

IRWIN SHAW

"John, what's the theme of this story?"

"What's the main point the author is trying to establish, Peter?"

"Is there a moral to this poem, Kelly?"

"Betty, what is the central idea of this novel?"

You have heard these words—theme, main point, moral, central idea—many times. As high school students, you may have grown used to hunting for "hidden meanings." As a youngster, you could enjoy a book because of its characters and its plot, but now you must be able to explain the message to prove you "understand" the story.

Question: Why do so many high school students buy Study Guides?

Answer: Because Study Guides explain the theme. A Study Guide is like an answer book.

Many educators and writers criticize "theme hunting" not only because it encourages Study Guides but also because it can kill the enjoyment of literature. Says well-known teacher of English, Dr. Michael C. Flanigan of the Univer-

sity of Oklahoma, "Too many students leave high school believing that serious reading is nothing more or nothing less than 'finding the message.'"

But although certain approaches to literature may exaggerate the importance of theme, that does not mean that many stories do not have themes. We can look back over a story or a novel or a poem and make a general statement about what it proves. When we do that, we have discovered the theme.

Therefore, as young writers, you need to be aware of the problem theme can cause. Consider this possibility: You have just come up with an exciting idea for a short story. This story has a clever plot, distinctive characters, a unique setting, humor, and pathos. But the story, as you see it, also proves a point about life. You want your readers to say, "What a great story!" "What marvelous characters!" "What a perfect setting!" But you also want them to say, "That story made me think a little!"

Now, here is your problem: On one hand, you need to make sure your readers *get* the idea, but

and the SUBTLE MESSAGE

by Robert Boone

on the other hand, you do not want them to get it too easily. You don't want to be too vague or too obvious.

Is There Life After College Athletics?

One way to develop a sense for solving this problem is to read writers like Irwin Shaw, whose stories usually carry profound messages, yet messages that have been woven carefully, *unobtrusively* into the fabric of the story.

And with Shaw, a good place to start is "The Eighty-Yard Run," a short story about a college athlete who never grows up. When he is in his early twenties, Eric Darling runs for eighty yards at a football practice. From that time on, his life is all downhill. The story follows his decline from that brilliant moment until fifteen years later when he finally sees that his profession and his marriage have been lost because he never lived beyond his one great moment.

Plot: Let's Get Philosophical

Shaw handles the plot in such a way that the reader discovers that "The Eighty-Yard Run" is more than a simple action story. The conflict deals with ideas: Will Darling grow up or will he stay forever young and ignorant? The story begins with Darling and his wife-to-be agreeing that he is the greatest thing on earth. He is the campus hero whom she worships.

Tension grows after the couple marries and moves to New York where she begins to acquire big-city sophistication, while he still lingers doggedly in his glorious jock past. She moves completely into the cultural scene and Darling, without a job, takes up drinking seriously. ("I have nothing else to do.") In other words, we don't follow the story for its physical action; we follow it for its philosophy.

But Shaw needs to make his plot interesting, too. If this story does nothing more than follow a philosophical argument, it will be nothing more than a long fable—a real yawner. So, he must add details and surprises to keep us reading. Even though we suspect the story will end badly for



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Darling, we want to know exactly how it will end. Will he be destroyed by drinking? Will Louise have an affair? Will the conflict become violent? Will he commit suicide? Or will he finally grow up?

Characters: Ideas Embodied

Because the two main characters, to a degree, represent ideas, Shaw is able to use them to transmit his theme. Darling represents the stunted athlete who never grows up, while his wife symbolizes the maturing woman. As with the plot, what Shaw shows us about these characters relates *only* to these attitudes. They are always in character. We see Darling score the touchdown, savor that moment, cuddle his girl, accept her praise, grow edgy over her blossoming sophistication, and drink and drink and drink. We see Louise first worship her man and later



take on the qualities of the self-sufficient, developing woman.

But although the characters are predictable, they are not boring because Shaw reveals them in subtle ways. Early in the story, for example, Shaw emphasizes Darling's alertness to his surroundings. After his touchdown, he notices "how fresh and whole and solid his body felt." He sees the "sharp, clean white of the tape against the ruddiness of his skin, fresh from the shower." Walking home, he feels the "gravel crunch satisfactorily under his shoes in the still twilight, feel-

ing his clothes swing lightly against his skin, breathing the thin evening air. . . ." Shaw never says, "Look how alive this young man is!" He shows us instead.

And he also shows us how, at thirty-five, Darling has become "foggy" and "hazy." Confusion has brought him to booze, and booze has made him confused. When his wife shows him a piece of modern art, he sits on the couch "squinting."

It takes awhile, but Louise finally must admit to herself how insensitive her husband has become. One night at a party a friend suggests that they all go to 14th Street to see a play. Darling does not want to go. "It's too gloomy." For years Louise has humored or ignored his ignorant, childish responses. But not this time.

"Oh, hell!" Louise said loudly. She looked coolly at Darling, as though she'd just been introduced to him and was making up her mind about him, and not very favorably.

Once again, Shaw could have entered the story to tell us to notice that Darling's wife has at last faced up to her husband's *obtusiveness*. But why bother? He has made the point well without being too obvious.

Again, through subtle characterization, he further shows their decaying relationship. Midway through the story, Darling asks Louise not to call him "Baby."

Toward the end of the story, when he finally takes a mediocre job, they have this exchange:

"I can make fifty, sixty dollars a week," Darling said to Louise that night . . .

"Yes, Baby."

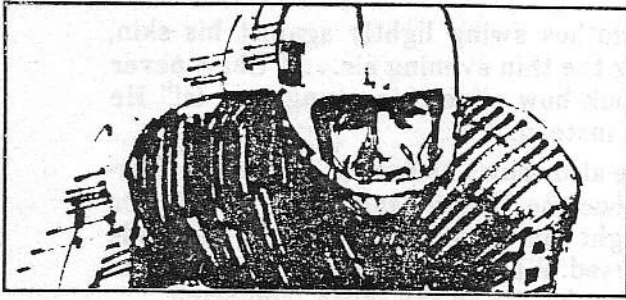
"As it is," Darling said carefully, "I can make it back here once a month and holidays and the summer. We can see each other often."

"Yes, Baby."

For her, Darling will always be a baby. And he is, isn't he?

The Conclusion: Truth or Consequences

At the end, Shaw makes sure we get the point when Darling, standing by the field where he



once ran for eighty yards in practice, suddenly sees himself for what he is.

Darling half-closed his eyes, almost saw the boy fifteen years ago reach for the pass, slip the halfback, go skittering lightly down the field, his knees high and fast and graceful, smiling to himself because he knew he was going to get past the safety man. That was the high point, Darling thought, fifteen years ago, on an autumn afternoon, twenty years old and far from death, with the air coming easily into his lungs, and a deep feeling inside him that he could do anything, knock over anybody, outrun whatever had to be outrun. And the shower after and the three glasses of water and the cool night air on his damp head and Louise sitting hatless in the open car with a smile and the first kiss she ever really meant. The high point, an eighty-yard run in the practice, and a girl's kiss and everything after that a decline.

Is this too obvious? Did Shaw need to make the revelation so clearly? Perhaps not, but it works effectively. For one thing, Darling, not Shaw, is expressing these thoughts. For another, Darling follows this revelation with a surprising action. We wonder: "What is he going to do now that he finally sees what a fool he has been?" Will he run back to Louise? Will he go back to school? Will he hire a shrink? Join a church? Buy a rope? All of these reactions seem possible—some would even be logical. After all, he has come to a decision, and now he must act. But, instead of acting logically, here is what he does:

Darling stood up, smiled a little, because if he didn't smile he knew the tears would come. He looked around him. This was the spot. O'Connor's pass had come sliding out just to here... the high point. Darling put up his hands, felt all over again the flat slap of the ball. He shook his hips to throw off the halfback, cut back inside the center, picked his knees high

as he ran gracefully over two men jumbled on the ground at the line of scrimmage, ran easily, gaining speed, for ten yards, holding the ball lightly in his two hands, swung away from the halfback diving at him, ran, swinging his hips in the almost girlish manner of a back in a broken field, tore into the safety man, his shoes drumming heavily on the turf, stiff-armed, elbow locked, pivoted, raced lightly and exultantly for the goal line.

He will never change.

Shaw is able to communicate his theme because his theme is worth communicating. The idea—that we must keep maturing or face the consequences—is not new, but it is valid and he has found a valid way to tell it.

Throughout this year, articles in this magazine have told you, the young writer, to "*show, don't tell.*" Let the characters and action speak for themselves. Don't insult your readers. Follow Shaw's lead, for, if you'll forgive the ungrammatical pun, Shaw don't tell. !

Write Now . . .

● You may have heard a story referred to as having "more than one level of meaning." Perhaps you have thought—as we all have at one time or another—that one level sheltered some hidden truth, to which only an intellectual of the third degree could be privy. But this simple phrase refers only to the difference in ways to interpret a story. A story may, for example, be told by following the *plot*—the line of action or the "then-what-happened"? Or the story may be interpreted by its *theme*—the message of human experience or meaning of life that the author wants to convey. A simple way to see the difference between plot and theme is to consider certain "children's" stories. Describe plot and theme for a favorite story from your childhood—or for one of the following:

- What is the plot of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*? What is the theme?
- What is the plot of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. What is the theme?
- What is the plot of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*? What is the theme?