

ENGL 3000
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THEMATIC INQUIRY 3 - ROBERT PENN WARREN'S "DRIVER, DRIVER"

Due: Tue, 23 Jan

As you will see in the handout "'Theme' and 'Thematics' in the Study of Literature," literary scholars often use the term *theme* in order to refer to *a prominent idea found in several literary works*. For example, if we read Bukowski's "the trash men" as a poem about *the alienation of the artist in a commercial society*, it's not hard to imagine another poem or story that deals with the same theme (e.g., Franz Kafka's "The Hunger Artist" in our anthology).

We can begin to consider this use of the term *theme* by comparing the ideas in Musgrave's "Hidden Meaning" and in the poem she alludes to, Robert Penn Warren's "Driver, Driver." As we saw in her "Hidden Meaning," Musgrave refers to the American writer Robert Penn Warren by name:

Imagine getting into a taxi
where the driver is a real poet.
You could quote Robert Penn Warren
without feeling ridiculous: "Driver,
do you truly, truly know what flesh is?" (6-10)

Musgrave, however, does more than refer to Warren. The quotation "Driver, / do you truly, truly know what flesh is?" comes from Warren's poem "Driver, Driver," published in the volume *Incarnations: Poems 1966-68*. By quoting this line, Musgrave suggests that she is dealing with a significant idea that one finds in Warren's poem. But "dealing" with the same idea does not mean that Musgrave is merely duplicating what Warren has written; good writers, like Musgrave, give their own spin to the ideas they find in the writing of others.

You will find Warren's poem on the other side of the handout. But before you read "Driver, Driver," it is helpful to know that it is the last piece of a sequence of poems entitled "Internal Injuries" in which the speaker, who is riding in a taxi, has just witnessed an accident in which an older, African-American woman has been struck by a car.

Short Writing Assignment (due Tue, 23 Jan)

In addition to reading Warren's poem, I'd like you to write brief responses to the following questions:

- In line 5 of "Driver, Driver," our attention is drawn to two unusual words, *chyme* and *chyle*. Literary scholars, when they need information on a word, turn to an authoritative dictionary, often the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. To give you some experience using this dictionary (which is available online through Walker), look up both words. Given their meanings, where would we expect to find the use of these words? What do you think Warren tried to convey about the speaker by having him use these words?
- Now, let's shift back to Musgrave's poem: What might Musgrave have tried to suggest by quoting from lines 23-24 in Warren's poem? I don't think we can determine a single, correct answer to this question; but I do want you to see that this matter *must* be considered when discussing Musgrave's poem.
- In addition to the quoted lines, do you find Musgrave alluding to other features or aspects of Warren's poem?

NB: Your response to this assignment, like all homework assignments, must be typed.

Robert Penn Warren
Driver, Driver (1968)

Driver, driver, hurry now—
Yes, driver, listen now, I
Must change the address, I want to go to

A place where nothing is the same.

5 My guts are full of chyme and chyle, of Time and bile, my head
Of visions, I do not even know what the pancreas is for, what,

Driver, driver, is it for?
Tell me, driver, tell me true, for
The traffic begins to move, and that fool ambulance, at last,

10 Screaming, screaming, now arrives.
Jack-hammers are trying, trying, they
Are trying to tell me something, they speak in code.

Driver, do you know the code?
Tat-tat-tat—my head is full of

15 The code, like Truth or a migraine, and those men in orange helmets,

They must know it, they must know,
For *tat-tat*, they make the hammers go, and
So must know the message, know the secret names and all the slithery functions of

All those fat slick slimy things that
20 Are so like a tub full of those things you
Would find in a vat in the back room of a butcher shop, but wouldn't eat, but

Are not that, for they are you.
Driver, do you truly, truly,
Know what flesh is, and if it is, as some people say, really sacred?

25 Driver, there's an awful glitter in the air. What is the weather forecast?