

Experiments With Theme

Stories that are built around themes or philosophies often come out sounding rather pretentious. Characters and events become subservient to political, sociological, or moral concepts, and appear flat; prose becomes disconnected from voice, and takes on a terrible dryness. The collected works of Ayn Rand are good examples.

But then again...as with anything, if you do it right, you can get away with it. You *can* write a theme-based story.

One of my hobby-horses in teaching fiction writing is that the writer should never forget about the interconnectedness of plot and character. Plot drives character, as events in real life change real people. And character drives plot, in that the situations we get into are dictated by what sort of person we are. If we're going to write something based on an abstract idea, the work must fit into this equation. The idea may drive characters and events—but the characters and events must also seem to form the idea. We have to create people poised on the edge of apprehending some truth (or appealing untruth), then push them over the edge with well-chosen events. Or take someone who embraces our idea, and, for better or worse, puts certain circumstances into motion that will test that idea.

It's akin to the difficulty of writing a good science fiction story: you need to have great characters and a great plot, *plus* you need to design an entire freaking planet. That is to say, it's hard. Below, I've dug up a bunch of quotations from various thinkers. Write something based upon one of them.

- 1) From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs. (Karl Marx)
- 2) Every law is an infraction of liberty. (Jeremy Bentham)
- 3) Whatever is funny is subversive...a dirty joke is a sort of mental rebellion. (George Orwell)
- 4) You can never have a revolution in order to establish a democracy. You must have a democracy in order to have a revolution. (G. K. Chesterton)
- 5) Concepts without percepts are empty. Percepts without concepts are blind. (Immanuel Kant)
- 6) For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed. (Ludwig Wittgenstein)
- 7) Mankind has grown strong in eternal struggles and it will only perish through eternal peace. (Adolf Hitler)
- 8) Leisure is the mother of philosophy. (Thomas Hobbes)
- 9) Our inventions are want to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end. (Henry David Thoreau)
- 10) Man is so made that he can only find relaxation from one kind of labor by taking up another. (Anatole France)