

Readers' varying interpretations of theme in short fiction[☆]

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Abstract

After reviewing arguments about the nature of thematic inferences and problems with previous empirical research, we report the results of a study examining both the process by which individual readers arrive at a fictional story's theme and the themes at which they arrive. Sixteen avid readers read two stories of microfiction paragraph by paragraph, commenting after each paragraph on the larger point the author might be making. At the end of each story, the participants stated a theme capturing the overall meaning of the story. The results showed that readers (1) differed substantially in their interpretations of the stories' themes, (2) can draw the same conclusion about a story and yet make very different thematic inferences while reading, and (3) appear to keep alive a number of interpretations about a story's meaning, concluding the overall theme only at the story's end. The results strongly suggest that themes do not reside in texts in any obvious way but are constructed by readers. The results also suggest that thematic inferences are not computed automatically, as part of comprehension, but rather later as acts of interpretation. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

To what extent do fiction readers arrive at the same interpretations of what stories are about? Do fiction readers who arrive at the same interpretations make the same interpretations along the way? Although there is a large body of empirical research on inferences in reading, surprisingly little is known about global thematic inferences that readers make about entire texts, as most research has been concerned with local inferences that are elicited by one or two sentences. Graesser et al. (1994) have, in fact, concluded that no adequate empirical tests of thematic inferences exist.

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This study represents a first attempt at answering these questions by exploring the thematic inferences that readers voice as they read very short stories. We propose that by tracking the thematic inferences readers make en route to claiming a particular overall meaning or theme for a given narrative, we can better understand how readers arrive at similar or different notions of the meaning of a text. Before we describe our findings, we first address some basic definitional issues, and review the state of the art of the relevant empirical evidence. Rather than rigorously testing the alternative positions, we present exploratory data that pursue some of the predictions that the various positions offer.

1. What is a theme?

There is little consensus about what exactly literary themes are, or even if they are worth exploring. For example, some argue that positing theme for a text is sterile and reductionistic (e.g., Sollors, 1995). We are well aware of the dangers of proposing that a text has a single universally-agreed-upon theme, or even that authors intend particular themes. Nonetheless, we argue that one reason that literary stories, though fictional, have life beyond their pages is because readers attempt to connect them to the outside world; as we see it, themes are the bridge between print and life. In contrast with Brinker's (1995) claim that "Identification of themes is a necessary condition for an emotional response to a literary work and its poetic world," we recognize that readers can respond emotionally to literature without ever identifying a theme. However, we believe that when readers deeply process a text in order to elicit themes, their appreciation of the text can grow along with their understanding of themselves and the world around them.

For our purposes, a theme represents the reader's notion of the main idea, message, or central meaning of the text – the gist or the point. Theme is best expressed as a generalized declarative statement or proposition. Theme grows out of the particulars of a text but moves beyond specifics to comment on generalities about culture and humanity. Multiple themes can be identified for any one text, especially literary text.

The theme in a narrative isn't the same as the main idea in expository text. Unlike main points, narrative themes are more abstract and do not refer to specifics (Huck et al., 1987; Lukens, 1982). However, both themes and main points capture the gist of the text. Theme also isn't quite the same as "aboutness." As Rimmon-Kenan (1995) puts it:

"And what do we mean by 'about'? Is *Madame Bovary* about Emma's relations with Charles, Léon, and Rodolphe...? Or is it about, say, the fragility of love – a more general concept under which the specific elements can be unified...? Or – yet another possibility – does *Madame Bovary* make a statement about the world, such as 'romantic ideas are inadequate for everyday life...'... Is *Madame Bovary* about the fragility of love, about enslavement to money, about the 'moeurs de province,' or about all these together? – and if about all, how are the different themes related to each other? Is one 'major' and the other 'minor'? Does one subsume the others, or do they unite in a higher level of generality?"(p. 9).

To take up this example, *Madame Bovary* can be said to be *about* Emma's relations with Charles, Léon, and Rodolphe, but these relations do not comprise the theme because they refer to specific characters. Themes must be stated generally without reference to specific story elements. A reader may (dis)agree with Flaubert about the role of romanticism in everyday life, but it is the theme which connects the work of art with the real world. Abstraction helps to expand the scope of stories beyond the setting, characters, and plot to the world beyond the page, to the world in which we live, and does not necessarily ignore the specificity and uniqueness of each literary work.

General concepts like “the fragility of love,” or even simply “fragility” or “love,” might be considered themes, as *Madame Bovary* is about these things generally and they do not refer to specific characters and plot. But such single word concepts or phrases do not convey a particular message or make a judgment about what has been suggested by a literary work. A theme needs to express a point, message, or moral and be expressed as a declarative statement, often in the form of an adage (Graesser et al., 2001). Therefore, “romantic ideas are inadequate for everyday life” is both a theme of *Madame Bovary* and what the book is about. It is a theme because direct reference to the particulars of *Madame Bovary* is excluded, an abstract generalized message is made in the form of a declarative statement, *and* information about the world we live in is conveyed. Themes must be “about either society, human nature, or the human condition” (Lukens, 1982: 101).

Multiple interpretations are likely for virtually all texts (Bleich, 1978; Fish, 1980). Along with “romantic ideas are inadequate for everyday life,” readers of *Madame Bovary* could also contend (among other possibilities) that “imaginary landscapes can provide a richer place to live than reality.” Both these themes reflect a different “spin” on the material (one bemoans the consequences of a life lived in the imagination, and the other recognizes its benefits). But some themes are likely to be endorsed by more readers than others, and some will be seen as more idiosyncratic. Each reader's response combines personal and cultural material to greater and lesser extents. That a single text can contain a multitude of interpretations can be accounted for by three factors: differences between texts, readers, and situations (see Vorderer, 1996, for discussion). Even the same reader reading the same text at different times for different purposes can be expected to understand a text differently: “The theme we isolate depends on our particular aims and needs, whether we are in search of authorial intentions, readerly responses or our own pet subjects” (Bremond et al., 1995: 3).

2. How do readers infer themes?

Since themes are rarely directly stated by authors, they must be imputed by readers. To do this, readers go beyond the explicit information provided and use background knowledge to infer a theme. Because readers all fill in the unwritten portions of a text in their own ways, meaning is produced by the reader's activity and is not the sole property of the text.

Whether readers generate thematic inferences “on-line” or “off-line” is hotly debated. As Richard Gerrig has pointed out (personal communication), this distinction actually has two separable components, which have often been muddled: (1) whether thematic inferences are obligatory (generated automatically by all readers at all times, as a result of cognitive architecture) or optional (generated strategically by some readers, some or all of the time), and (2) whether they occur at the time of reading or later. Our research does not address this issue directly but looks instead at the process by which readers arrive at given themes. However, borrowing Gibbs’ (1994) stages of linguistic interpretation, we argue that thematic inferences are likely acts of interpretation rather than comprehension. That is, if “comprehension refers to the immediate moment-by-moment process of creating meanings for utterances” (Gibbs, 1994: 116) and “interpretation refers to analysis of the early products of comprehension” (Gibbs, 1994: 117), thematic inferences will not be made automatically moment-by-moment but instead involve strategic analysis and conscious thought.

One major position is the minimalist hypothesis, initially proposed by McKoon and Ratcliff (1992) and elaborated in work on memory-based text processing (e.g., Gerrig and McKoon, 1998; see discussion in several papers in O’Brien et al., 1998). The minimalist hypothesis contrasts automatic and strategic inferences. Automatic inferences are based on easily available information and may be necessary if readers are to make statements in the text locally coherent; they are constructed in the first few hundred milliseconds of processing. In contrast, strategic inferences require readers to have special goals or strategies. The minimalist position would be that thematic inferences are strategic because they involve accessing information from long-term memory that is not easily available and integrating widely separated pieces of information from entire texts.

An alternative position is the constructionist theory (see, e.g., Graesser et al., 1994), which argues that readers strive to maintain coherence at low and high levels of representation. Thus, readers construct surface, linguistic, textbase, and situation representations on-line, in an immediate and parallel fashion. Constructionists argue that even under conditions of local text coherence readers will bridge distant text ideas in their search for text explanations. If a narrative has a point, is globally coherent, and even if the reader has no particular purpose in reading it, Graesser et al. (1994) predict that thematic inferences will be generated on-line. Thus, it may be that readers make thematic inferences precisely when texts are coherent in order to highlight and emphasize the text’s evident sensibility.

Although the research on thematic inferences is relatively scant, studies of two main varieties have been conducted. Some focus on theme-topics (Eamon, 1979; Walker and Meyer, 1980; Guindon and Kintsch, 1984; Walker and Yekovich, 1984). In these studies, theme refers to a single idea or category – the subject matter of a passage. For instance, a title could represent a theme-topic. Other research focuses on theme-motifs (Gick and Holyoak, 1980; Reiser et al., 1985; Seifert et al., 1986; Lehr, 1988; Whitney et al., 1991; Forbus et al., 1995; Gentner and Markman, 1997). Theme-motifs are abstract situations that are not bound by time and place. For Aesop’s fable “The Tortoise and the Hare,” the theme-topic could be “a race”

whereas the theme-motif could be its moral “Slow and steady wins the race.” In the discussion that follows we focus on theme-motifs.

How and why do readers respond to stories the way they do? Holland (1988) holds that by virtue of a reader’s “identity themes” (a person’s signature way of interpreting the world based on deep dynamic issues), thematic inferences are determined *before* reading has been undertaken. Explaining thematic interpretation as an intrapersonal affair, Holland addresses the observation that people can interpret the same works of literature quite differently, but individuals can interpret different works highly consistently. As a case study, Holland attempts to get “inside” the mind of Robert Frost by analyzing Frost’s poetry, his responses to others’ writings, and his societal concerns. Through this analysis, Holland identifies Frost’s identity theme as “managing his fears of the unlimited and unmanageable by manipulating limited, knowable, symbols” (Holland, 1988: 170). Holland suggests that Frost’s fear of the vast unknown preceded his interpretive efforts, predetermining the thematic inferences Frost would draw prior to his approaching a text.

In contrast to this notion of predetermined themes, three other theories suggest that readers resist final conclusions about theme until coming to the end of a passage. Readers may sift through large amounts of information before, in a winnowing process, concluding a final theme (Collins et al., 1980; Zwaan et al., 2001). Collins et al. (1980) propose that readers refine an initial group of schematic impressions by progressively incorporating more and more textual elements, thereby eliminating schematic mismatches. In contrast, Zwaan et al. (2001) argue that readers gradually move beyond the specifics of a narrative, its causal and motivational structure and its temporal and spatial framework, until analogical processes can be applied and a theme can be drawn. Or, readers may make thematic inferences throughout the text, until the accruing inferences lead to an ultimate conclusion (Vipond and Hunt, 1984). Let us examine these three theories in greater detail.

Collins et al. (1980) argue that inferences do more than fill in missing connections between surface structure elements, context, and background knowledge. They argue that model-based inferences, unlike text-based inferences, synthesize an underlying *a priori* model that organizes and guides a set of inference procedures. In this theory of text understanding, readers quickly form an initial incomplete model of a text, constructed of schemas triggered by the opening statements. As reading progresses, readers incorporate more and more textual elements into their model. The reader attempts to fill in the unspecified variable slots of each model, thereby refining the model with greater and greater specificity.

To test this theory, Collins et al. (1980) asked participants to listen to difficult-to-understand passages. After hearing the entire passage, participants described aloud how they processed the texts, whether they had any intermediate hypotheses along the way, whether they were (dis)satisfied with any of these hypotheses, and why. Analyses of readers’ protocols demonstrated that particular schemas are triggered by textual information. Initially, readers juggle multiple schemas before constraining their understanding to conform to the text. As reading progresses, questions are born from the schematic models constructed. When the questions are answered, solutions to other questions are constrained.

Collins et al. (1980) identify four strategies utilized by readers to test the plausibility of the models constructed. (1) Readers test the plausibility of their assumptions and their consequences by comparing parts of the model with their world knowledge. (2) By attempting to answer various questions that arise, readers assess the completeness of their model. (3) Readers seek a model that allows different components to tie together in a variety of ways. (4) Readers match concepts applied by the model with surface aspects of the text. Meeting these criteria, the readers gradually settle on an interpretation of the text. Although Collins et al. (1980) do not discuss thematic inferences per se, their theory suggests that readers generate multiple themes at the beginning of a story and progressively refine their impressions as reading proceeds.

In another version of how readers construct thematic representations during text comprehension (Zwaan et al., 2001), readers spontaneously construct situation models (mental representations of events described in the text). These models, though, are bound in time and space, so readers must move beyond the textual situation to analogous situations outside the story proper. Moving beyond the story, readers create themes which are mental representations of situations lifted out of a temporal-spatial framework (Zwaan et al., 2001). In order to make a thematic inference, readers must take three additional steps using a separate set of mechanisms, called a thematic-abstraction module, that account for the thematic-abstraction process. The situation forms the input but then the reader constructs the thematic structure by: “1. creating a copy of the causal and motivational structure, 2. deleting the temporal and spatial framework information, and 3. eliminating all the temporal, spatial, and protagonist information that is not directly related to the causal-motivational structure” (Zwaan et al., 2001).

Once the temporal, spatial, and characterological information has been deleted, the reader engages in analogical reasoning. Citing Holyoak and Thagard (1995) on analogical reasoning, Zwaan et al. (2001) distinguish between first-order and higher-order, or system, information. Analogies utilize higher-order information, including causal and motivational relations, without referencing first-order information: protagonists, objects, temporal and spatial relations. Similarly, thematic abstraction, functioning analogically, requires readers to make causal and motivational linkages, omitting first-order information. By way of example, Zwaan et al. (2001) compare two proverbs: “Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched” and “Don’t sell the skin before you’ve shot the bear.” These proverbs lack similarity on the level of first-order information but are matched on the causal level. Thus, they are thematically similar; the conclusion can be drawn that actions should not be undertaken until conditions for that action have been met. Readers of narratives are also hypothesized to excise first-order information and construct thematic representations by seeking higher-order analogies to notions about culture, society, and human nature.

Zwaan et al.’s theory has not yet been empirically tested, but related studies have been carried out. In a series of three experiments, Reiser et al. (1985) showed that readers can successfully sort stories when instructed to compile those sharing “the same kind of plot,” thereby sorting according to higher-order information (thematic content) rather than first-order information (specific story content). Also, readers

were able to emulate these stories as writers, writing stories with “the same kind of plot.” Finally, another group of readers was able to sort the subject-written stories into the same groups as the experimenter-written stories.

Seifert et al. (1986) explored whether a previously read story can facilitate comprehension of a thematically similar story read afterward. Readers were presented with stories differing in surface structure (setting, characterization, and plot activity) but similar in motif. Seifert et al. (1986) concluded that readers only attend to similarity at the thematic level if they are explicitly instructed to do so. Because readers were successful at recognizing structural similarities at a thematic level when cued but not when left to their own devices, it seems that recognizing similarities is strategic, not automatic. Yet, spontaneous activation can occur if the stories are easily mapped one to the other. In other words, if the story is set in the same city, the characters hold the same job, share the same gender and dress similarly, readers can spontaneously recognize deep structural themes (Forbus et al., 1995; Gentner and Markman, 1997). It may be that it is easier for readers to recognize the causal-motivational structure of a story when the temporal and spatial framework are similar.

In a related study, Gick and Holyoak (1980) had college students attempt to solve a difficult medical problem involving a patient with a malignant inoperable stomach tumor for whom radiation could be lethal. Only 10% of the students could solve the problem initially, but 75% of the students could when presented with a story analogy and encouraged to use it to solve the tumor problem. The analogy involved a dictator ruling a country from a fortress and an army intent on overtaking him but fearful of land mines planted on the roads leading to the fortress. Unlike in the Seifert studies, here surface structure was completely different, and yet the college students were able to make the mapping from a military problem to a medical one. However, as with the studies described earlier, the students had to be encouraged to use the story to solve the problem. Thus, people do not always make spontaneous thematic comparisons or generate structural analogies.

Finally, Vipond and Hunt (1984) identify a style of reading necessary for identifying theme: point-driven reading. They then describe the process by which point-driven readers “evaluate” texts and settle on thematic interpretations; the idea is that readers’ evaluations slowly accrue before a final analysis and reckoning of the entire text is made.

Point-driven reading contrasts with two other reading approaches for narrative texts: story-driven and information-driven reading (Vipond and Hunt, 1984). Readers of narratives can adopt a story-driven stance by limiting their focus to a “good read.” These readers engage with the plot, characters, and events but are unconcerned with larger points to be drawn. Information-driven readers set out to learn from the text in a manner normally associated with content area reading. Note that point-driven reading may be rare in laboratory situations, which can inadvertently invoke an information-driven approach; the laboratory reader’s task is to learn or remember, and the text itself is often fragmentary and inane (Dillon, 1980). Thus, according to Vipond and Hunt (1984), even when researchers believe they are studying literary reading, their theories may only be indirectly related to it.

In point-driven reading, “the understander reads with the expectation that the text will enable the construction of a valid, pragmatic point” (Vipond and Hunt, 1984: 266). In order to construct such a point, point-driven readers implicitly realize that a story has an author who has intentions and intends to make points, has a reason for telling the story, and a message to convey. Therefore, for Vipond and Hunt, inferences which are theme/point-related involve inferences about author intent. Graesser et al. (2001) agree and go farther, stating that all “readers intentionally attempt to recover the writer’s intended meaning.” Thus, whether or not writers consciously intend to convey a theme, some readers, if not all, make a point of recovering theme.

Another factor that might contribute to reading for theme is individual differences in working memory that can affect which thematic interpretations are made, and when (Whitney et al., 1991). In the Whitney et al. study, participants read demanding narratives an event at a time and then thought out loud about their burgeoning interpretations. Consistent with what is known about memory span and comprehension, the low-span readers, struggling with holding and manipulating information in working memory, produced more specific elaborations early in the passage than high-span readers. The readers with greater working memory capacity were able to withhold judgment until they obtained more information from the text before supplying a specific thematic interpretation. Thus, low-span readers balance sentence-to-sentence understanding with inferring the overall message of the passage by coming to early conclusions about the theme. High-span readers can maintain local coherence while balancing possible thematic interpretations.

Reading a literary text in a point-driven manner differs from story-driven and information-driven reading because of the reader’s use (conscious or not) of coherence, narrative surface, and transactional strategies (Vipond and Hunt, 1984). Point-driven readers are invested in constructing a global speech act by establishing a coherent rendering of the entire text. Story-driven and information-driven readers may read in smaller units and fail to, or not be interested in, integrating disparate aspects of the story. Point-driven readers attend to the narrative surface of what is read: plot, setting, and character, along with the point of view presented, the tone, diction, and style of the story. Story- and information-driven readers tend not to notice such features. Also, point-driven readers recognize that the text is an artifact and interpret the actions and beliefs of the characters in light of the fact that an author has created these characters for a reason. Story-driven and information-driven readers tend to take the actions and beliefs of characters at face value.

Skilled readers are flexible in their approaches for steering their course through written material and can choose at will to read for pleasure, for information, and/or for larger meanings. By adopting a point-driven stance, readers acknowledge an invitation to make literary evaluations while reading, evaluations which help the reader to identify the theme of the story. These evaluations are made when “that which is not normally expectable: the unpredictable, surprising, inconsistent, or incongruous” occurs between a given element and the local norms of the text (Hunt

and Vipond, 1986: 57). Hunt and Vipond identify three broad types of textual evaluations which are triggered in three different ways:

1. *discourse evaluations* can occur when something is expressed in a distinctive way by the use of metaphor, simile, metonymy, parallelism, hyperbole, and the like,
2. *story evaluations* can occur when something unexpected happens in the story-world having to do with an event, setting, or character,
3. *telling evaluations* can occur when the fact that the narrator mentions something at all, or mentions it at a particular moment, is surprising.

Although it may sound as though reading for theme is the privileged domain of a rare few, kindergarten children have been shown to be able to identify theme (Lehr, 1988). Kindergartners were asked to identify which two of three stories were thematically matched. For realistic fiction, 80% of the children identified the matched books. For folktales, 35% of the children identified those thematically matched. The greater ease with which children matched themes for realistic fiction seems to suggest that the closer a story is to a child's realm of experience the easier it is to identify theme. Lehr also found that kindergartners could generate themes if they had been highly exposed to literature. Youngsters lacking in literary experience generated responses that were too concrete and vague. This research suggests that background knowledge and well-readness are important factors in recognizing theme.

According to Hunt and Vipond's (1986) analysis of literary evaluations, it is possible to identify which points within a text might be chosen to fuel a particular reading. Even so, their theory does not predict the exact nature of any one reading because each type of evaluation will not always be made by any given reader; different readers are expected to draw their points from different conglomerations of evaluations. However, since texts tend to exhibit redundant patterns of evaluations, meanings tend to be shared amongst readers.

The Hunt and Vipond (1986) theory, while untested, is attractive for several reasons. For one, it lends itself to empirical experimentation because it is disprovable. If the theory were put to the test, then evaluations should only be made by point-driven readers at identified junctures having evaluative force – unpredictability, surprisingness, inconsistency, or incongruity. Also, this theory tries to account for the variability of literary reading amongst different readers and by the same reader at different times. The theory also provides an explanation for the marked consistency of interpretations that different readers can make of the same material.

In summary, readers all bring to a text their own set of expectations and experiences which help determine the theme which is drawn. However, researchers do not agree how readers process the text in order to arrive at the theme. Collins et al. (1980) describe a top-down process whereby schematic information yields to textual elements in a process of gradual refinement. Zwaan et al. (2001) and Vipond and Hunt (1984) propose a bottom-up process whereby textual elements accrue and influence the formation of thematic inferences. In the former, a textual summary maps onto a previously held analogical structure. In the latter, incongruous and

redundant textual elements accrue until the force of a particular point is driven home. Only Holland (1988) suggests that the themes readers draw are pre-determined.

3. Problems with past inference studies addressed by the current study

Past research on thematic inferences is not only sparse, but as with most research on inferences it has been problematic. Magliano and Graesser (1991) outline three classes of theoretical and methodological problems associated with this previous work: problems with the texts researchers used, problems with the experimental tasks used to measure whether an inference was generated on-line or off-line, and problems identifying the inferences readers truly generate. Our study addresses some of these shortcomings.

Past inference studies have tended to use experimenter-generated artificial texts which fail to capture the richness of real texts from the real world; they often appear stilted and obviously manufactured for the purposes of a given study (Magliano and Graesser, 1991). These manufactured texts tend to be very short, sometimes only one sentence in length (McKoon and Ratcliff, 1986; Potts et al., 1988). Such short inauthentic passages may not support the richness of thematic inferences people make when they read genuine literature written for readers' enjoyment. In this study, in contrast to the texts normally used by researchers, two stories of micro fiction (short short stories of approximately 250 words) were read paragraph by paragraph. These stories were published in an anthology of stories of micro fiction presenting a decade of winners and selected finalists of the World's Best Short Short Story Contest.

The literature chosen for this study, though short, afforded a variety of interpretations. Without straining, the participants were able to garner meanings from the stories which extended beyond the immediate scope of the characters and the plot portrayed. In a pilot study, 14 participants all readily identified a theme for each of these stories with half of the readers agreeing on the same theme. Thus, the stories chosen for this study provided the opportunity to observe the processes by which readers arrive at the same and different themes.

In the initial phases of the pilot study, readers were asked to read and to comment on the thematic content of the material sentence by sentence. But this was too difficult; these readers were not able to maintain deeper level processing when thinking aloud sentence by sentence. However, readers instructed to read paragraph by paragraph could maintain comprehension and deeper level processing. Thus, readers for this study were instructed to read paragraph by paragraph.

Rather than examining whether an inference was generated on- or off-line, we looked at the content of the inferences themselves. In fact, the very purpose for reading was provided; readers were encouraged to make thematic inferences during and after reading – after each paragraph and upon completing the story. Thus, explicit instructions guided the readers to process the material deeply, globally, and thematically. The readers themselves were chosen for their ability to read for

theme since it has been argued that not all readers concern themselves with this higher level analysis (Vipond and Hunt, 1984). We assessed for this penchant by asking: “When you read, do you think about the larger point the author might be making?” Only readers who answered in the affirmative were included in the study.

The third problem with past inference research outlined by Magliano and Graesser (1991) is that researchers usually do not identify beforehand which inferences readers will be likely to make given the particular material presented. Researchers tend to base their judgments on which inferences they feel are most likely to be generated, without finding out which inferences readers normally make. This study, on the other hand, pretested how readers under normal circumstances would comprehend the stories they read. Readers in a pilot study read the stories without interruption and commented on the overall theme of the story.

Three alternative outcomes of the study appear possible. First, readers may keep alive more than one thematic interpretation after each paragraph, arriving at a final conclusion about the overall meaning only upon completion of the story. This outcome may be the most likely for avid readers who report reading for theme. Such readers, who report that they pursue reading as a pleasurable activity and regularly think about the impact of an entire text, are likely aided by an adequate working memory capacity. This combination, of (1) intent to synthesize the text into a meaningful whole and (2) cognitive wherewithal, may allow avid readers to entertain competing alternative meanings of a given text as they read, ultimately settling on one overall meaning.

Alternatively, it is possible that schemata play a more important role in reading for theme than adequate working memory. According to Kintsch and van Dijk (1978), thematic inferences are macropropositions constructed from micropropositions under the control of a schema. Those micropropositions that do not fit with the controlling schema are ignored, but those that do are represented by an ordered connected list of macropropositions which form the gist of the story (Vipond, 1980). Readers may adopt an early schema-based impression of a story, making the ultimate theme drawn a foregone conclusion. If this is so, then readers who arrive at the same conclusion about a story should have drawn similar thematic inferences along the way.

Thirdly, the thematic inferences made during the course of reading may have no bearing on the thematic inferences drawn after reading. This is a plausible outcome with less skilled readers who, struggling to maintain local coherence, may fail to recognize the text’s global structure. However, given this study’s pool of self-reported avid and skillful readers, who presumably take advantage of good macrostructure, this outcome is less likely. Skillful readers would be expected to focus on thematic ideas that help them understand the text and probably would not casually discard inferences made during reading in favor of post hoc inferences. In any case, if there is no relationship between concluding thematic inferences and those made during reading, readers making similar thematic inferences should be no more likely to draw the same conclusion than readers making dissimilar thematic inferences.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Sixteen avid readers from the New York City area, eight White women and eight White men ranging in age from 27 to 71, participated in this study. A questionnaire was distributed to people who identified themselves as avid readers in order to ascertain their appropriateness for participation. Readers were chosen who reported reading a minimum of five books a year, stated a preference for fiction over non-fiction, and acknowledged contemplating the larger point the author might be making while reading and upon finishing a story or book. Participants reported reading a minimum of eight books and a maximum of 50 books a year. The participants were highly educated. All but one had received a Bachelor's degree. Two had received law degrees; six had received Master's degrees, and two were working toward doctorates. The participants represented a wide range of professions from dancers to real estate executives.

4.2. Materials

Two short short stories from *Micro Fiction: An Anthology of Really Short Stories* (Stern, 1996), "Diverging Paths and All That" by Maryanne O'Hara and "Grief" by Ron Carlson, were chosen for use in this study. (See Table 1 for the text of both stories.) Micro fiction is a shortened version of a short story. In order to be considered part of the genre, the story must be approximately 250 words or less. Why micro fiction? These short short stories allowed us to use naturalistic text and yet not be overwhelmed by data. Why these two particular stories? In a pilot study, 14 participants read ten short short stories silently and then wrote a sentence (2–3 at most) stating the meaning or the point of the story. Of the ten stories, these two led to the greatest number of listed themes that agreed and also that differed, thus allowing us to compare the processes involved in coming to similar and different thematic inferences. For "Diverging Paths and All That," four pilot readers agreed on one theme and another four agreed on another. The other six readers generated six separate themes. For "Grief," seven readers agreed on the author's implied theme and seven disagreed, generating seven different themes. The other piloted stories either provided no agreement, with all 14 readers stating individual themes, or with minor agreement reached between two to four people. (The extreme variability of interpretation in the pilot sample already provides evidence that thematic inferences are not straightforward or universally agreed-upon).

Checklists were created for presentation after each story was read. The checklists distilled the responses of the 14 pilot readers into five stated themes. Readers were asked to mark two themes: one that was most like their own understanding, and one they thought might be most commonly stated were the story to be read by a large sample of individuals. (See Appendix A for the two checklists.)

Table 1

Diverging Paths and All That
Maryanne O'Hara

In Dollar Saver, the aisles are empty, customers crowding Electronics watching Nixon resign on twenty TV sets. Dad dropped us off with three bucks to buy burgers but we've already spent it on fireballs and fudge.

While Nixon keeps the manager occupied, Billy demonstrates the "heads-up technique," the nonchalant gaze, his left hand filching Hershey bars and Bic pens while his right hand jingles pocket change. Billy grins, "I really save my dollars here."

Solo time. I head for Cosmetics, the wall of Peeper Sticks—blue and green and lavender eye crayons that've always cost dollars I don't have. My hand closes around Seafoam Green, hesitates, but what the hell, even the President's a crook, so I slip it up my sleeve. I try to sneak away natural as Billy, but my legs move too quick and stiff.

Billy meets me in Electronics, where Nixon's keeping his head up, not admitting a damn thing. Saying he'd be able to clear his name if he fought long enough, but he'll sacrifice his honor for the country. When he says he'll resign as of noon the next day, I check out all these adults who yelled, "Impeach the crook." Nobody cheers. The faces are solemn as gravestones. Billy's motioning, Come on let's go, but I suddenly feel like I ate too much candy. I shake my sleeve, dropping the Peeper Stick onto a shelf, and follow Billy out the automatic doors. Dad's picking us up in two minutes, but Billy's headed someplace else.

Grief
Ron Carlson

The King died. Long live the king. And then the Queen died. She was buried beside him. The King died and then the Queen died of grief. This was the posted report. And no one said a thing. But you can't die of grief. It can take away your appetite and keep you in your chamber, but not forever. It isn't terminal. Eventually you'll come out and want a toddy. The Queen died subsequent to the King, but not of grief. I know the royal coroner, have seen him around, a young guy with a good job. The death rate for the royalty is so much lower than that of the general populace. The coroner was summoned by the musicians, found her on the bedroom floor, checked for a pulse, and wrote "Grief" on the form. It looked good. And it was necessary. It answered the thousand questions about the state of the nation.

He didn't examine the body, perform an autopsy. If he had, he wouldn't have found grief. "There is no place for grief in the body." He would have found a blood alcohol level of one point nine and he would have found a clot of improperly chewed tangerine in the lady's throat which she had ingested while laughing.

But this seems a fine point. The queen is dead. Long live her grief. Long live the Duke of Reddington and the Earl of Halstar who were with me that night entertaining the Queen in her chambers. She was a vigorous sort. And long live the posted report which will always fill a royal place in this old kingdom.

4.3. Procedure

The participants were given a questionnaire to ascertain basic demographic information and to assess suitability for the study (see Appendix B). To prepare the readers for the task ahead, first the well-known Aesop's fable, "The Tortoise and the Hare," was read aloud and its larger meaning discussed. A fable was chosen because fables have morals/themes and readers can identify them (Dorfman and Brewer, 1994). Thus, the experimenter could easily demonstrate the task to the participants. The participants were told: "I am studying readers' reactions to literature, specifically readers' interpretations of a story's larger meaning, in other words, the theme(s) of a story." Participants were then read Aesop's fable, "The Tortoise and the Hare":

A tortoise and a hare started to dispute which of them was swifter, and, before separating, they made an appointment for a certain time and place to settle the matter. The hare had such confidence in its natural fleetness that it did not trouble about the race, but lay down by the wayside and went to sleep. The tortoise, acutely conscious of its slow movements, plodded along without ever stopping until it passed the sleeping hare and won the race.

After participants voiced their notion of the theme of this fable, other possibilities were described by the experimenter based on previous readers' impressions. (See Appendix C for a listing of the variety of themes provided for even this seemingly simple story.)

At this point, it was explained that the study being conducted was concerned with how meanings are arrived at, not just the final meanings people conclude. Therefore, readers would be asked to comment on the larger point the author might be making after each paragraph and when they had finished reading the story. It was explained that for the sake of the study the story had been broken into paragraphs, but that each paragraph was related to another and that comprehension was critical in order to be focusing on the theme. The participants were shown the book from which the stories were drawn in order to emphasize that these were real stories, not texts conjured up for an experiment. However, the participants read from a typed booklet that allowed only one paragraph per page to be seen at a time.

In order to reduce the likelihood that reading a fable might impose a "fable-like" way of reading the other "non-fable" fiction stories, the experimenter also demonstrated the procedure with a second non-fable story, "The Cough" by Harry Humes. The experimenter read the story aloud paragraph by paragraph. At the end of each paragraph, the experimenter thought aloud about the larger point the author might be making. Then the experimenter stated her impression of the overall theme of the story. The experimenter's statements were in the form of a sentence, 2–3 sentences at the most. (See Appendix D for a transcript of "The Cough" with the experimenter's interpretations.)

After asking any remaining questions about the procedure, the readers read "Diverging Paths and All That" aloud, commenting after each paragraph about the larger point the author might be making. All responses were audiotaped for subsequent transcription.

Finally, a list of five of the most common themes gleaned from the pilot participants was shown to the readers. They were asked to mark the theme most like their own understanding, or to mark "other" if none of the themes matched. They were also asked to mark the theme they thought would be most commonly given if a large sample of readers were to read the story. The identical procedure was repeated for "Grief."

4.4. Coding

Although the checklists were administered to provide a common reference point for categorizing the readers' responses, the checklists proved unnecessary and were not analyzed; it turned out that 100% inter-scorer agreement was achieved simply by grouping the protocols according to the readers' own stated themes. Two raters,

the first author and a Psychology graduate student from the New School for Social Research, grouped readers' responses to each story according to their stated overall theme. Although no two people used identical language to express their thoughts, the raters achieved 100% agreement as to which readers shared similar impressions of the story and which did not. For instance, both raters agreed that the following four stated themes, when distilled, expressed the similar notion "Morality is personal": 1. Every person ultimately has his own moral values. You can be led by someone but ultimately your true self will direct you. 2. You can be your own person. You can escape the influence of the environment. 3. In the end, you have to base your morality on your own value system as developed through your life. 4. Morality is an individual issue for everybody and not everyone is going to hold to the same standard.

When readers shared similar impressions of a story with one or more of the other readers, the raters then compared the themes stated by these readers after each paragraph in order to compare the process by which these readers arrived at the final theme. Here, 93% inter-scorer agreement was achieved. The raters made judgments as to whether the readers offered the same, different, or approximately the same theme after each paragraph during the reading process. Judgments were based on the perceived gestalt of the utterance. For instance, although the above four readers appeared to agree on the overall meaning of the story, the raters judged that no two agreed on the theme of paragraph one and three agreed on the theme of paragraph two. One rater judged that three agreed on the theme of paragraph three whereas the other rater judged that all four agreed, and both raters agreed that no two people agreed on the meaning of paragraph four. In Table 2, the readers are categorized by stated overall theme with comparisons made for themes stated for each paragraph for "Diverging Paths and All That."

5. Results

Eleven of the 16 readers of "Diverging Paths and All That" shared their overall view of the story with one, two, or at most three other readers. The five remaining readers stated themes which diverged from all other readers' responses. Generally speaking, readers tended to offer four distinct interpretations of "Diverging Paths and All That." Four readers stated that the theme of the story was: "Morality is personal." Two readers stated: "Things happen that you aren't aware of." Another two inferred that: "Immoral acts happen at all levels." Three others took the meaning to be that: "Children learn by example." The five remaining readers offered thematic statements that were not readily categorizable and therefore could not be classified:

1. Dishonesty leads to ethical bankruptcy.
2. Modern technology and politics have created an empty free environment.
3. Children and adults get bombarded with information that confuses them as to their natural desires.

4. Adult and child worlds parallel one another. Some people in both worlds lie and steal easily and the rest of the people in both worlds are less sure about what is right and wrong.
5. Depending on what we see other people doing, we can do one thing, switch back and do another.

In the extreme, readers could share their overall impression of the story but disagree on the theme being stated for each paragraph. Other readers agreed on the meaning of only one out of four paragraphs but still reported the same overall meaning of the story. Still others agreed on the theme of two paragraphs, and at the most three paragraphs, arriving at the same overall theme for the entire story. No two people made the same thematic inferences for all four paragraphs (see Table 2).

With regard to the story “Grief,” nine readers shared the company of at least one, and at most two, other readers stating the same overall theme for the story. However, most strikingly, none of these readers shared the same interpretation for any of the paragraphs while reading. According to one rater, only two readers shared even approximately the same interpretation of one paragraph. The other rater believed that four readers converged on approximately the same interpretation of a paragraph (see Table 3). Most often, then, the readers of “Grief” did not share similar impressions of the story while reading, yet more than half were able to find at least one partner in interpreting the overall theme for the story. Three readers stated that the theme was: “The truth will be kept from the people.” Two inferred that: “Truth is not always necessary.” Two others took the meaning to be: “Power structures contain hypocrisy by their very nature.” Another two suggested that: “People want

Table 2
Comparisons of thematic inferences by paragraph for readers of “Diverging Paths and All That”

Overall theme	Reader	Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3	Paragraph 4
Morality is personal	4	no agreement	agreement	agreement	no agreement
	5	no agreement	agreement	agreement	no agreement
	11	no agreement		agreement	no agreement
	15	no agreement	no agreement	*	no agreement
Children learn by example	1	agreement	no agreement	*	agreement
	2	agreement	no agreement	*	no agreement
	9	agreement	no agreement	no agreement	agreement
Immoral acts happen at all levels	6	no agreement	agreement	no agreement	
	7	no agreement	agreement	no agreement	
Things happen that you aren't aware of	10	no agreement	no agreement	no agreement	no agreement
	12	no agreement	no agreement	no agreement	no agreement

* Conflicting interpretations by evaluators. Note: Readers who arrived at themes which were not shared by others are not represented in the above table.

Table 3
Comparisons of thematic inferences by paragraph for readers of “Grief”

Overall theme	Reader	Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3
The truth will be kept from the people	1	no agreement	partial agreement	no agreement
	5	no agreement	partial agreement	no agreement
	10	no agreement	no agreement	no agreement
People want to be appeased and do not always want to hear the truth	3	no agreement	no agreement	partial agreement
	13	no agreement	no agreement	partial agreement
Power structures contain hypocrisy by their very nature	4	no agreement	no agreement	no agreement
	8	no agreement	no agreement	no agreement
Truth is not always necessary	9	no agreement	no agreement	no agreement
	11	no agreement	no agreement	no agreement

Note: Readers who arrived at themes which were not shared by others are not represented in the above table.

to be appeased and do not always want to hear the truth.” The seven remaining readers offered themes unlike any of the other sixteen and therefore could not be categorized. Those themes were as follows:

1. Grief isn’t uniform. The finality of death can’t be summarized and it is compatible with a genuine commitment to life.
2. The ways something is reported publicly bears little or no relation to the private experience of the people it purports to describe. Depending on your point of view, this is either infuriating or convenient.
3. We need to accept rather than understand everything in order to proceed.
4. Often behind a public explanation lies many possible reasons for things happening.
5. Sometimes explanations shed very little light on the truth.
6. History is rife with revisionism.
7. What we know the truth to be is subservient to what the powers that be say is the truth.

In comparing different readers’ responses to the two stories, no two readers who agreed on the theme of one story agreed on the theme of the other. Thus, there was no evidence that particular readers tended to read similarly from story to story. However, two of the 16 readers generated themes for both stories which did not mesh with any other readers’ renderings. Thus, it may be that particular readers tend to read in more idiosyncratic ways than others, but no conclusion can be drawn based on this two story sample.

6. Discussion

The fact that readers gave a remarkable variety of interpretations for the two short short stories used in this study strongly supports the notion that theme is

constructed and not held within a text. Both stories (“Grief” and “Diverging Paths and All That”) evoked the expression of four main themes – interpretations agreed on by one or more readers, with each story also suggesting several other themes recognized by individual readers and not others. Even at the point of greatest agreement, only four readers out of 16 stated the same thematic inference for the overall meaning of the story. At the point of least agreement, seven readers stated seven separate themes unlike those of the other participants. Had there been more than 16 participants, there likely would have been an even greater number of interpretations.

Not only did readers infer a variety of summary themes for each story, they claimed a variety of thematic possibilities on the way to these summary themes. No two readers of “Grief,” even those agreeing on the overall theme, made the same thematic inferences during reading. Only one rater identified two thematic inferences that were approximately the same, and the other rater judged that two sets of two thematic inferences were close in meaning, though not identical.

The readers of “Diverging Paths” tended to agree more often on thematic inferences en route to making their final thematic inference – several readers made two of the same thematic inferences on the way. However, even with this story, readers could share the same overall impression and none of the same thematic inferences during reading. Therefore, the answer to the original question: Do readers who arrive at the same conclusion regarding the overall meaning or theme of a story make similar thematic inferences as they read?, is that readers can draw the same conclusion about a story and yet make very different thematic inferences mid-passage. Also, readers who arrive at different conclusions, as might be expected, are no more likely to process stories similarly.

The results of this study suggest that readers, at least avid readers, juggle simultaneously a variety of interpretations of a story, concluding the overall theme only at the story’s end. These results are consistent with Whitney et al.’s (1991) findings that readers with adequate working memory capacity maintain local coherence and balance possible thematic interpretations before settling on a specific elaboration. Thus, readers often did not share the same thematic inferences during reading but could come to the same conclusion about a story. For instance, Reader #13, while reading “Diverging Paths and All That,” stated two thematic inferences each for two of the four paragraphs and two thematic inferences for the overall meaning of the story. (See Appendix E, particularly Readers #12 and 15.) Others who stuck to a single thematic inference for each paragraph were still seen to juggle multiple interpretations – the content of their statements showed a variety of points of view rather than a single early schematic impression. For instance, Reader #5 made four unrelated thematic inferences for each of the four paragraphs of “Diverging Paths and All That” but was still able to pull the story together with an overall statement of theme.

If one thematic inference followed another in a schema-driven fashion, readers should have drawn similar inferences, but they did not. In contrast to the notion that micropropositions, under the control of a schema, are represented by an ordered connected list of macropropositions which form the gist of a story, as Kintsch and van Dijk’s (1978) model might suggest, our results suggest that skillful

readers exercise a flexible reading style and are not so quick to adopt an early impression of a piece of literature.

However, the thematic inferences drawn mid-passage, if not related to each other, were always in some way related to the overall stated theme. Thus, there was no evidence to suggest that thematic inferences made during the course of reading are independent of the ultimate theme drawn by the reader post-reading. The readers appeared to coalesce the main points of each thematic inference into an even greater global statement about the story; although each thematic inference by definition is a statement of main idea, in order to state the main idea for the story, the readers often incorporated the essence of some or all of their previous thematic inferences with the addition of a newly stated idea. Thus, readers offered what could be considered two different types of thematic inferences – those occurring mid-passage and those stated upon completion of the story. Most often, those stated during reading did not incorporate aspects of other thematic inferences stated.

The current study used a limited sample of both readers and texts, and it required readers to think-aloud at specified junctures in the texts. This experimental technique demonstrated that thematic inferences can be made, that these particular readers had the prerequisite world knowledge to make them for these particular stories, and that these inferences are expressible in language. But as these inferences are not normally verbalized, the fact that the inferences were expressed in verbal protocols does not allow us to conclude that these inferences are generated on-line in either sense of the term.

In sum, the data suggest that thematic inferences are not generated at the moment of initial comprehension, and that they are generated strategically and after-the-fact, almost certainly requiring extra effort. This is not to say that thematic inferences are divorced from on-line automatic processes; on-line processing stimulates off-line processing, and bottom-up processing can trigger top-down processing, even mid-passage. But our results highlight how important it is for us to remember that themes are not automatically inferable and that texts do not “contain” themes. Readers impute them.

Thematic inferences (like all strategic inferences) are challenging to study empirically. Only some readers make them some of the time. They are likely to differ from reader to reader, reading to reading, and text to text. It is not clear how to tap them without distorting ordinary reading processes. And the unit of experience over which themes are extracted – propositions? words? paragraphs? – is also unclear. We don't know whether some themes are more chronically or temporarily accessible than others, and what might make them more accessible (salience within a culture, personal significance for a reader, or particular qualities of a text); if some themes are more accessible than others, this complicates the question of just how automatic or strategic thematic inferences are. It is unclear what determines how an overall theme is formulated – when it is rapidly selected and when it slowly coalesces. It is also unclear whether certain genres, like fables (see Dorfman and Brewer, 1994), call for thematic inferencing more than others. Such questions go beyond more traditional questions about on-line vs. off-line processing, but they are essential to explore if we are to better understand readers' actual experience.

Appendix A

Checklist for
“Diverging Paths and All That”

Choose from the following themes the one that is **MOST LIKE YOUR OWN UNDERSTANDING**. Check “other” if none of the themes below correspond to your understanding of the story.

1. The same role models and circumstances can produce opposite responses.
2. The making of moral choices marks the beginning of adulthood.
3. As a person gains knowledge of the world and its problems, a loss of innocence accompanies the process.
4. Following crooked leaders astray may be tempting. But in the end, crime is a sordid affair.
5. People are less influenced by role models than by fear of punishment they may receive.
6. Other.

* * *

Now, from the same set of themes, choose the one you think might be the **MOST COMMON** response amongst other readers.

1. The same role models and circumstances can produce opposite responses.
2. The making of moral choices marks the beginning of adulthood.
3. As a person gains knowledge of the world and its problems, a loss of innocence accompanies the process.
4. Following crooked leaders astray may be tempting. But in the end, crime is a sordid affair.
5. People are less influenced by role models than by fear of punishment they may receive.

Checklist for
“Grief”

Choose from the following themes the one that is **MOST LIKE YOUR OWN UNDERSTANDING**. Check “other” if none of the themes below correspond to your understanding of the story.

1. Truth doesn’t serve a public function.
2. History has its requirements, separate from our own.
3. Some truths are better left unsaid.
4. Don’t judge a book by its cover.
5. Grief cannot explain the cause of death; it can only explain the feeling upon death.
6. Other.

Now, from the same set of themes, choose the one you think might be the **MOST COMMON** response amongst other readers.

1. Truth doesn't serve a public purpose.
2. History has its requirements, separate from our own.
3. Some truths are better left unsaid.
4. Don't judge a book by its cover.
5. Grief cannot explain the cause of death; it can only explain the feeling upon death.

* * *

How did reading and thinking aloud affect your comprehension or ability to interpret the theme?

Appendix B

READER QUESTIONNAIRE

1. About how many books do you read for pleasure in any given year?
2. Name the last three books you have read.
3. Do you prefer fiction or non-fiction? If fiction, do you read novels and short stories?
4. When you read fiction, do you read to acquire information and to learn something? Of the last three books you read, how many would you say you read in this manner?
5. When you read fiction do you tend to "lose yourself" in the story? Of the last three books you read, how many would you say you read in this manner?
6. When you read, do you think about the larger point the author might be making? Of the last three books you read, how many would you say you read in this manner?
7. What is/was your major in college?
8. Have you studied literary theory?

Appendix C

Responses to "The Tortoise and the Hare"

1. In the long run, slow and persistent is better than fast and overconfident.
2. Talent isn't a substitute for effort.
3. Plodding persistent effort wins out over overconfident natural talent.
4. Don't get cocky. Overconfidence in one's self can be detrimental.
5. Vanity is negative. Persistence is positive.
6. Success demands not an innate ability but rather diligence and self-knowledge.
7. If you work hard, even if it's not easy, you can succeed.
8. With consistent hard work you can attain your goals. You shouldn't take for granted your abilities because without hard work, they're meaningless.
9. Despite one's sense of prowess, one can't take it for granted and must plan to make that prowess count.

10. Those who have self-awareness and know how to utilize their best qualities optimally stand a better chance of success in life. Those who are arrogant and self-deluding risk greater failure.
11. Those who are persistent and act with recognition of their weaknesses can overcome those weaknesses and be successful.
12. Carelessness can have ill effects. Diligence pays off.
13. Nothing is predictable in terms of outcome.

Appendix D

The Cough

Harry Humes

Our young father walked Ash Alley whistling “Rescue the Perishing,” but already he carried mine tunnels home in his black-streaked breath. It was like first sleet against an attic window. My mother would look at him, her lips a line of impatience and fear. “Your lungs will soon be stone,” she said. “It’s good money, Dorse. It’s our only money.”

The larger point the author might be making is: *sometimes the man of the house has to risk his life to support his family.*

Some of the men who stopped at our house to see my father had tongues like fish that stuck out between words. Gray-faced, shoulders bony, they all seemed about to cave in. My mother would leave the room, her lips thinner than ever, but the cough followed her across the linoleum, down cellar steps, hunkered close when she planted sage and primrose. The cough was like a child. It was always hungry. It demanded attention. It woke us up at odd times and sat in the good chair by the window. In the winter, it trailed behind my father like a peacock feather on a woman’s hat.

The larger point the author might be making is: *the choices men make can pain those they care about. Also, it seems like the cough is ever present. Sacrifices can be a constant reminder.*

One summer he told us we were on a planet going nowhere fast. He made a model he called an orrery, and showed us how the heavens worked. The center was bright and hung there like one of my mother’s peony blossoms. “That there’s what pushes it,” he said. “And that’s what made the coal.”

The larger point the author might be making is: *fathers can be like the center of the universe for their families. They can be like the sun and propel things forward, or like a dark cloud, causing the family to go nowhere.*

We looked at him and nodded, but we had our own ideas about what made it go. We could hear it behind the least little thing.

The larger point the author might be making is: *one person’s experience of reality can be very different from another person’s.*

What is the theme of the story?

Sacrifices made by an individual can affect their sense of reality and put them at variance with those around them.

Appendix E

“Diverging Paths and All That”

Response to Paragraph 1

- Reader #1: Children relate to life with different interests or in different ways than adults.
- Reader #2: There is often a contrast between a child’s agenda and an adult’s agenda.
- Reader #3: We spend our leisure time by choosing the activities that interest us and they may not be the things we think in advance.
- Reader #4: Life includes big dramatic changes while minute daily things still go on.
- Reader #5: The importance of larger movements are lost on, in this case, children.
- Reader #6: Children’s experience is immediate and doesn’t correspond to adult’s perceptions of the world. The things that are important are completely different. Children experience the world in a more sensory way.
- Reader #7: Reality is never quite as it appears; simple worlds tend to splinter.
- Reader #8: Kids, perhaps in lower middle class United States environments, will take advantage of what little freedom they have to indulge in the available commerce.
- Reader #9: Fathers can have interests that are different than their children.
- Reader #10: The intention of the parent is not always followed by the children.
- Reader #11: Children and adults have very different value systems and priorities.
- Reader #12: People are compelled to watch something really important and what’s important to some people is different than for others.
- Reader #13: a. Television and modern media impact on people and their. b. Fathers and children may have different world views.
- Reader #14: Sometimes people try to occupy others with distractions (money and objects) that they may not actually need.
- Reader #15: Kids will be kids, preferring candy to almost anything.
- Reader #16: The world is a world of consumption; the adults are consuming images and politics and kids consume whatever they find most interesting.

Response to Paragraph 2

- Reader #1. Children often live in a different world from adults, in both is reflected dishonesty in really different ways.

- Reader #2. There is often a contrast between a child's tactile sense of what they can extract from the world and the larger moral issues involved like "Stealing is wrong."
- Reader #3. Sometimes people can take advantage of us when we are distracted. Kids may take advantage playfully when they see the adults not looking.
- Reader #4. There is a resemblance in society between big and small corruption.
- Reader #5. There are two orders of thieves.
- Reader #6. There are two levels of dishonesty and deceit. One that is national and political, and one that is individual and personal. There is a relationship between the two, but they are also completely separate.
- Reader #7. Everyday events mirror and are influenced by political events.
- Reader #8. Kids can take advantage of the projected morality to rebel against it.
- Reader #9. Children unattended can do negative things.
- Reader #10. The values that the child expresses may not always be the family.
- Reader #11. Sometimes people in general, and children more specifically, can easily get away with crimes.
- Reader #12. What one thing means to one person may mean something different to someone else.
- Reader #13. Modern technology can interfere with our noticing the world around us.
- Reader #14. People get easily distracted by things that can entertain them and take them to a different mental place.
- Reader #15. Boys will be boys, and they will not think twice about their actions and will even make smug remarks about it.
- Reader #16. Adults' and children's worlds share consumption.

Response to Paragraph 3

- Reader #1. If children see that adults are dishonest, they feel that they can be dishonest, too. Some are better at it than others.
- Reader #2. Public figures can serve as *carte blanche* to act immorally.
- Reader #3. We can justify taking advantage based on seeing other people do it, people in power. If they can do it, I can do it.
- Reader #4. A person on his own has a harder time being a criminal or committing a crime.
- Reader #5. A person finds justification for their behavior in the behavior of others.
- Reader #6. Women have a more well-developed moral sense than men. Everyone is dishonest in some way, though.
- Reader #7. Our morality is clouded by what we want and we desire to get away with fulfilling that desire at all costs.
- Reader #8. People can use the weaknesses of their leaders to make excuses for their own deficits.
- Reader #9. Siblings can learn to do these negative acts from each other.

- Reader #10: Role models that children have, whether they are political or in any other area, are extremely important in not just the positive examples they portray but in the negative examples as well.
- Reader #11: You can justify an immoral action if that behavior is commonplace in society.
- Reader #12: When you want something really badly, it doesn't matter how you get it. And, even people who are supposed to be good can be really bad.
- Reader #13: Morality, on some level, is still a part of who we are as easy as it may be to be immoral.
- Reader #14: Sometimes people get a notion to do something and while doing it no longer see the point but do it anyway.
- Reader #15: a. Girls will be girls; they are not as able to pull off macho thefts.
b. Moral faults in leaders can be an example and a crutch for the general populace.
- Reader #16: Acting dishonestly takes practice.

Response to Paragraph 4

- Reader #1: This child sees that not all adults think dishonesty is all right. Some think it's really serious and decides that it's wrong and chooses a different path than Billy who is headed some place else.
- Reader #2: Incidents can cause quiet moral turning points.
- Reader #3: Other people's actions can bring one to a personal realization, cause a light bulb to go off.
- Reader #4: A leader can be a bad example for the people.
- Reader #5: One man's dishonesty makes another man honest.
- Reader #6: If we are honest with ourselves, our dishonesty will make us suffer in the long run. Therefore, it is better not to do something dishonest.
- Reader #7: There is no stating categorically what is right and wrong, or where the boundary lies.
- Reader #8: Believing in an authority figure can make you lose track of where you're going/what you're doing.
- Reader #9: Children can be affected by environmental influences and possibly swayed to act more positively.
- Reader #10: Adults and children react differently to the same messages and situations, but the children need explanation from the adults as to what their reaction is based on.
- Reader #11: Sometimes our society benefits from the second thoughts and deeper conscience that some people have but which politicians usually lack.
- Reader #12: While people are focused on what they think is important, smaller crooks are getting away with crime.

- Reader #13: a. People do, and want to, put faith in their leaders and it does in the end affect them when they have been let down. b. Siblings aren't necessarily alike. So, even with all the love and admiration they might have for each other, they can't necessarily follow in the same path.
- Reader #14: Children and adults live in different worlds; children are aware of what goes on but are not interested.
- Reader #15: a. After a lynch mob lynches the victim, they cannot help but consider the gravity of the situation. b. Boys will be boys.
- Reader #16: In both the worlds of children and adults, there are a mixture of feelings that make right and wrong less than clear.

Overall Theme

- Reader #1: Children so get their signals about their values from the adults in the world they live in. Our world had mixed messages. Some children get one message and some get the other.
- Reader #2: Children learn by examples and sometimes it's not always the example people intend.
- Reader #3: We watch other people and base all kinds of actions and reactions onto them, good and bad. Depending on what we see other people doing at one time, we can do one thing, switch back and do another.
- Reader #4: Every person ultimately has his own moral values. You can be led by someone but ultimately your true self will direct you.
- Reader #5: You can be your person. You can escape the influence of the environment.
- Reader #6: Dishonesty happens at every level from the most simple to the most complex. It's better to be honest than dishonest, but it's possible to get away with dishonesty at least for a time.
- Reader #7: Immoral acts happen on all levels and judgment isn't always just.
- Reader #8: Going the way of dishonesty leads to ethical bankruptcy. And, from the loss of a leader is the loss of unity.
- Reader #9: Children are affected by both parenting and non-parenting forces as conditioning from their behavior.
- Reader #10: The parent out of sight may never know what his children are doing in private.
- Reader #11: In the end, you have to base your morality on your own value system as developed through your life.
- Reader #12: a. Morality is relative. b. There are always things going on that you don't know about.
- Reader #13: a. Siblings are different. Even with all the desire to be your sibling, or follow your sibling, you're not that person. b. Modern technology and politics has created an empty free environment.

- Reader #14: Children and adults get bombarded with information that confuses them as to their natural desires.
- Reader #15: Morality is an individual issue for everybody and not everyone is going to hold to the same standard.
- Reader #16: Adult and child worlds parallel one another. Some people in both worlds lie and steal easily and the rest of the people in both worlds are less sure about what is right and wrong.

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