

Before You Read

Birthday Box and To James

Connect to the Short Story and the Poem

Think about a time you felt inspired to do your best. Were you giving your best effort because it was an activity you love doing? Or were you doing it for someone you love?

Quickwrite Freewrite for a few minutes about how it felt to do your best and how you feel about it now.

Build Background

Authors get ideas for their stories and poems in different ways.

- In 1995, an editor invited ten authors, including Jane Yolen, to write about a child who receives a beautiful, empty box as a birthday present. Each author's imagination was sparked by the same idea, yet each writer wrote a completely original piece of literature.
- Among Frank Horne's many accomplishments, he once coached a championship high school track team. The talent and efforts of a young runner inspired Frank Horne to write the poem "To James."

Vocabulary

stark (stärk) *adj.* plain; harsh, grim, or severe (p. 705).

The colorful costumes in the school play contrast with the stark set.

festive (fes'tiv) *adj.* joyful; suitable for a celebration (p. 705).

We used decorations and flowers to make the house festive for the holiday.

infinite (in'fə nit) *adj.* extremely great; having no limits or end (p. 706). *Small children seem to have an infinite amount of energy when they play.*

subtle (sut'al) *adj.* characterized by cleverness; having a faint, delicate quality (p. 707). *Dad left a broom near the table as a subtle reminder that we should clean up after lunch.*

Meet the Authors



Jane Yolen

A Literary Life Jane Yolen wrote her first two books before she entered high school. Since that time, Yolen has written more than 250 books. "Birthday Box" was first published in 1995. Jane Yolen was born in 1939.

Frank Horne

An Accomplished Man Frank Horne's love of track began when he ran the quarter mile as a college student. He once teamed with other African American poets. "Your task is definite, grand, and fine," Frank Horne was born in 1899.



Glencoe Online

Author Search For more about Jane Yolen and Frank Horne, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code 6L29763u5.

Set Purposes for Reading

BQ BIG Question

As you read, ask yourself, how can an older person's wisdom and experience help a younger person become who he or she wants to be?

Literary Element Style

Style is the author's choice and arrangement of words and sentences. Authors sometimes repeat a series of words, phrases, or sentences that have a similar grammatical form. This technique, called parallelism, shows the relationship between ideas and emphasizes important thoughts.

Analyzing style can help you understand the meaning of a story or poem. As you read, ask yourself, how does the word choice and use of parallelism contribute to the meaning and purpose of each selection?

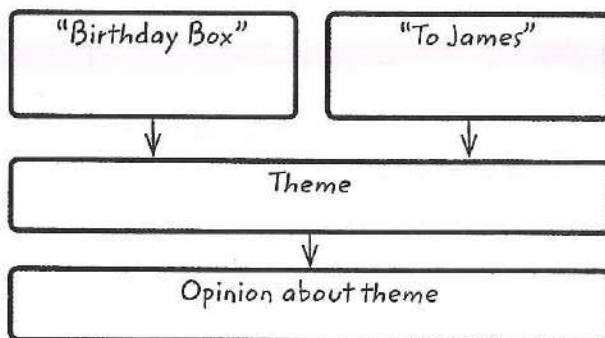
Reading Strategy Evaluate Theme

When you **evaluate**, you make a judgment or form an opinion about something that you read. When you evaluate theme, you form an opinion about the message that the author wants to convey.

Evaluating theme is important because it helps you form an opinion about what you're reading. It also helps you understand recurring themes, or themes that appear in more than one literary work. A short story and a poem can have a similar theme, even if they have different structures. To evaluate theme, think about the following questions:

- What message about life does the author want to convey?
- Do you agree with the author's message? Why or why not?

As you read, look for details that hint at the theme of each selection. Then use the details to analyze and evaluate each theme. In what ways are the themes of the selections similar? Use a graphic organizer like the one below.



Learning Objectives

For pages 700–711

In studying these texts, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study:

Analyzing style.

Analyzing parallelism.

Reading: Evaluating theme.

TRY IT

Evaluate Imagine that the theme of a short story you just read is "Act first and think later." Discuss with a partner whether you think this statement is good advice for young people.



Birthday Box

Jane Yolen



Emerging Angel. John Bunker. Mixed Media.

I was ten years old when my mother died. Ten years old on that very day. Still she gave me a party of sorts. Sick as she was, Mama had seen to it, organizing it at the hospital. She made sure the doctors and nurses all brought me presents. We were good friends with them all by that time, because Mama had been in the hospital for so long.

The head nurse, V. Louise Higgins (I never did know what that V stood for), gave me a little box, which was sort of funny because she was the biggest of all the nurses there. I mean she was tremendous. And she was the only one who insisted on wearing all white. Mama had called her the great white shark when she was first admitted, only not to V. Louise's face. "All those needles," Mama had said. "Like teeth." But V. Louise was sweet, not sharklike at all, and she'd been so gentle with Mama.

I opened the little present first. It was a **fountain pen**, a real one, not a fake one like you get at Kmart.

"Now you can write beautiful stories, Katie," V. Louise said to me.

I didn't say that stories come out of your head, not out of a pen. That wouldn't have been polite, and Mama—even sick—was real big on politeness.

"Thanks, V. Louise," I said.

The Stardust Twins—which is what Mama called Patty and Tracey-Lynn because they reminded her of dancers in an old-fashioned ballroom—gave me a present together. It was a diary and had a picture of a little girl in pink, reading in a garden swing. A little young for me, a little too cute. I mean, I read Stephen King¹ and want to write like him. But as Mama always reminded me whenever Dad finally remembered to send me something, it was the

Visual Vocabulary

A **fountain pen** is a pen that has an ink cartridge that can be replaced. The cartridge automatically feeds a steady supply of ink to the writing point.



Style What details about V. Louise Higgins does the author repeat?

¹ A very popular novelist, **Stephen King** writes tales of horror and the supernatural.



thought that counted, not the actual gift.

"It's great," I told them. "I'll write in it with my new pen." And I wrote my name on the first page just to show them I meant it.

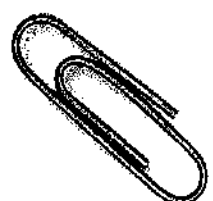
They hugged me and winked at Mama. She tried to wink back but was just too tired and shut both her eyes instead.

Lily, who is from Jamaica, had baked me some sweet bread. Mary Margaret gave me a gold cross blessed by the pope, which I put on even though Mama and I weren't churchgoers. That was Dad's thing.

Then Dr. Dann, the intern² who was on days, and Dr. Pucci, the oncologist (which is the fancy name for a cancer doctor), gave me a big box filled to the top with little presents, each wrapped up individually. All things they knew I'd love—paperback books and writing paper and erasers with funny animal heads and colored paper clips and a rubber stamp that printed FROM KATIE'S DESK and other stuff. They must have raided a stationery store.

There was one box, though, they held out till the end. It was about the size of a large top hat. The paper was deep blue and covered with stars; not fake stars but real stars, I mean, like a map of the night sky. The ribbon was two shades of blue with silver threads running through. There was no name on the card.

"Who's it from?" I asked.



² An *intern* is a recent medical school graduate who works under the supervision of experienced doctors.

Style How does the author's use of humor help the reader understand Katie?



None of the nurses answered, and the doctors both suddenly were studying the ceiling tiles with the kind of intensity they usually saved for X rays. No one spoke. In fact the only sound for the longest time was Mama's breathing machine going in and out and in and out. It was a harsh, horrible, insistent³ sound, and usually I talked and talked to cover up the noise. But I was waiting for someone to tell me.

At last V. Louise said, "It's from your mama, Katie. She told us what she wanted. And where to get it."

I turned and looked at Mama then, and her eyes were open again. Funny, but sickness had made her even more beautiful than good health had. Her skin was like that old paper, the kind they used to write on with quill pens, and stretched out over her bones so she looked like a model. Her eyes, which had been a deep, brilliant blue, were now like the fall sky, bleached and softened. She was like a faded photograph of herself. She smiled a very small smile at me. I knew it was an effort.

"It's you," she mouthed. I read her lips. I had gotten real good at that. I thought she meant it was a present for me.

"Of course it is," I said cheerfully. I had gotten good at that, too, being cheerful when I didn't feel like it. "Of course it is."

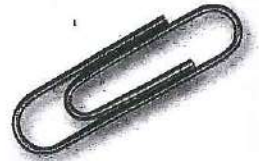
I took the paper off the box carefully, not tearing it but folding it into a tidy packet. I twisted the ribbons around my hand and then put them on the pillow by her hand. It made the stark white hospital bed look almost festive.

³ *Insistent* means "demanding attention or notice."

Vocabulary

stark (stärk) *adj.* plain; harsh, grim, or severe

festive (fes'tiv) *adj.* joyful; suitable for a celebration



Evaluate Theme Why is it important that Katie knows the box is a gift from her mother?





Under the wrapping, the box was beautiful itself. It was made of a heavy cardboard and covered with a linen material that had a pattern of cloud-filled skies.

I opened the box slowly and . . .

"It's empty," I said. "Is this a joke?" I turned to ask Mama, but she was gone. I mean, her body was there, but she wasn't. It was as if she was as empty as the box.

Dr. Pucci leaned over her and listened with a stethoscope,⁴ then almost absently patted Mama's head. Then, with infinite care, V. Louise closed Mama's eyes, ran her hand across Mama's cheek, and turned off the breathing machine.

"Mama!" I cried. And to the nurses and doctors, I screamed, "Do something!" And because the room had suddenly become so silent, my voice echoed back at me. "Mama, do something."

I cried steadily for, I think, a week. Then I cried at night for a couple of months. And then for about a year I cried at anniversaries, like Mama's birthday or mine, at Thanksgiving, on Mother's Day. I stopped writing. I stopped reading except for school assignments. I was pretty mean to my half brothers and totally rotten to my stepmother and Dad. I felt empty and angry, and they all left me pretty much alone.

And then one night, right after my first birthday without Mama, I woke up remembering how she had said, "It's you." Not, "It's for you," just "It's you." Now Mama had been a high school English teacher and a writer herself. She'd had poems published in little magazines.


4 A **stethoscope** is an instrument used to listen to sounds made by the body's internal organs, especially the lungs and heart.

Current

infinite (in'fə nit) *adj.* extremely great; having no limits or end

Style How does the parallelism in this paragraph emphasize Katie's feelings?

Comprehension What message does Katie's mother want Katie to remember?



She didn't use words carelessly. In the end she could hardly use any words at all. So—I asked myself in that dark room—why had she said, "It's you"? Why were they the very last words she had ever said to me, forced out with her last breath?

I turned on the bedside light and got out of bed. The room was full of shadows, not all of them real.

Pulling the desk chair over to my closet, I climbed up and felt along the top shelf, and against the back wall, there was the birthday box, just where I had thrown it the day I had moved in with my dad.

I pulled it down and opened it. It was as empty as the day I had put it away.


"It's you," I whispered to the box.

And then suddenly I knew.

Mama had meant I was the box, solid and sturdy, maybe even beautiful or at least interesting on the outside. But I had to fill up the box to make it all it could be. And I had to fill me up as well. She had guessed what might happen to me, had told me in a **subtle** way. In the two words she could manage.

I stopped crying and got some paper out of the desk drawer. I got out my fountain pen. I started writing, and I haven't stopped since. The first thing I wrote was about that birthday. I put it in the box, and pretty soon that box was overflowing with stories. And poems. And memories.

And so was I.

And so was I. 

Vocabulary

subtle (sut'əl) *adj.* characterized by cleverness; having a faint, delicate quality

BQ BIG Question

In what way does the empty box encourage Katie to become a writer?



To James

Frank Horne

- Do you remember
how you won
that last race . . . ?
how you flung your body
5 at the start . . .
how your spikes
ripped the cinders
in the stretch . . .
how you catapulted°
10 through the tape . . .
do you remember . . . ?
Don't you think
I lurched° with you
out of those starting holes . . . ?
15 Don't you think
my sinews° tightened

9 To **catapult** is to leap or hurl oneself, as if from a giant slingshot.

13 To **lurch** is to move forward suddenly.

16 **Sinews**, or tendons, are cords of tissue that connect muscles to bones.

Style How does the repetition in lines 2–10 help you understand what's involved in winning a race?

at those first
 few strides . . .
 and when you flew into the stretch
 20 was not all my thrill
 of a thousand races
 in your blood . . . ?
 At your final drive
 through the finish line
 25 did not my shout
 tell of the
 triumphant ecstasy°
 of victory : . . ?

Live
 30 as I have taught you
 to run, Boy—
 it's a short dash.
 Dig your starting holes
 deep and firm
 35 lurch out of them
 into the straightaway
 with all the power
 that is in you
 look straight ahead
 40 to the finish line
 think only of the goal
 run straight
 run high
 run hard
 45 save nothing
 and finish
 with an ecstatic burst
 that carries you
 hurtling
 50 through the tape
 to victory . . .



Evaluate Theme What is the “goal” to which the speaker refers?

BQ BIG Question

What advice does the speaker give the runner for reaching his goals?

27 *Triumphant ecstasy* is a state of overwhelming joy or delight as a result of success or winning.

After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

1. How is Katie's mother able to buy Katie the birthday box? [Recall]
2. What is the relationship between the runner and the speaker in "To James"? [Identify]
3. Katie's mother plans a party even though she is ill. What can you infer about Katie's mother? Explain. [Infer]
4. How does the speaker in "To James" feel about the runner? How can you tell? Use examples from the poem to support your answer. [Interpret]
5. How does filling the box with her writing help Katie deal with her grief? Explain. [Analyze]
6. **BQ** **BIG Question** Both Katie and the runner have had individuals help them in life. How are these individuals similar? How are they different? Explain. [Compare]

Vocabulary Practice

On a separate sheet of paper, write the vocabulary word that correctly completes each sentence. If none of the words fits the sentence, write "none."

stark festive infinite subtle

1. The sky became _____ as the dark rain clouds blocked the sun.
2. When Mom looked at her watch, it was a _____ message for us to hurry.
3. Keisha put on a colorful dress because it made her feel _____ for the party.
4. The dog gazed at me with _____ eyes until I gave it a treat.
5. The painting added a touch of color to the _____ walls.
6. The number of stars in the sky seems _____ on a clear night.

Academic Vocabulary

The empty box that Katie receives from her mother **motivates** Katie to write stories and poems. In the preceding sentence, *motivates* means "causes something or someone to act." Think of an activity you like to do as much as Katie likes to write. What motivates you to do that activity?

TIP

Comparing

Here are some tips to help you compare the mother in the story and the speaker in the poem.

Think about

- the actions the mother and the speaker take and the ways they behave
- the advice they give
- how they are alike and different

FOLDABLES Study Organizer

Keep track of your ideas about the **BIG Question** in your unit Foldable.



Online

Selection Resources

For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u5.

Literary Element Style

1. At the end of "Birthday Box," Katie says that her box "was overflowing with stories. And poems. And memories." How does the author's style help the reader understand the connection between Katie's writing and her memories? Explain.
2. Find an example in "To James" where the poet uses parallelism to emphasize the message of the speaker. What effect does it have? Explain.

Review: Metaphor

As you learned on page 203, a **metaphor** is a figure of speech that compares seemingly unlike things. In contrast to a simile, a metaphor implies a comparison without using the words *like* or *as*. An **extended metaphor** is an implied comparison that continues through a longer section of a piece of writing.

3. In line 32 of "To James," Frank Horne compares "it" to "a short dash." What two things does this metaphor compare?
4. What extended metaphor does Frank Horne use in "To James"? Explain.

Reading Strategy Evaluate Theme

Test Skills Practice

5. Read these sentences from "Birthday Box."

But I had to fill up the box to make it all it could be. And I had to fill me up as well.

Katie expresses the story's theme by

- A understanding that Mama should have filled the box.
- B realizing Mama's unusual gift was a form of good advice.
- C making the box more important than her memories of Mama.
- D worrying that she could not fill the box well enough.

Grammar Link

Subjects Separated from Verbs Subject-verb agreement can be challenging when a prepositional phrase separates the subject from its verb. When the subject and verb are not next to each other, you may wonder what the subject of the sentence is. For example, in the sentence below, is the subject *One* or *nurses*?

One of the nurses (is, are)
from Jamaica.

If you leave out the prepositional phrase, the subject becomes easier to find.

One ~~of the nurses~~ (is, are)
from Jamaica.

Once the prepositional phrase "of the nurses" is gone, you see that the subject is *one*, and the correct verb form is *is*.

Practice Choose the correct verb in the following sentences.

Some members of the hospital staff
(has, have) a birthday party.

One of the gifts (surprise,
surprises) Katie.

Then write two sentences of your own about the story or the poem in which the subject and the verb are separated by a prepositional phrase.

Speaking and Listening

Performance With a small group, choose one person to read aloud "To James." The speaker should vary the tempo, volume, and pitch of his or her voice so that the poem comes alive for the listeners. The other members of the group should perform a pantomime to go with the reading. What movements imitate the runner's actions? How will your group emphasize the repetition in the poem? It may be helpful to write down the movements and lines, so that your group can practice the performance.