Themes in the novel

Which of the following are important themes in the novel? Are there any others you feel should be included?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journeys</th>
<th>Mental illness</th>
<th>Identity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>Coincidence/synchronicity</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Totems</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Identifying important themes and being able to write about them is a key skill when studying any novel. In the following activities you will focus on the theme of nature in the novel Riding the Black Cockatoo. Later you will be using the same approaches to prepare notes on the other themes.

Task 1: quotation race

Agree on a suitable reward from your teacher before beginning the race - you might suggest that you are allowed to pack away a few minutes before everyone else, or to earn an achievement certificate, or the right to sing everyone a song (whatever rocks your boat!).

Working in pairs, spend ten minutes (and no more!) skim reading the novel and bookmarking pages that refer to nature in any way - think trees, plants, animals, insects ... the whole lot!

Aim to find more than the other pairs in your class in this time. (Hint - you will be more effective if you each start at different parts in the novel!)

Task 2: collate your quotations

Join up with another pair and compare the quotations you have found between the four of you, bookmarking any new ones.

Can you agree on one quotation that sums up the importance of nature as a theme in the novel?

Write it out and be prepared to share it with the rest of the class, explaining your choice:

Task 3: identify a key quotation

Read the following quotation from Chapter 14.

When he looked at Nature he saw himself, not as separate, nor superior. He was nature and she expressed herself through him.

Who does this quotation refer to? Can you interpret it on more than one level?
Riding the Black Cockatoo by John Danalis

Themes in the novel

Task 4: embark upon an essay!

A sample question (for English Literature) read:

**Explore how John is affected by nature in the novel. Remember to consider social, cultural and historical context in your answer.**

Using either the quotation above or one of your own choosing, prepare an introductory paragraph in response to this question.

Task 5: plan the rest of your essay

One way of doing this is to choose five of the quotations from your initial quotation race and to use each of these as the basis for a paragraph. Remember that you need to use PEE paragraphs and to use literary language in your analysis.

Create a grid like the one below in order to create an effective, quotation based plan. The first point has been completed as an example for you. Aim for similarly detailed explorations - make your quotations work hard!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Exploration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature is referred to at the very start of the novel.</td>
<td>'And once my secret was out, it just sat for all to see, like a bright blue jellyfish washed up by a king tide …'</td>
<td>simile use suggests nature is implicit in the story telling ‘king tide’ implies royalty and power of nature ‘bright blue’ – alliteration focuses attention on image ‘jellyfish’ suggests something that is nasty, unwanted, can cause pain like the secret</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Task 6: write the essay!

Use your plan and pad it out with impressive vocabulary! Here are a few words you might like to use when writing the exploration sections of your paragraphs:

- suggests
- could be seen as
- reminds the reader of
- implies
- signifies
- refers to
- represents
- gives the impression
**Themes in the novel**

**Task 7: proofread and improve**

Proofreading your own work is an excellent skill to develop. Look at the following introduction to the essay question you have worked on and compare it with your own. Annotate the good points of your own introduction in a similar way. Can you improve your answer? *(Remember that if you need to make additions to your essays in exams you can always add footnotes – indicate them clearly with asterisks and numbers.)*

Read your partner’s essay as well as your own.

Throughout the novel, Danalis uses Nature to enhance and enliven his story. As his story progresses we see him developing an affinity with the natural world so that eventually he comes to feel more at home with nature than with the modern world of medicine and money. He ultimately rejects the lifestyle choice of ‘shuffling into line in this ‘brave new world’.* *(Ch. 15).*

**Task 8: repeat the process for the other themes**

Go back to the themes you identified at the start of this session. Work in groups of four to come up with typical essay questions on each of these themes and repeat the essay writing process from steps 1–7!

Keep your quotations bookmarked for future reference ...