

Theme:

You can't highlight theme evidence. All themes are probably true.

The Key to Theme is Character

The author expresses something about life they wish you to know. That's called theme. On the STAAR test, ALL of your answer choices will be true and plausible. The answer choices will use collective terms like "adults" and "people" and "boys."

To find theme, what you have to do is first determine what characters represent each entity described by the vague terms in the answer choices. Then you have to decide which characters are the primary focus of the author and which characters are secondary. Then, when you look at the answer choices, you closely consider the options in terms of what the main characters are learning. If the answer choice talks about a minor character, the theme might be true, but not the point of what the author is focusing on for your lesson about life.

As you read the following article, think about what Borden Deal wants you to know about life.

Who are the primary characters? The adults? The boys? Green Spaces?

Then use that information to pair with the answer choices and questions below. The primary characters will be the ones learning the lessons about life.

Bring your textual support and reasoning to the Socratic Seminar circle.

F. Adults often lose their sense of accomplishment as they age.

*Are the adults the primary characters in this excerpt?

*Do the adults in this story forget about things they have done well? If so, what were those accomplishments? Highlight the evidence if possible.

G. People take pride in their work.

*Who is proud of their work in the excerpt? How do you know? Highlight the evidence if possible.

H. People rely on authority figures to maintain order.

*Which people in the excerpt need authority figures to keep things peaceful?

*Which people are the authority figures?

*Highlight the evidence if possible.

J. It is important to recognize the value of green spaces.

*Which characters recognize the value of green spaces?

*Was the importance of green spaces the most important idea in the passage?

*What did a group of people do that proves that green spaces wasn't the theme - wasn't what Borden Deal wanted you to consider about how you live your life?

*Highlight the evidence if possible.

Going Deeper: Titles almost always help us out with theme or thesis. Anybody ever hear of Antaeus? Sounds Greek to me. [And it is.](#) Anataeus was a giant, whose father was Poseidon. Guess what? His mother was Gaea - the Earth! "So that even if thrown to the ground, he was invincible." How does this allusion to Greek mythology reveal another theme related to the way T.J. responded by destroying all their hard work?

Antaeus

T. J. has moved from a rural area to a large city. After meeting the narrator and the narrator's friends on an abandoned rooftop where they regularly spend time together, T. J. suggests they make a rooftop garden to grow watermelons. He hopes the activity will bond them as friends as well as bring a sense of Alabama, where he had his own acre of farmland, to his new home. The boys have established the garden after much hard work. from Antaeus by Borden Deal.

1 Then an adult voice said behind us: "What are you boys doing up here?"

2 It startled us, for no one had ever come up here before, in all the time we had been using the roof of the factory. We jerked around and saw three men standing near the trap door at the other end of the roof. They weren't policemen, or night watchmen, but three men in plump business suits, looking at us. They walked toward us.

3 "What are you boys doing up here?" the one in the middle said again.

4 We stood still, guilt heavy among us, levied by the tone of voice, and looked at the three strangers.

5 The men stared at the grass flourishing behind us. "What's this?" the man said. "How did this get up here?"

6 "Sure is growing good, ain't it?" T. J. said conversationally. "We planted it."

7 The men kept looking at the grass as if they didn't believe it. It was a thick carpet over the earth now, a patch of deep greenness startling in the sterile industrial surroundings.

8 "Yes, sir," T. J. said proudly. "We toted that earth up here and planted that grass." He fluttered the seed catalogue. "And we're just fixing to plant us some watermelon."

9 The man looked at him then, his eyes strange and faraway. "What do you mean, putting this on the roof of my building?" he said. "Do you want to go to jail?"

10 T. J. looked shaken. The rest of us went silent, frightened by the authority of his voice. We had grown up aware of adult authority, of policemen and night watchmen and teachers, and this man sounded like all the others. But it was a new thing to T. J.

11 "Well, you wasn't using the roof," T. J. said. He paused a moment and added shrewdly, "So we just thought to pretty it up a little bit."

12 "And sag it so I'd have to rebuild it," the man said sharply. He turned away, saying to a man beside him, "See that all that junk is shoveled off by tomorrow."

13 "Yes, sir," the man said.

14 T. J. started forward. "You can't do that," he said. "We toted it up here, and it's our earth. We planted it and raised it and toted it up here."

15 The man stared at him coldly. "But it's my building," he said. "It's to be shoveled off by tomorrow."

16 "It's our earth," T. J. said desperately. "You ain't got no right!"

17 The men walked on without listening and descended clumsily through the trap door. T. J. stood looking after them, his body tense with anger, until they had disappeared. They wouldn't even argue with him, wouldn't let him defend his earth-rights.

18 He turned to us. "We won't let 'em do it," he said fiercely. "We'll stay up here all day tomorrow and the day after that, and we won't let 'em do it."

19 We just looked at him. We knew that there was no stopping it. He saw it in our faces, and his face wavered for a moment before he gripped it into determination.

20 "They ain't got no right," he said. "It's our earth. It's our land. Can't nobody touch a man's own land."

21 We kept on looking at him, listening to the words but knowing that it was no use. The adult world had descended on us even in our richest dream, and we knew there was no calculating the adult world, no fighting it, no winning against it.

22 We started moving slowly toward the parapet and the fire escape, avoiding a last look at the green beauty of the earth that T. J. had planted for us . . . had planted deeply in our minds as well as in our experience. We filed slowly over the edge and down the steps to the plank, T. J. coming last, and all of us could feel the weight of his grief behind us.

23 "Wait a minute," he said suddenly, his voice harsh with the effort of calling. We stopped and turned, held by the tone of his voice, and looked up at him standing above us on the fire escape.

24 "We can't stop them?" he said, looking down at us, his face strange in the dusky light. "There ain't no way to stop 'em?"

25 "No," Blackie said with finality. "They own the building."

26 We stood still for a moment, looking up at T. J., caught into inaction by the decision working in his face. He stared back at us, and his face was pale and mean in the poor light.

27 “They ain’t gonna touch my earth,” he said fiercely. “They ain’t gonna lay a hand on it! Come on.”

28 He turned around and started up the fire escape again, almost running against the effort of climbing. We followed more slowly, not knowing what he intended. By the time we reached him, he had seized a board and thrust it into the soil, scooping it up and flinging it over the parapet into the areaway below. He straightened and looked us squarely in the face.

29 “They can’t touch it,” he said. “I won’t let ‘em lay a dirty hand on it!”

30 We saw it then. He stooped to his labor again and we followed, the gusts of his anger moving in frenzied labor among us as we scattered along the edge of earth, scooping it and throwing it over the parapet, destroying with anger the growth we had nurtured with such tender care. The soil carried so laboriously upward to the light and the sun cascaded swiftly into the dark areaway, the green blades of grass crumpled and twisted in the falling.

31 It took less time than you would think . . . the task of destruction is infinitely easier than that of creation. We stopped at the end, leaving only a scattering of loose soil, and when it was finally over, a stillness stood among the group and over the factory building. We looked down at the bare sterility of black tar, felt the harsh texture of it under the soles of our shoes, and the anger had gone out of us, leaving only a sore aching in our minds like over-stretched muscles.

32 T. J. stood for a moment, his breathing slowing from anger and effort, caught into the same contemplation of destruction as all of us. He stooped slowly, finally, and picked up a lonely blade of grass left trampled under our feet and put it between his teeth, tasting it, sucking the greenness out of it into his mouth. Then he started walking toward the fire escape, moving before any of us were ready to move, and disappeared over the edge while we stared after him.

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