2. Suppose that the whole of "The Man Who Would Be King" were narrated by the newspaperman, with only his paraphrases and summaries of Peachey's account of what happened to him and Dravot. How would the story be different?

3. What would be lost if "The Drunkard" were set in the third person?

4. Could Annie, in "Tickets, Please," have told her own story? As Lawrence, the author, tells it, does Annie really grasp the full meaning of her own story? Should she?

We have seen how closely the development or revelation of character is related to the matter of point of view. It is related with equal intimacy to the matter of *style* (see Glossary). When a story is told in the first person, this relationship is most obvious: a man's language is the man. (Peachey is not the narrator of "The District Doctor," but try to imagine how different it would be if he were—how much the dialogue would change in his language; how little, even, he could understand of such a story.) Similarly, there are intimate relations between style and character in stories told in the third person. We have already remarked what we regard as defects of style in "The Furnished Room" and "Tennessee's Partner": inflation and poeticism that do not match the material, that are inappropriate to the context of the stories. But consider, in contrast, the appropriateness of style of "Araby," for instance. It is the style that at once informs the sensitive reader that though the story is one of painful adolescent love, it was not written or spoken by any adolescent boy. Rather it presents that painful experience as recollected, assimilated, judged, and set in true perspective by a man grown to maturity.

This is not the place to analyze a number of stylistic questions, but it is the place to insist on the fact that the style of the story that a character inhabits does have an essential relation to him, and to the attitude of author and reader toward him. In one sense, the style of the story is his world—and himself.

4

What Theme Reveals

In discussing the stories we have read thus far we have continually referred to the theme, the idea, the meaning. We cannot very long consider the actions or characters of a story without coming to some concern with theme of a story, for insofar as it is a good story, it is, as we have insisted, an organic unity in which all the vital elements have interrelations. Each element implies all the other elements, and implies them in motion toward a significant end.

Now, as we turn to a more systematic treatment of theme in fiction, let us review some of our notions. For one thing, the theme of a piece of fiction is not to be thought of as merely the topic of the story—though the word is sometimes loosely used in this sense. For instance, we may say that two stories shortly to be encountered, "The Killers," by Ernest Hemingway, and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," by Richard Wright, have the same topic: growing up, the initiation into manhood. The titles of another pair—"Love" by Guy de Maupassant, and "Love" by Jess Stuart—proclaim the same topic, but even though we shall find considerable similarity in treatment, we shall also find significant differences in meaning and differences in the very "feel" of the stories. *The theme, then, is what is made of the topic.* It is what amounts to the comment of the idea *implied* in the process of the story.

The theme is what a piece of fiction stacks up to. It is the idea, the significance, the interpretation of persons and events, the pervasive and unifying view of life embodied in the total narrative. It is what we are to make of the human experience rendered in the story—always involving, directly or indirectly, some comment on values in human nature and conduct.

This last remark may provoke two objections. Some may feel that it makes fiction a kind of mere moralizing, with illustrations. Others may feel that it gives no accommodation to stories that are gay, lighthearted, and comic. Both objections are well taken, and deserve discussion.

Let us take an indirect approach to the first. When we read a good piece of fiction we may be caught by any number of interests, in different degrees. We may simply find a character attractive, and relish his company as we would that of a friend in real life. Or we may find our curiosity stimulated by strange backgrounds or events—the satisfaction of the same desire that leads us to travel. Or we may be held by suspense, the anxiety to know what comes next. We may even be caught by the writer's personality, his charm of spirit, his sprightliness of observation on life, or his poetic expression. Or we may enjoy daydreaming into experiences that we can never have in our humdrum lives. We may, in fact, be caught by any combination of things.

But in the end there is always the question "What does it add up to? what does it mean?" If we do not feel that things work out to some moment of significant stability, we feel defrauded. And we should not forget that the question every person, sooner or later, asks about life is "What does it mean?" If a story does not deal with this question, in some way or other, we are left dissatisfied.

One reason for such dissatisfaction is our simple human craving to have things put into order. We like to observe a story working itself out into a unity—just as we feel a need to have our own lives make sense. We demand the logic of cause and effect in fiction, and reasonable motivation, in the same way we demand it in life. We demand that there be a logic of theme—a thematic structure into which the various elements are drawn into unity. Thus, *no theme, no story.*

That is one approach to the objection that our discussion of theme seems to make fiction mere moralizing with illustrations. Another approach is related, but dissimilar. Let us examine the word *illustration* in this connection.

Fiction is not illustration, even though it sometime's pretends to be—as we see when we read "The Man Who Would Be King," which pretends to be an illustration of its motto: "Brother to a Prince and fellow to a begger if he be found worthy." Fiction is not illustration, because with illustration we are always aware that the idea being illustrated comes first in importance, that the content of the illustration is always being dictated by the nature of the thing—the "idea"—being illustrated. The illustration is an explanation, then, not a discovery developed from life.

But with fiction, insofar as it is successful, the imagination creates a world that exists, as it were, in its own right. With great masterpieces, this reality, in all aspects, is so compelling that it often seems closer to us than things we know to be hard facts. Hamlet, let us say, is more vivid to us than George Washington or the man next door. But even fiction that is merely good, not great, carries with it some degree of this illusion of independent existence.

How does this question of independent existence bear on the question of theme? Simply, thus: in a successful piece of fiction, out of this sense of an independent world, as the characters act and are acted upon, as one event leads to another, we become more and more aware of the significance of the whole. That is, *we gradually sense the development of a theme, the growth of significance.* We feel ourselves caught up in a vital process in which meaning emerges from experience. It is such a sense that, in the end, makes our own lives, insofar as we live above a brute level, interesting to us: the sense of deepening discovery in experience. Fiction, then, is never the mere illustration of an idea. *It is the created image of the very life process by which we feel ourselves moving toward meaning in our own experience.*

Let us turn, at long last, to the second objection, the objection that our emphasis on the place of theme in fiction leaves little play for the gay or comic. A full discussion of this would take us far into an analysis of the comic in itself, but it should be enough to say here that we are aware of the comic only by an implied contrast, however remote, with the serious, that the laughter of comedy always has in it some element of escape from the urgency—even the pain—of life.

If we look back at the comic stories read thus far—say, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" and "The Drunkard"—we readily see that always a slight shift of emphasis would plunge us into a world entirely different from that of the story. Comedy, including even warm humor, as well as savage satire, has to do with disappointment and surprise, the criticism and defeat of aspirations, contrasts of pretension and actuality, inability to adjust to the changing demands of life. The top-hatted man with his nose in the air who slips on a banana peel is the image behind all comedy—but the fall that rebukes vanity may sometimes break a neck. The distance between a good laugh and the need to call an ambulance is not very great.

At this point another question may be asked. Since theme is a comment on human values, how can we appreciate a story whose theme we cannot accept? There is no use in trying to evade this question by taking refuge in nice generalities, and no use in denying its importance or the difficulty of trying to give an honest answer.

To begin, let us forget fiction altogether, and think of our relations with other people. We live with a variety of people, and with most of them, we have, at some point or another, serious differences in opinion, tastes, and values. With Susie we disagree violently on literary matters, and every time we go to a movie with her we have an argument. With John Jacobs we disagree on politics; with Jim Kobeck, on how to play a hand of bridge. And we take a very dim view of Mary Moffet's intelligence. But—and here is the point—we may be good friends with all of them. We may even fall in love with, and marry, one of them. In other words, we recognize in any one of them, some particular qualities that we value despite disagreements. More important, we may recognize an underlying good will, and an honest attempt to make sense of things and to achieve decency. On recognizing such things, we may discover in ourselves some tolerance and some power of sympathetic imagination. In this process we realize that the world is complicated, and is the richer for the fact. We find that to live fruitfully we must modify our dogmatic attitudes and beliefs.

This is not to say that one thing is as good as another. Each of us has to work out his own scale of values and live by it. But what we have been saying *does* mean that when we encounter differences, we must try to understand their nature, and try to find the underlying common ground that makes human respect possible.

But how does this apply to fiction? In this way: we can think of the authors of stories as we think of friends and associates; we can make, even in disagreement, the imaginative effort to realize what underlies their logic, the logic by which a theme unfolds.

What, then, of the common ground? The common ground is the understanding of the fact that, insofar as a theme is coherently developed through a story, we are, as we read, witnessing and taking part in the great human effort to achieve meaning through experience. A story, as we have said, is an image of the life process.

We must here be prepared to make a concession. We must simply recognize that some writers, and some stories, offend us at so deep a level that we simply cannot find the common ground. We reject a story as we reject a person in real life, as an offense to our basic values.

Sometimes, however, we reject a story not because it offends us by its theme. We may reject it simply because it is unconvincing—even though we agree with the theme. The story fails in its logic of motivation, in its presentation of character, in the attempt to make the idea develop from the action. Or perhaps the story with the acceptable theme is merely sentimental, and the emotional and logical response demanded is not really justified by the characters and events. In such a case, the author has made the idea we believe in seem too easy to come by, too mechanical; so we reject his story because we know that any valuable idea is really related to life and demands some depth of scrutiny. To sum up such objections, the story fails to convince us because it is not *coherent*. The parts do not hang together.

This leads us back to our opening comments in section 1, where we discuss the *truth of correspondence* and the *truth of coherence*. If we reject a story because the theme offends us, we are appealing to what we take to be the truth about life and values. If we reject a story because of the other reasons given—if, as we usually put it, it is "unconvincing"—we are appealing to the truth of coherence. The story does not hang together on its own terms and therefore whatever meaning it may claim to offer does not really come out of the experience of the story. Most of our problems with fiction spring from problems of coherence.

The notion of coherence leads to the notion that the meaning—the theme—of a good story is general and pervasive. If a story shows organic unity, all parts contribute to the meaning. We live, of course, in an imperfect world, and few stories perfectly digest all their material. Nevertheless, let us assume that a story is coherent until we have given it a fair inspection. One way to give this inspection is to try to find what idea, what feeling, what attitude consistently develops in the process of the story.

We can look at what kinds of characters and what kind of world are presented. That is a starting point, for it tells us something of the interests of the writer and his range of experience and sympathy. We can ask what is at stake for a character—or characters—and what discoveries develop in the end. We can look at the pattern of plot and try to see what significant issues emerge, and what patterns seem important. We can ask what is the tone of the story, what is the pervasive feeling. Is it ironical, cold, reportorial, sympathetically analytic, pathetic, comic, angry? We can ask about the validity of the speech of the characters and try to judge the style of the author. And always, we are asking if the story is coherent. Only then are we really ready to pass a final judgment on the theme.

Our examination of the stories that follow is not to be taken as an exercise in moral hunting. It is not even to be taken, primarily, as an exercise in giving a general statement to the themes of the various stories—although the attempt to make such statements is a necessary part of our study. More important than framing such general statements are these two considerations:

First, to see how the theme of a story, if it is a good story, *necessarily* develops from the experience as presented in the story. Here, of course, we are dealing with problems of coherence.

Second, to see how the theme is *uniquely* developed. To do this means that we must try to see how a theme—even supposing we are able to state it in general terms—may be, in fact, qualified and modified by the actual treatment in the story, so that what the story "says" finally becomes something more special, uniquely applicable. And this, of course, is the most difficult of our problems.

The stories in this section employ various methods in the presentation of their themes. There may be general statements. There may be *allegory* and *symbolism* (see Glossary). There may be realistic dramatic situation. *But we must always remember that the total story, including its general atmosphere, is the embodiment of the theme.* As we have said in discussing plot in section 2, we must think of the whole story as an image, however shadowy, of the meaning of experience. It may be thought of as a massive symbol of the theme.

LOVE: THREE PAGES FROM A SPORTSMAN'S BOOK

Guy de Maupassant

I HAVE just read among the general news in one of the papers a drama of passion. He killed her and then he killed himself, so he must have loved her. What matters He or She? Their love alone matters to me, and it does not interest me because it moves me or astonishes me or because it softens me or makes me think, but because it recalls to my mind a remembrance of my youth, a strange recollection of a hunting adventure where Love appeared to me, as the Cross appeared to the early Christians, in the midst of the heavens.

I was born with all the instincts and the senses of primitive man, tempered by the arguments and the restraints of a civilized being. I am passionately fond of shooting, yet the sight of the wounded animal, of the blood on its feathers and on my hands, affects my heart so as almost to make it stop.

That year the cold weather set in suddenly toward the end of autumn, and I was invited by one of my cousins, Karl de Rauville, to go with him and shoot ducks on the marshes at daybreak.

My cousin was a jolly fellow of forty with red hair, very stout and bearded, a country gentleman, an amiable semibrute of a happy disposition and endowed with that Gallic wit which makes even mediocrity agreeable. He lived in a house, half farmhouse, half château, situated in a broad valley through which a river ran. The hills right and left were covered with woods, old manorial woods where magnificent trees still re-