

Themes in *Henry V*

This resource is designed as a reference guide for teachers. We have listed the major themes and motifs within *Henry V* and provided examples of scenes where you can study them.

Themes

- Leadership
- The glory of war
- The horror of war

Motifs

(Recurring elements and patterns of imagery in *Henry V* which support the play's themes)

- Parallel scenes between noblemen and commoners
- Friendships
- Animals

Themes

Leadership and the qualities needed to be an effective king and whether these are the same as those of a good person.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 1: The Bishop of Ely and the Archbishop of Canterbury celebrate Henry's transformation from a dissolute youth to accomplished and responsible leader.
- Act 2 Scene 1: Henry has cut himself off from his old friends. Falstaff is dying and Nym and Pistol suggest that Henry has broken his heart.
- Act 2 Scene 2: Henry dismisses the three traitors' pleas for mercy in sentencing them to death.
- Act 3 Scene 1: Henry delivers his rousing 'Once more into the breach, dear friends' speech to the English army.
- Act 3 Scene 6: Henry approves the sentencing of his old friend, Bardolf, to death for stealing. He stresses the importance of protecting the rights of the conquered French.
- Act 4 Prologue: The Chorus tells of Henry, disguised, visiting his soldiers in the night to give them encouragement.
- Act 4 Scene 1: After discussing the upcoming battle with various soldiers, Henry reflects on the heavy burdens of kingship.
- Act 5 Scene 2: Henry successfully negotiates peace, his marriage to Catherine uniting France and England.

The glory of war

Some related scenes:

- Act 2 Prologue: The Chorus describes the heroic determination and commitment of the entire country to the war ('Now all the youth of England are on fire...').
- Act 3 Prologue: The Chorus chronicles the glamorous crossing of the English fleet and the army's triumphant siege of Harfleur.
- Act 3 Scene 1: Henry delivers his rousing 'Once more into the breach, dear friends' speech to the English army.
- Act 4 Prologue: The Chorus stresses the nobility of the patient English who expect to die the next day.
- Act 4 Scene 3: Henry delivers his St. Crispin Day speech before the Battle of Agincourt where the French will outnumber them five to one.
- Act 4 Scene 6: Exeter describes the deaths of York and Suffolk, moving Henry to tears.
- Act V Prologue: The Chorus reports Henry's triumphant return to England.

The horror of war

Some related scenes:

- Act 2 Scene 4: Henry's letter to the Dauphin warns of 'this hungry war' which will open its 'vast jaws' and produce 'widows' tears, the orphans' cries...'
- Act 3 Scene 2: Nym, Pistol and the Boy wish they were safe at home, drinking ale.
- Act 3 Scene 3: Henry vividly describes the terrible suffering of Harfleur citizens should the Governor not surrender.
- Act 4 Scene 4: We learn that Nym has also been hanged for stealing.
- Act 4 Scene 6: Exeter describes the deaths of York and Suffolk, moving Henry to tears. Henry orders all the French prisoners to be killed.
- Act 4 Scene 7: Learning of the murder of the pages, Henry repeats his order to kill the French prisoners.

Motifs

Parallel scenes between noblemen and commoners

For example:

- 'But I will rise there with so full a glory / That I will dazzle all the eyes of France'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Now all the youth of England are on fire'
Act 2 Prologue
- 'I dare not fight, but I will wink and hold out mine iron. It is a simple one, but what though? It will toast cheese, and it will endure cold as another man's sword will - and there's an end'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more...'
Act 3 Scene 1
- 'On, on, on, on, on! to the breach, to the breach!'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'For there is none of you so mean and base / That hath not lustre in your eyes...'
Act 3 Scene 1
- 'Knocks go and come; God's vassals drop and die; / And sword and shield / In bloody field / Doth win immortal fame'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'Would I were in an alehouse in London! I would give all my fame for a pot of ale and safety'
Act 3 Scene 2

Friendships as these illustrate a range of styles of human relationships and human qualities; also as they highlight the isolation of Henry.

For example:

- 'A noble shalt thou have, and present pay; / And liquor likewise will I give to thee, And friendship shall combine, and brotherhood. / I'll live by Nym, and Nym shall live by me...Give me thy hand'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'As ever you come of women, come in quickly to Sir John....Sweet men, come to him'
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Tut! I have the best armour of the world. Would it were day! / You have an excellent armour; but let my horse have his due. It is the best horse of Europe'
Act 3 Scene 7
- 'Suffolk first died; and York, all haggled over, / Comes to him, where in gore he lay insteeped, And takes him by the beard, kisses the gashes / That bloodily did yawn upon his face, And cries aloud, 'Tarry, my cousin Suffolk! My soul shall thine keep company to heaven'
Act 4 Scene 6

Animals as symbols of the aggression and cruelty of war.

For example:

- 'Whiles his most mighty father on a hill / Stood smiling to behold his lion's whelp / Forage in blood of French nobility'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Then imitate the action of the tiger'
Act 3 Scene 1
- 'I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips'
Act 3 Scene 1
- 'Up to the breach, you dogs'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'Foolish curs, that run winking into the mouth of a Russian bear and have their heads crushed like rotten apples! You may as well say, that's a valiant flea that dare eat his breakfast on the lip of a lion'
Act 3 Scene 7
- 'When I bestride him, I soar, I am a hawk'
Act 3 Scene 7
- 'Steed threatens steed / In high and boastful neighs'
Act 4 Prologue
- 'The man that once did sell the lion's skin / While the beast lived, was killed with hunting him'
Act 4 Scene 3