

## **The -ISMs: Terms to Know and Use for Discussing Author's Purpose, Theme and Characterization**

In literary interpretation, knowing the following terms can be of help in discussing a particular author's purpose and theme, as well as in discussing characterization. An author has a predominant attitude toward life, as we all do, and he/she reveals that attitude through the characters. If the major character in a novel or short story ( or the persona in a poem), reacts to conflict in a certain way and, consequently, fails or succeeds, it is an extension of the author's theme.

As the reader, you are interpreting what that theme, or the author's attitude, is. Others may not see it in the same way as you, but the point of interpretation is to explain and illustrate why or how you arrive at your interpretation. In using the following terms, we usually say that an author (or the character) shows a predominant attitude. Most will have secondary tendencies, but one attitude will be dominant. It is that dominant attitude that relates to the theme.

In deciding which term best describes a particular character or author, trust yourself. It is a matter of interpretation. In some stories, a fine line separates naturalism and determinism. One person may say a character is simply realistic; another person may consider the character naturalistic. You may see strong qualities of romanticism; whereas, another person may see transcendentalism. It is opinion. Your opinion is as valid as anyone else's opinion--if you can effectively explain it and support it.

A thesis statement for a literary analysis focusing on a world view (-ism) may look like this:

Although the poem, “-Out –Out” by Robert Frost, resonates with romantic images of the grandeur and beauty of Nature, the persona reveals a naturalistic attitude.

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### **The -Isms:**

**deism**, influenced by rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Deists acknowledge that the regularity of nature (natural laws) reflects the benevolence of a divine providence. They base their belief in god entirely on reason, without any reference to faith, revelation, or institutional religion. Therefore, deists reject “miracles” such as virgin birth and resurrection of the dead. They acknowledge Jesus as a historical leader and teacher and the Bible as an important historical document, but do not accept the supernatural, i.e. irrational, attributes of either. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and many other leaders of the American revolution were deists.

**determinism**, influenced by rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Determinists believe that every event is the inevitable result of antecedent causes. Applied to ethics and psychology, determinism usually involves a denial of free will. In some respects, determinism is similar to predestination; however, determinism is not theologically based. Determinists believe our fate is decided by circumstances beyond our control, circumstances

such as our environment. The institutions of society control us, as well as our own psychology. If I am born into an inner city family that does not value education, then my educational future is determined, which, in turn, controls my economic future. Today, based on genetic studies, some are advancing the idea that my disposition for diseases (as well as my emotional/psychological attributes) is “built into my genetic structure.” This is an expression of determinism.

**existentialism** emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in an indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts. **For a broader description see [below](#).**

**naturalism**, in literature, a philosophical attitude that became dominant in early twentieth century.

Naturalism is based on realism and determinism, but it adds another dimension. The naturalist places emphasis on the importance of environment. The environment in which the individual finds himself controls whether or not the individual will succeed or overcome adversity, and “environment” is a broad term--it can be society, government, culture, family or our own psychology. Our fate is decided by circumstances beyond our control.

In expressing his/her attitude toward life, the naturalist seems to say: “I must try to overcome; I must struggle against adversity.” The individual does try--but the individual will fail. The individual may think there is a chance of success, but the odds against him/her are too great. The reader may conclude that such a character is a tragic hero because he/she struggled valiantly, or the reader may conclude that such a character is simply “pitiful” for fighting a losing battle.

**predestination**, a theological doctrine that asserts that God predestines from eternity the salvation of certain souls.

So-called **double predestination**, as in Calvinism, is the added assertion that God also foreordains certain souls to damnation. Predestination rests on the basis of God’s omniscience and omnipotence and is closely related to the doctrines of divine providence and grace. Calvinism rejects the role of free will and teaches that grace is irresistible and that God by an absolute election saves the souls of some and abandons the souls of others. In early American literature, we see this belief in Puritan literature.

**realism**, in literature, a philosophical attitude, as well as a writing technique, that arose as a reaction to romanticism in the late nineteenth century.

The realist attempts to experience life objectively. He/she concentrates on the five senses: seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling. An effort is made to ignore, if not discount, the emotions. Emotions are unreliable; “facts” are not. As an attitude toward life, the realist strives to make no value judgments and seems to say: “What you see is what you get--nothing more, nothing less.”

As a writing technique, realism is objective description.

Mark Twain (late 19th century) and Ernest Hemingway (20th century) wrote with realism. Whether or not they exhibited realistic philosophical attitudes is open to interpretation.

**relativism**, is a philosophical attitude dominant in the twentieth century.

Relativism states that human judgments are always conditioned by the specific social environment of a particular person, time, or place. Cognitive relativists hold that there can be no universal knowledge of the world, but only diverse interpretations of it. Moral relativists hold that there are no universal standards of moral value, but only the cultural norms of particular societies.

I cannot know whether a particular act or decision is right or wrong unless I know and understand the circumstances that produced the act or decision. "Right and wrong," "good and bad" are relative terms, not absolute terms. A commonly heard comment is "It's relative."

**romanticism**, a philosophical revolt in 18th century against rationalism.

Broadly speaking, a romanticist is one who views life with optimism. He/she recognizes that life has difficulties, even tragedies, but believes that we, as individuals, can overcome them; therefore, the ability and desire to confront adversity is a required, as well as necessary, quality. In addition, romanticists believe the individual to be the center of life and that literature is valuable as an expression of human feelings and attitudes.

Romanticism places an emphasis on the importance of imagination and the spiritual feelings inherent in the human being. Romanticists believe that as humans, we have more than just the five senses that science recognizes--seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, smelling. Our "sixth sense" involves interior feelings that cannot be objectively proven. This leads to an emphasis on the "romantic" qualities such as idealism and mysticism. The romanticist emphasizes frequent and direct contact with nature because through nature, we learn. Nature is both a teacher and a healer for humankind.

**transcendentalism**, in American literature, a philosophical and literary movement that flourished in New England from about 1836 to 1860.

Transcendentalism originated among a small group of intellectuals who were reacting against the orthodoxy of Calvinism and the rationalism of the Unitarian Church. It is related to romanticism, but it strives for a spiritual awareness. Like romanticism, transcendentalism recognizes a "sixth" sense, but believes that it can be extended to the "all knowing" state of awareness, well beyond idealism.

If you think about the Hindu mystic or, perhaps, the Buddhist monk who draws inward to become "one with the universe," you will come close to understanding the concept of transcendentalism.

**Existentialism** is a broad view, with different emphases by different people, but the following three concepts (most directly expressed by Sartre) are common to most existentialists.

### **Choice and Commitment:**

Perhaps the most prominent theme in existentialist writing is that of choice. Humanity's primary distinction, in the view of most existentialists, is the freedom to choose. Existentialists have held that human beings do not have a fixed nature, or essence, as other animals and plants do; each human being makes choices that create his or her own nature. In the formulation of the 20th-century French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, existence precedes essence. Choice is therefore central to human existence, and it is inescapable; even the refusal to choose is a choice. Freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility. Because individuals are free to choose their own path, existentialists have argued, they must accept the risk and responsibility of following their commitment wherever it leads.

### **Existence precedes essence:**

There is no cosmic designer; there is no design or essence of human nature. Human existence or being differs from the being of objects in that human being is self-conscious. This self-consciousness also gives the human subject the opportunity to define itself. The individual creates his/her self by making self-directed choices. (Example: a chair is an object. Its essence precedes its existence. A human must construct her/his own essence. It is continually evolving through the choices he/she makes.)

As human existence is self-conscious without being pre-defined, we, as autonomous beings are "condemned to be free"-- compelled to make future directed choices. These choices induce anxiety and uncertainty. If we, as individuals, simply follow custom or social expectations in order to escape angst, we have escaped the responsibility of making our own choices, of creating our own essence. We have acted in bad faith.

### **Existential Angst:**

Existential angst is an important term. It is that severe anxiety that we experience when we first recognize the enormity of the responsibility that we have through our choices. Some never recover from the angst and, therefore, stay in a severe depressive state; one must act in spite of the feelings of depression/anxiety to create meaning in life.

To act authentically, we must take responsibility for our future. We cannot choose what gender, class, or country we were born into, but we can choose what we make of them. We are free to create our own interpretation of ourselves in relation to the world, to create a project of possibilities, of authentic actions, as the expression of freedom.