

Pre-Reading

Epigraph

Objective: Identifying a novel's theme from an epigraph

Activity

An epigraph is a literary technique that authors use to create interest and add depth to a story. It often appears before the beginning of the story but can also be used as an introduction to a chapter or section. An epigraph can be a short poem, quote, or passage that suggests the primary theme of the novel or provides a hint to the reader about what will be coming next. Sometimes the meaning of the epigraph is easy to identify; sometimes it doesn't become clear until later in the novel.

The epigraph that introduces *Ordinary People* is an excerpt from Sonnet CLXXI, by Edna St. Vincent Millay:

**“But what a shining animal is man,
Who knows, when pain subsides, that is not that,
For worse than that must follow—yet can write
Music, can laugh, play tennis, even plan.”**

Reread the passage carefully, and try to identify the overall theme of this novel. Consider how this epigraph could relate to the novel's title. Keep in mind that a theme is more than a word or two that suggests an idea or subject; it is a universal statement about humanity that will be the overall message of the story. Write your ideas in a brief paragraph. Be prepared to share your responses in a class discussion.