The Expression of Human Conditions in literature

All literature exists not only for the obvious surface reasons but also to express the human conditions. Some conditions transcend time, culture and society while others may only apply to one group of people at a specific point in history. “Marriage is a Private Affair”, “cathedral”, “Hanging Fire”, “Funeral Blues”, “Ode to My Socks”, “A raisin in the Sun”, and “Andre’s Mother” all contain human conditions that apply to everyone or others that apply only to a specific group. These Poems, short stories and plays all serve as excellent examples of expression of the human conditions.

“Marriage is a Private Affair” written by author Chinua Achebe highlights the changes in values between generations and how they conflict. Further it contains the theme of family healing (love) and forgiveness for the sake of it. The theme of generation gaps is the main theme of the story in that Nnaemeka has fallen in love with and wants to marry his fiancé Nene. However as he tells his bride to be, “They [fathers] are most unhappy if the engagement is not arranged by them. In our case it’s worse ---- you are not even an Ibo.” (Achebe 258). He knows his father will be very angry in that he has found his own wife for himself and that she is not even from the same tribe but he loves her and plans to goes against the “cultural rules” to try and convince his father otherwise. His father essentially cuts off with his son for the most part due to the marriage and refuses to see Nene. While this type of instance existed more often in past times and especially within cultures holding stricter to customs it still exists in modern times today to varying degrees depending on the society and will continue to exist as long
as generations continue to evolve from the previous ones. As the author grew up in Nigeria and as a member of the Ibo tribe himself, he has first hand experience with the tribe’s customs and social mores. He may even have dealt with those rules in a similar experience where he knowingly went challenged them. Family healing comes into play when Nene writes her father in-law, after eight years of marriage and no communication, informing him that his grand children know of him and really want to meet him. She says basically she cannot bear to tell them that their own grand father refuses to meet them because who their father married. This cracks through the armor the grand father has built around himself and his emotions because of his son’s marriage choice and he begins to rethink his stance on his son and family. This is a theme that I know applies today and to everyone as a close family friend experienced the same situation. She married someone against her parents will and they refused to speak with her over it until grand children were born upon which time they “melted” and accepted her husband and children into the family over the grand children and not wanting to punish them as well. This story is written from the third person narrative view with an “all knowing” knowledge of each characters inner thoughts and feelings. “The old man at once felt the resolution he had built up over so many years falling in.” is an example if the narrator speaking of a characters inner feelings (Achebe 260). This makes the story a lot more meaningful from a reader’s perspective as one can see how much emotional pain everyone suffers from.

“Cathedral” by Raymond Carver has a theme of awakening or learning that comes from overcoming preconceived notions. The narrator begins off in the story agitated a bit that his wife’s old blind friend, whose wife recently passed away and is in the area, is coming to visit. He mentions “I wasn’t enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I
knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies” (Carver 314). He is somewhat unsure about the blind man and seems a bit nervous about his visit and what to do and say. Later in the visit as they watch a program on TV about European cathedrals on TV he becomes involved in trying to explain to Robert, the blind man, what a cathedral look likes. He gives up trying to verbally explain it and Robert tells him to get a pen and some heavy paper so they can draw one. While sitting on the ground drawing a cathedral Robert holds the narrator’s hand following all the motions of it, feeling the layout of a cathedral. As they work away the narrator gets sucked into the work and just keeps drawing. Robert tells him to add some people to it and then to close his eyes and keep drawing. As the narrator finishes the drawing he keeps his eyes closed and has an epiphany, finally realizing that the blind man really is not that weird or scary as he thought, he just another guy and he has learned to work around his handicapped just fine. The final line reads “It’s really something, I said” (Carver 323). In response to Robert asking the narrator what he thinks about their cathedral. This theme of learning is something that applies to everyone, anywhere and anytime even though it probably existed to a greater extent in times past, most people tend to “judge a book by its cover” and this story is about overcoming those initial ideas people develop and taking the time to learn the actual facts. The author is known for his stories applying to human conditions and this story is no exception. Carver wrote the story from a 1st person narrative from the view of the character that needed to learn so that we would be left to wonder and learn about the other characters thoughts and feelings about him and develop our own views and perhaps change them as the story went on.
The themes of "Hanging Fire" by Audre Lorde are dealing with adolescent issues and death. The poem begins off in a stereotypical whiney teenage tone stating "I am fourteen" (Lorde 1). Then the speaker proceeds to list off all the problems they have to deal with; a bad case of acne, a crush on an immature boy, keeping clean and not playing like a young child and another sibling on the way. The high drama and everything seems like it is the end of the world during that period in your life. These are the typical teenage growth issues that all teenagers have to deal with during those years. So while this theme is technically universal it is only universal to people during their early teenage years and talking to some older people it is easy to see how soon we forget where we have been. This theme is one easy for readers of my age to read and relate to because reflecting back ten years or so is not too difficult and in hind sight its easy to judge ones self. The author probably reflected back on her youth remembering the issues that bothered her most to incorporate this theme. Death is another theme in the story. The narrator mentions death in each of the stanzas wondering "what if" they die. "What if I die before morning" (Lorde 8), "Suppose I die before graduation" (Lorde 15), and "will I live long enough to grow up" (Lorde 32). What will happen, who will care and other insecure thoughts about what will happen after death are common. Thoughts of this nature are something that everyone deals with regardless of age, race, gender, society. Death can occur directly or indirectly to anyone at any time and is something people worry and wonder about as it is still an unknown in life. While I believe the author added this because it was an issue she dealt with as a teen it is still a universal human condition that everyone has to deal with at one point or another.
“Funeral Blues” written by W.H. Auden has a single theme of the loss of a loved significant other. The poem starts off speaking of how time needs to stop and everything needs to be quiet because its time to mourn. The narrator is saying that basically everything needs to stop because of the significance of this death. The poem continues on like this into the next stanza. In the third stanza the author writes of how much “he”, the person who died, meant to the narrator. “He” was essentially everything and every part of them was him, as the poem states “He was my North, my South, my East and West,” (Auden 9). Then poem then changes from a mourning sad tone to a highly depressing tone as the speaker ends the poem talking about how the stars, moon and sun are useless now that “he” is dead and nothing is good anymore. “….nothing now can ever come to any good.” (Auden 16) is the final line of the poem showing how sad and depressed over “his” passing the narrator truly is. The loss of a significant other is something universal to a point. Anyone can fall deeply in love and lose them but it is generally associated with someone older who has been in a serious relationship for a very long time and basically grown to act as a single entity as opposed to a couple. I’ve seen a few older couples where as soon as one died within a year the other passed just because they pretty much lost the reason they stayed alive for. The author very easily could have experienced such an event in their life or perhaps even witnessed it happen as I have and chose to try to put their observations down in writing. Regardless the author really captured the emotions one feels at the loss of an important loved one.

When Pablo Neruda wrote “Ode to My Socks” he incorporated the theme of being happy with what you have, even if that is not very much. The speaker tells of receiving a pair of socks from Maru Mori that she made herself. The narrator then goes on to praise
these socks for all their qualities and metaphorically describes them as they put them on
their feet. “my feet were two fish made of wool,” (Neruda 18) is one example and the
speaker also compares their feet to “two immense blackbirds” (Neruda 25) and “two
cannons:” (Neruda 26). The author then simply states at the poem’s end the moral of the
poem that “beauty is twice beauty and what is good is doubly good when it is a matter of
two socks made of wool in winter.” (Neruda 77) This quote states the theme or main
point of the entire poem that anything is twice a beautiful and as good when you really
need it. The author is praising an ordinary object in everyday life that some people take
for granted while others would love to have it, his example being socks in winter. This
theme is tough for most people in our culture today to relate to as many of us have never
had to go without such a simple necessity as a pair of socks but it is understandable what
the author wants to achieve. People living in poorer parts of the world and in earlier
generations would most likely of had an easier time connecting directly with this poem.
Neruda is known for this type of simple poetry praising common objects and I believe it
was his way of writing “common” poetry that even simple folks could understand
without having to read into it much. The idea of this writing style probably also had
something to do with his known extreme communist political views.

“A Raisin in the Sun” strongly contains the themes of dreams and family.
The theme of dreams is constantly in action throughout the story. Walter dreams of
providing money and things for his family by opening his own liquor store. Beneatha
dreams of becoming a doctor and finding herself while mama dreams of owning her own
house and maintaining the family. The entire story is essentially directly related to the
happiness or sadness that comes from their attempts to attain these dreams. Walter says
“I want so many things that they are driving me kind of crazy....” (Hansberry 1317). He just wants to provide for his family but he simply feels he cannot because of position and he is causing a lot of friction in the family because of this and his pipe dreams. Dreaming is something everyone experiences and does regardless of class, gender, race, culture, etc. Everyone has some dream they wish to accomplish. The author of this play, Lorraine Hansberry, wrote this play as someone who had first-hand experiences with the topic of being a black female playwright during the 1950s, not an easy dream at the time. She also as a child lived with her family in a house they bought in an all white neighborhood where they faced great hostility from neighbors. The second theme of family is also very important. Throughout the play mama attempts to hold the family together and survive as she knows they need to. She questions if Walter is outside the home looking for “peace” and always keeps the family members in check. Her dream of owning a house also is directly related as owning a home is her way of keeping the family together in a secure piece of property that they own. Hansberry growing up in the hostile white neighborhood had to have had a strong family connection that held them all together while dealing with the problems outside. This was her reason for putting in the strong theme of family unity. Also during the 1950s family was a very important aspect of life to everyone compared to now. Family is a condition of life for almost everyone although not as important now to most as it was during the period this play was written. Still most people today can relate to the idea of trying to hold a family together for the sake of it as every family has their problems.

Terrence McNally’s play “Andre’s Mother” possesses the theme of acceptance of differences. Andre’s mother refuses to accept that her own son was gay and in a
relationship with another man, even after his death from Aids which she was unaware of how he died. His boyfriend Cal’s family is completely accepting of the relationship and always knew of it however Andre’s mother was left in the dark because Andre knew she wouldn’t accept him. Cal says “… he was so afraid of hurting you and of your disapproval.” to Andre’s mother. Even once Cal tells her how Andre died and about his fight for life she remains quiet just standing, still unable to deal with his sexuality and death. The author, being homosexual and growing up during a time when that was completely unacceptable in nearly all of America, most likely wrote this based off his own experiences or could have based it off of the experiences of others, as situations like this are not all that uncommon. Acceptance is something that not everyone has to deal with to this degree. Some people do everything “right” and get off easy, others face rejection short term over minor actions but not to often at the point where you cannot even tell your own mother something for fear of her reaction long term.

These literary works while they entertain, they also all portray varying themes related to the human conditions. Some of these conditions we can relate directly, others indirectly and yet others may be difficult to understand at all because of cultural, social, economic or time barriers. However they still serve as a teaching tool from which we can learn about other points of view. These pieces provide strong examples of the human conditions and people dealing with them.
Work’s cited:


McNally, Terrence. “Andre’s Mother.”