

The study of literary themes is highly significant for discerning the implied meaning fictional and non-fictional texts. Themes are key factors to explore the embedded authorial tone which has an effect upon the reader's perception of the text within the wide scope of literature as a human product. They designate one crucial aspect of literary texts since they are appropriated within the limits of society and culture dominating its narrative or descriptive atmosphere. The interpretation of literature in the light of its thematic is a bit traditional and scholars tend to look into the authorial clues projected by the authors in the bulk of the work. At this point, literary text is a subject to continual analytic thematic concerns with regard to its meticulous details because theme is "what the author wants you to remember most about the story. Some themes can be expressed in only one or two words. Below you will find a list of several common *literary themes*" (Rollins, 2013, p.11). As such, the study of the precise fictional descriptions which render the literary text distinctive artistic style devised by extraordinary writing dexterity. In this sense, themes; though commonly taken for granted in approaching any literary work, play a decisive role in unravelling the latent meaning of the entire text through which "the authors assess the need for new thematics, relate thematics to structural analysis and interpretation" (Bremond et al., 1995, p.184).

Such interpretation results in genuine appreciation of literary nuances needed to reinforce the reader's understanding of the text. Literary themes have many benefits for the latent meaning of the text since "the great works of *literature* used throughout this series have important *themes* that have been relevant to people for many years" (Smith, 2014, p.4). Themes are various; and they offer readers with profound insights about the core conceptual meaning of the whole literary work. They entail critical implications about the nexus of the work due to its incorporation of both the authorial stylistic

writing and the way it is conveyed to the reader; and the: "selections of *literary themes*, fictional characters and a good mastery of the narrative technique, the writers have created works having social problems as fields of creative investigation" (Ojo et al., 2000, p.212). One of the most important benefits of literary themes relates to the literary subject matters. That is, themes encompass motifs, subjects, and the main idea of the plot; whereby the author employs detailed descriptions through pithy thematic features in order to offer a vivid picture of how the written work could respond to a certain reality outside the text. Furthermore, literary themes could be archetypal characteristics. To elaborate, there are many themes which could be interpreted or grasped differently by readers because they hold universal meaning which appeals to all cultures around the world.

Themes, in this regard, might spread to include all cultures and all nations. Strikingly, such cultures and nations are united by literary themes. Consequently, the text becomes a connective channel among cultures and nations that communicate with each other on the ground of mutual understanding because "the *theme* is simply its underlying idea, which is never protected. Only the original way an author expresses dently created" (Fishman, 2020, p.261). The discussion of literary works from a thematic perspective, therefore, comprises the explicit and implicit notions through which the readers might find unprecedented ideas related to their culture or society. As a result, the text becomes more innovative, especially when it provides the readers with prolific ideas about their contemporary critical issues. The purpose of this study is to discuss the thematic peculiarities in Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and John Cheever's "The Swimmer."

2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Redemption, Sin, and Sense of Responsibility in Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp"

Bret Harte's classic story "The Luck of Roaring Camp" abounds with literary themes and notions which render it distinctive style among finest American fictional writings. Being a supreme example of Local Colorists movement in the story. It provides us with various aspects of life regarding the regional attributes of Western terrains as well as their geographical features. As a rule of thumb, Local Colorist emphasizes every detail in the places being depicted in the spatial setting of narrative works. The story has many regional description of the meticulous attributes of Western life and its related customs and traditions. This is due to the precise narrative details of the fictional scenes interpolated in the main course of the plot. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to examine the local color characteristics of the plot by discussing three interrelated themes, namely, redemption, sin, and sense of responsibility.

The first theme is redemption which precisely relates to the contextual elements of the story. The theme of redemption incarnates the characters' quest for perfection and self-autonomy regardless the obstacles of life. The story's main character exemplifies this notion within the scope of religious context. To clarify, the protagonist, baby Luck, embodies the theme of redemption since the word "redemption" does not have religious insights; it is the first word spoken by the baby shortly after his birth. As such. He exemplifies the theme of redemption because his camp is ravaged by criminals who kill his compatriots. For example, he revolts against the criminals and saves his people from annihilation; and, in this sense, he redeems the negative attacks of criminals. This is true to the reckless disrespect of Roaring Camp: "a day was accordingly set apart for the christening. What was meant by this ceremony the reader may imagine, who has already gathered some idea of the reckless irreverence of Roaring Camp" (p.10). In this sense, the protagonist is an optimal example of how the theme of redemption saves people from being neglected or exterminated.

Sin, which is the second central theme, refers to the characters' flagrant immorality. In other words, some characters commit nasty sins e.g., murder, gambling, and oppressive patriarchy which incur the curse of God upon sinners. These notions embody the authentic sense of the theme of sin. The traditional social and religious implication of the theme of sin are strongly associated with the persons who commit them. By time, they become victims of these sins as they feel repentant, especially when they feel that there is no possible path for salvation. As a response, they develop a feeling of despondence which deprives them of being psychologically stable. In other words, they are often tormented by their self-flagellation. They continually feel that they are haunted by their nasty sins even when they stop them. However, the story focuses on the theme of sin by means of the continual committing of sins without regard to qualm or conscience. In the course of the plot, Harte uses the character of Cherokee Sal as an oppressed woman. The story begins with describing the Roaring Camp's immoral vices, like gambling. People of Roaring Camp are overwhelmed in their unethical vices. They negatively talk about Cherokee Sal as a bad woman though she committed few sins:

There was commotion in Roaring Camp. It could not have been a fight, for in 1850 that was not novel enough to have called together the entire settlement. The ditches and claims were not only deserted, but "Tuttle's grocery" had contributed its gamblers, who, it will be remembered, calmly continued their game the day that French Pete and Kanaka Joe shot each other to death over the bar in the front room. The whole camp was collected before a rude cabin on the outer edge of the clearing. Conversation was carried on in a low tone, but the name of a woman was frequently repeated. It was a name familiar enough in the camp,—"Cherokee Sal." (p.1)

Ironically, people of Roaring Camp forget their vice and flagrant immorality, yet, they do remember and focus on Cherokee Sal's sins. As such, the story blatantly addresses the theme of sin in explicit way to reveal the social defects addressed by Local Colorists, including Hare. Cherokee Sal, therefore, is described as "a very sinful woman" (p.1). In contrast, people, do not reckon their sins or their violation of ethical principles, which leads her to consider the whole Roaring Camp as shameful and sinful: "Cherokee Sal was sinking fast. Within an hour she had climbed, as it were, that rugged road that led to the stars, and so passed out of Roaring Camp, its sin and shame forever" (p.7). The oppressive patriarchy, furthermore, is an indication of the theme of sin. People in Roaring Camp desert Cherokee Sal. They ostracize her though she is the only woman in the camp. As a result, she suffers from this treatment because she is abandoned by her society: "she was the only woman in Roaring Camp, and was just then lying in sore extremity, ... Dissolute, abandoned, and irreclaimable, she was yet suffering a martyrdom hard enough to bear even when veiled by sympathizing womanhood, but now terrible in her loneliness" (p.1).

The sense of responsibility is the third theme tacked in the story. Responsibility refers to the characters' sense of belonging to their society and family affairs. They feel that they are obliged to do their social and family duties with care. Luck is an example of this responsibility when he truly begins taking care of his people when his mother dies. He believes that he is responsible for providing his people with perfect, luxurious, and safe life: "and so the work of regeneration began in Roaring Camp. Almost imperceptibly a change came over the settlement. The cabin assigned to 'Tommy Luck'—or 'The Luck,' as he was more frequently called—first showed signs of improvement. It was kept scrupulously clean and white-washed. Then it was boarded, clothed, and papered" (p.11). In this case, Luck incarnates the authentic meaning of responsibility. This is because he enhances his people's sense of responsibility to come into terms with each other on the grounds of mutual care and respect. In doing so, he attempts to eradicate all forms of rife bad habits dominating the Roaring Camp which suffers from negative social norms. The theme of the sense of responsibility is sorely significant to grasp the implied meaning of life in the contemporary social context.

To recapitulate, this section examined the local color characteristics of the plot by discussing three interrelated themes, namely, redemption, sin, and sense of responsibility. It looked into these themes from a fictional perspective; whereby Harte provides us with a vivid picture of how Western life which has abundant complex human relations. Therefore, I think that the story is a fine example redemption, sin, and sense of responsibility that had been common at that time, yet, the story does

not highlight them in terms of ethics. It approaches them through social and regional perspectives. These themes are distinctive and they represent the spirit of the age in which the story is written due to the fact that literary themes "reflect the essence of literature" (Abu Jweid, 2022, p.22). They also embody the narrative nature of Harte's fictional style. The story is, consequently, abundant with thematic insights which are necessary to uncover the authorial concern with the social ties governing the relationship among of the time. The plot depicts the intricate social connections among the American people in the West and how they could be united through the sense of responsibility. It holds an implicit voice uttered by the narrators to lead the reader to the complex notions of social and culture in Western life.

2.2 Passage of Time, Social Class, and Delusion in John Cheever's "The Swimmer"

Literary realism refers to the precise depiction of real events of any experience in literary works. Authors try their hands to delve deep into the genuine impetus of writing their works in the light of life surrounding them; and literary theme "is the authorial reflection in the plot" (Abu Jweid, 2021, p.28). Therefore, they portray this experience or real life in the narrative fabric of the story's plot. The fictional characters, moreover, exemplify reality and its complex matters in the text. The study of reality depends on the thematic attributes of literary works by dint of exploring the authorial laconic comments on life through the characters' dispositions "to synthesize new literary modes capable of coping with the reviving narrative fiction" (Abu Jweid, 2023, p.21). Themes, in this respect, are associated with reality in order to provide the reader with necessary impression about people and their needs. They represent an optimal clue of the complex relationship among people in reality which is explicated differently in the narrative plot. The interpretation of reality draws its significance from the fact that authors have their own literary insights and how they project them in the bulk of their thematic styles. As a result, themes could be various and multifarious depending on the authors' concern with reality and its intricate matters as well. Consequently, the current section focuses on the themes of passage of time, social class, and delusion in John Cheever's "The Swimmer."

First, the theme of passage of time represents the inevitable and decisive time progression; whereby the characters do not truly feel the lapse of time in life. Cheever perceives the theme of passage of time in the life of the successive times spans which the character do not really feel. Time is depicted as quick and fast; and the characters do not have any ability to control it. This is due to their oblivious view of life when they undergo different experience or events. Cheever tackles the theme of passage of time through different characters at the onset of the story when there are a number of characters, like the

parishioners and the priest, who do not feel the passage of time:

It was one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying, "I drank too much last night." You might have heard it whispered by the parishioners leaving church, heard it from the lips of the priest himself, struggling with his cassock in the vestiarium, heard it from the golf links and the tennis courts, heard it from the wildlife preserve where the leader of the Audubon group was suffering from a terrible hangover. (p.726)

The passage of time is strongly associated with the narrative descriptions of the characters' feelings and life. In essence, this is a realistic phenomenon due to the fact that people really feel the quick span of time as they undergo personal experience. They are continuously overwhelmed by their surrounding social milieu which casts on them a true feeling of passage of time. Second, social class is one integral theme of the story; and it stands for the neglected middle class. The story approaches the lives of the middle class people in terms of the protagonist, Neddy Merrill, who is from Westchester; a place in New York where Bullet Park and Shady Hill are the narrative sites described in the plot. The plot, here, concentrates on how people from a middle social class treat each other on the grounds of civil affairs, like neighborhood which is overwhelmed by optimism; the quotation below abounds with the fictional descriptions of the middle social class appropriated with the story's plot:

This was at the edge of the Westerhazys' pool. The pool, fed by an artesian well with a high iron content, was a pale shade of green. It was a fine day. In the west there was a massive stand of cumulus cloud so like a city seen from a distance—from the bow of an approaching ship—that it might have had a name. Lisbon. Hackensack. The sun was hot. Neddy Merrill sat by the green water, one hand in it, one around a glass of gin. He was a slender man—he seemed to have the especial slenderness of youth—and while he was far from young he had slid down his banister that morning and given the bronze backside of Aphrodite on the hall table a smack, as he jogged toward the smell of coffee in his dining room. (p.726)

Neddy Merrill, therefore, exemplifies the social middle class in Westchester. The theme of the social middle class is conveyed by means of the regional characteristics of Westchester which embodies the John Cheever's interest in the reflecting an ideal picture of the American middle social class. Third, Cheever tackles the theme of delusion through depicting Neddy and his wife, Lucinda, as a happy couple leading familial perfection and stability. They interact with their neighbors in an optimistic and great way. Yet, they are deceived by this optimism when the neighbors get socially disintegrated by time, let alone their pain and suffering from their personal problems. In the quotation below, Neddy Merrill attempts to find meaning in life by discovering geographical places and naming them after his wife's name: "He had made a discovery, a contribution to modern geography; he would name the stream Lucinda after his wife. He was not a practical joker nor was he a fool but he was determinedly

original and had a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure" (p.727).

Neddy Merrill's quest for discovering new geographical places incarnates his obsession with finding happiness and meaning in life since he is affected by the sense of delusion. As argued earlier, the story offers profound thematic comment on the American middle class. By the same token, the story has a narrative commentary on the theme of delusion because the characters are still affected by the negative conditions common in the social middle class. In doing so, Cheever uses the characters as literary elements suitable for exploring the motivation his happiness. He is persistently influenced by the persona; problems in his society, but he does not control them because such society slides into disintegration. That is, there is no proper or serious steps to be taken against the deteriorating social affairs, including the relationships among the characters. The story's fictional society suffers from retardation because society does not have any connection with the path to happiness; and Cheever ascribes these social conditions to the theme of delusion. Strikingly, Neddy Merrill could find happiness through being alone without any access to other people; which exemplifies his predilection to find happiness in everything around him: "He felt tired, clean, and pleased at that moment to be alone; pleased with everything" (p.729). As such, the story reflects Cheever's projection of the theme of delusion via the personality of Neddy Merrill who seems to be a victim of social and family disintegration dominating his society.

To recap, this section discussed the themes of passage of time, social class, and delusion in John Cheever's "The Swimmer." The story perceives these themes from a realistic perspective since they authentically exemplify the radical transformation of the American society. In addition, the discussion reveals how the American Middle Class has intricate social affairs that make people disintegrated after they used to be close and united. For this reason, we believe that Cheever succeeded in describing the social change of the American Middle Class's people and how they could not easily cope with the new changes. However, he does not give them sufficient and powerful voice to express these problems in the plot as they still live on the verge of social retardation.

In this way, the story lacks the diversity of characters to some extent, which would embody the themes of passage of time, social class, and delusion. Hence, the diversity of the characters would properly convey these themes to the readers in a complex way. The themes of passage of time, social class, and delusion, therefore, might be further elaborated from a psychological perspective by relying on the most critical social experiences or events that leave their apparent impact upon the characters in particular, and the society in general. The critical discussion of these theme would be reinforced by looking into more

character if they are involved in the plot's sequence of events. Cheever's narrative style, accordingly, might explore various themes related to society or the American interpersonal affairs.

3. CONCLUSION

This study tackled the thematic attributes of Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and John Cheever's "The Swimmer." The study of the thematic aspects in these stories might provide a number of recommendations for further studies. Here, we tend to recapitulate these recommendations in two major contributions. First, the study literary themes would lead to the exploration of the author's implied voice in the text. The author may not enter the narrative world of his or her story. Instead, he or she might intersect with the narrative text via the text's inclusion of the authorial voice that reflects the author's intention which could not be explicitly expressed in the whole plot. In this case, the study of literary themes would be highly beneficial to the understanding of the text's central idea in a detailed and precise way. The significance of the study, here, unravels the authorial uses of creative way of writing which sustains the readers' ability to overcome any vague or difficult message projected in the plot. Consequently, themes might be critically appreciated by readers on the grounds of the author's implicit ideas expressed through the literary text. The first contributions of the study, therefore, involves the role of the author in creating the text and its related elements. Such elements might be detailed or concise depending of the authorial tendency to convey his or her intention or ideals in certain ways which are suitable for the readers and their critical appreciation.

Second, literary themes are elaborated and explicated by creative avant-garde style. At this point, the text's technical experimentation is empowered by the use of diversity of themes. Themes allow writers and reader to delve deep into the fictional and non-fictional works which could be interpreted differently. In this respect, the text's avant-garde style is the critical tool harnessed in the reading process through which new meanings come to the surface of the work. For example, in post-modernism, and even before the advent of post-modernism, literary avant-gardism played a crucial role in laying the significant premise for discerning the implied message of the text. As

in many cases, meaning is the ultimate destination sought by readers to come into terms with the text's optimal ideal expressed in themes. The expression of definitive ideas in the form of thematic has its own benefits concerning the possibility of writing a work in an experimental styles. Hence, literary experimentation becomes a great feature of new themes which could be provided to understand the contemporary states of affairs taking place outside the demarcation of the literary text. The second contribution of the study, therefore, relates to the literary avant-gardism i.e., the use of literary experimentation is augmented by employment of unprecedented themes that cope with the text's contemporary socio-cultural issues projected in fictional and non-fictional contexts.

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