

Winnie-the-Pooh Themes, Questions, and Quotes

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Language and Communication

In *Winnie-the-Pooh*, communication and language are two very different things. That is, communication does not always require language, and language doesn't always communicate anything. Milne is brilliant at forcing us to try and figure out what the *meaning* is behind verbal and non-verbal communication. But really, that's what all language is about, right?

Questions About Language and Communication

1. What's the difference between what the characters say and what they *mean*?
2. How do the foils, who know each other very well, communicate differently than characters who are not so close? E.g. Pooh and Piglet vs. Pooh and Kanga.
3. Is there a difference between written and spoken language in the book?

What gives a word meaning for Milne? What about for you?
What kinds of things do you associate with a word like "forest," "play," or "ther?"

Language and Communication-Themed Quotes

1. "Don't you know what "ther" means?"

"Ah, yes, now I do," I said quickly; and I hope you do too, because it's all the explanation you are going to get. (Winnie-the-Pooh.1.7-8)

Well, this is pretty much it in a nutshell. Milne doesn't always explain what he or his characters *mean* with their idiosyncratic language, but he leaves it up to us to interpret it. So, what do *you* think "ther" means?

2. He said to himself: "That buzzing-noise means something. You don't get a buzzing-noise like that, just buzzing and buzzing, without its meaning something." (Winnie-the-Pooh.1.27)

Pooh represents a young child in many ways, and here he's showing us what it's like to be a kid trying to understand lots of grown-up talk. All that noise has got mean something, right?

3. He said, "Silly old Bear," in such a loving voice that everybody felt quite hopeful again. (Winnie-the-Pooh.2.53)

Tone makes a difference, doesn't it?

Friendship

Winnie-the-Pooh tackles the difficult task of talking about friendship even though all the characters are imaginary friends. Yikes. What this means, though, is that Milne can explore many different kinds of dynamics, and even propose a kind of "ideal" friendship. At least for kids. Keep in mind that the friends Christopher Robin wants and needs might be different from adult friendships.

Questions About Friendship

4. How would Milne define friendship? Do you agree? Disagree? Qualify your answer.
5. Which relationship best represents the ideal friendship in the Pooh books?
6. Why don't Milne's characters ever get angry with each other? They certainly do selfish things sometimes, and create problems for each other. Why don't they get mad?

Friendship-Themed Quotes

1. And the first person he thought of was Christopher Robin. (Winnie-the-Pooh.1.41)

This is right after Pooh's encounter with the Gorse-bush. This is our first sign of the profound, genuine emotional connection between Pooh and Christopher Robin—in a time of need, Pooh automatically goes to his friend.

2. "Hallo, Pooh," he said. "How's things?"

"Terrible and Sad," said Pooh, "because Eeyore, who is a friend of mine, has lost his tail. And he is moping about it." (Winnie-the-Pooh.4.31-32)

Friendship is a two-way street. It requires empathy, understanding and perspective. Pooh cares so much for his friend that Eeyore's sadness makes him sad too.

3. So Kanga and Roo stayed in the Forest. And every Tuesday Roo spent the day with his great friend Rabbit, and every Tuesday Kanga spent the day with her great friend Pooh, teaching him to jump, and every Tuesday Piglet spent the day with his great friend Christopher Robin. So they were all happy again. (Winnie-the-Pooh.7.157)

These are all such ordinary things, but for Milne, doing ordinary things with friends is the source of all sorts of happiness.

Foolishness and Folly

For the most part, Foolishness and Folly are the source of humor in the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books. Who doesn't like some good slapstick, after all? Milne makes these traits oddly and profoundly endearing. Take Pooh, for example, the Bear of Very Little Brain. He's dim. He's clumsy. He's forgetful. But you can't help but love him. That's the way it is with all these characters. We love them in spite of and usually because of their foolishness. Maybe because it's so innocent, almost nostalgic. It reminds us of what children are like as they learn to navigate the serious world they live in. You can't fault them for making a few mistakes, can you?

Questions About Foolishness and Folly

7. Why is there so much silliness in the books? Is it just for the humor, or does Milne have a deeper message?
8. We like to think that the characters' silliness allows children to feel like they're in the know. Can you think of some examples where young readers would know more than the characters?

Milne includes both broad slapstick humor and subtle irony

and wit. What functions do the different kinds of humor serve in these books?

Foolishness and Folly-Themed Quotes

- 1. Well, you laughed to yourself, "Silly old Bear!" but you didn't say it aloud because you were so fond of him. (Winnie-the-Pooh.1.84)

Especially in the first few chapters, Christopher Robin responds incredibly positively to Pooh's foolishness. Most of them end with a quote like this, in which CR expresses his love for Pooh immediately after the bear has done something, well, brainless.

- 2. "It's a very funny thing," said Bear, "but there seem to be *two* animals now." (Winnie-the-Pooh.3.17)

Pooh's lack of understanding, such as in this case when he and Piglet follow their own tracks around in circles, allows the reader—even a very young child—to be in on the joke while the characters are left in the dark. This is Milne's version of dramatic irony for young audiences. And it's an amazing source of fun.

Life, Consciousness, and Existence

Amazingly, *Winnie-the-Pooh* includes a ton of amazing philosophical moments. Milne includes bushels of insight into how children begin to learn about life, consciousness and existence. In psychological research, aspects of this form a "Theory of Mind," which explains how kids learn (and they have to learn) that other people can have different thoughts than they do and experience the world in different ways.

Questions About Life, Consciousness, and Existence

- 9. Pooh has a lot to say about existence and the way the world works. Does he have the innocent perspective of a child? Or the wise point of view of a peaceful philosopher?

10. Milne has spoken openly—albeit briefly—challenging the Christian church that dominated existential thought in his society. How do his agnostic/atheistic leanings come through in the world he creates in the Forest? Milne writes as if Christopher Robin's imaginary play has created a very real, complex world in which he plays. Should we consider a child's fantasy play "real" or "serious?"

Life, Consciousness, and Existence-Themed Quotes

1. "The only reason for being a bee that I know of is making honey" (Winnie-the-Pooh.1.28)

Let's consider Pooh as a young child for a moment. Young children start out as being egocentric—only thinking about things from their own point of view—and then they learn to consider other peoples' perspectives. This actually starts to happen at a predictable age, usually around 4-5 years-old. So with this in mind, we can really see how Milne tries to show us how this development happens. Pooh is starting to consider another being's existence, but still, it's all about him and his needs.

2. "I shall do what I can by singing a little Cloud Song, such as a cloud might sing [...] How sweet to be a Cloud / Floating in the Blue!" (Winnie-the-Pooh.1.89-91)

Here, our hero actually puts himself in someone else's shoes. Here's that "Theory of Mind." Of course, clouds don't sing, but, well, baby steps.

3. He was humming this hum to himself, and walking along gaily, wondering what everybody else was doing, and what it felt like, being somebody else (Winnie-the-Pooh.2.3)

And now we start getting into some pretty deep philosophical considerations. What is it like? Can we ever know? What do you think?

Innocence and Youth

Winnie-the-Pooh has its own interpretation of what youth is all about. For the most part, Milne attributes a whole lot of purity, innocence, and sentimentality to his son's childhood. In *Winnie-the-Pooh*, children are free to roam, free from worry, free from responsibility. Granted, it's a pretty idealistic picture of childhood. There are plenty of other books that show youth as a difficult period in life, but the Pooh books make us focus on the positive. Milne gets some things very right, too, and within his halcyon view of youth, he also shows a deep understanding for how children learn, and great respect for each stage of development.

Questions About Innocence and Youth

11. Do you think Milne's portrayal of childhood is an accurate one?
12. Who is the "youngest" of the animals in the book? The "oldest?" How can you tell?

A lot of adults wish they could be like children again. Modernist art (i.e. Picasso, Cezanne) was based on the idea of returning to a childlike freedom with perspective and materials. Using Milne's Forest as a starting ground, what is it about youth that adults are trying to access emotionally? Intellectually?

Innocence and Youth-Themed Quotes

1. Eeyore wasn't listening. He was taking the balloon out, and putting it back in again, as happy as could be... (*Winnie-the-Pooh*.6.152)

You know how young children can do the same thing over and over again? How the simplest activity can be really engaging? Like playing peek-a-boo, catch, or clicking a clicky pen over and over again. Turns out, this is developmentally appropriate. There's no better way to learn about something really well than repeating it to exhaustion.

2. "Yes!" said Roo. "Look at me sw—"and down he went over the next waterfall into another pool. (*Winnie-the-Pooh*.8.115)

Roo is the youngest character in the book, though Tigger may be about the same in terms of juvenile behavior. Milne characterizes him as having unbridled enthusiasm. Since Roo is too young to understand the possible negative repercussions of falling into a rushing stream (i.e. drowning), all he sees is the fun. Who cares if it's not real swimming?

3. "And that letter is a 'P,' and so is that, and so is that, and 'P' means 'Pooh,' so it's a very important Message to me, and I can't read it."
(Winnie-the-Pooh.9.26)

Milne has a unique understanding of stages of development. We've talked about taking other peoples' perspectives, but here's a great view of educational stages too. Sure, one way of looking at this is that Pooh is mistaken, and he can't read. But there's another way. Pooh is in the emergent stage of literacy development. He recognizes at least one letter, "P" and he connects it to the word that he knows with that letter, "Pooh." This is an early step among many on the way to being able to read for real.

Education

In *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Milne has a pretty suspicious view of formal education. Just think about it. Christopher Robin's journey from the innocent, youthful world of the Forest to the world beyond it is driven by his shift to primary school years. His interest in play is replaced by academic demands. Milne is not necessarily saying that education is bad, but he certainly likes his satire.

Questions About Education

13. Pedagogy has changed a lot in the last 90 years. Is Milne's depiction of Christopher Robin's education applicable to today's kids?
14. Milne is a proponent of education and literacy (a big Duh statement, we know), but at the same time he uses Owl to satirize stuffy academics. How do you reconcile these seemingly opposing points of view?
15. Milne essentially makes a distinction between book smarts and street smarts. Which characters represent

each side of this coin? Is there anyone who has both?

Education-Themed Quotes

1. "So for a week Christopher Robin read that sort of book at the North end of Pooh" (Winnie-the-Pooh.2.73)

The important thing here is the accompanying illustration showing CR reading an alphabet book to Pooh. At the beginning of the tales, Christopher Robin is in the very beginning stages of his learning, and being educated is as much about playing the part as actually knowing the information. While the text, which represents the way the stories unfold in CR's imagination, tells us that he's "reading", the illustration shows us the reality of what that means. He's merely sharing an early reader exercise book. Clever.

2. "Owl was telling Kanga an Interesting Anecdote full of long words like Encyclopedia and Rhododendron to which Kanga wasn't listening." (Winnie-the-Pooh.8.107)

Owl is recognized as the most learned character in the Forest. Unfortunately, no one really cares or understands him. They're impressed by his vocabulary, his claims to be able to read (even though we know he can't, really), but when it comes down to it, there are more important things than just erudition.

3. "'Owl hasn't exactly got Brain, but he Knows Things. He would know the Right Thing to Do when Surrounded by Water. There's Rabbit. He hasn't Learnt in Books, but he can always Think of a Clever Plan.'" (Winnie-the-Pooh.9.6)

Here, Milne articulates the difference between street smarts and book smarts. In the world of the Forest, at least, clever plans and practical common sense are at least as valuable.

Art and Culture

It's hard to ignore how *Winnie-the-Pooh* depicts what art, particularly poetry and song, is supposed to be about. And especially the process by which it is made. Milne has given us a protagonist in Pooh who's a veritable artist-in-residence. Nary a chapter goes by without a poem, song, or hum to accompany the action. Milne's point of view? Art is pleasant. It marks an occasion, be it a heroic effort or a run-of-the-mill visit to a friend. And most importantly, it's something that just comes to you. Much like the Pooh series is inspired by his own child's play, Pooh's pieces are always inspired. He's not one for editing, more of a stream-of-consciousness kind of writer. Again, pretty much in line with the modernism of his day.

Questions About Art and Culture

16. Milne uses Pooh to outline a particularly improvisational view of art. Can you think of some other works that share a similar aesthetic?
17. In spite of the emphasis on inspiration and spontaneity, we're pretty sure Milne spent a lot of time planning and editing his books. Can you find some evidence in the text that might suggest more planning than he lets on?

Can you find any differences among the "hums," "songs" and "poems" that Pooh makes up? What makes a piece of art one or the other?

Art and Culture-Themed Quotes

1. "'What about a story?' said Christopher Robin."
(*Winnie-the-Pooh*.1.10)

It's worth noting that the entire premise of the Pooh books operates around Milne telling improvised stories to his son. This kind of process then dominates how the characters create art throughout the tales.

2. "*Tra-la-la, tra-la-la, / Tra-la-la, tra-la-la, / Rum-tum-tiddle-um-tum, / Tiddle-iddle, tiddle-iddle, / Tuddle-iddle, tiddel-iddle, Rum-tum-tum-tiddle-um.*" (*Winnie-the-Pooh*.2.2)

Who says poetry has to be about something? Nonsense words and little ditties are valid too. Just ask the post-modernists.

3. 'Then would you read a Sustaining Book, such as would help and comfort a Wedged Bear in Great Tightness?' (Winnie-the-Pooh.2.72)

Pooh asks for this when he's stuck in Rabbit's door. This is our first clue from Milne that art is contextual. Different pieces serve different purposes at different times.

BIG QUESTIONS


1. Do children really have to grow up and leave the "Hundred Acre Wood?" What would happen if we stayed and did *nothing* our whole lives?

2. A lot of people say that childhood today is different than it was back in their day. Which day that was, we're not sure, but they say it anyway. After reading this book, what do you think Milne would say about your childhood? What about your children's?

3. For a bear with very little brain, Pooh says some profound stuff. Is he really as vacant as the description says he is? What nuggets of wisdom can you find in his silliness?

4. Friendship is an important theme in *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Check out the "Themes" section for more on that. But here's a question: are the relationships among the fantastical characters in this book actually realistic? Do they remind you of your friendships?

5. All children engage in pretend play when they're young. And biologists and psychologists alike tell us that play is an essential way that children learn about the world—from the mechanics of how things work to how to interact in social situations. What do you think Christopher Robin learned during his play with the animals in the Hundred Acre Wood?



6. The narrative structure of Winnie-the-Pooh is actually pretty complicated. How do you think children respond to the many levels of narrative, the postmodern tidbits, the irony and humor? Do they get it? Do they need to?