Coming Full Circle

In the essay "The Barn and the Bees" the author's purpose is to inspire or uplift the reader by revealing that the cycle of life is resilient even in the face of destruction. As a result of this purpose, the theme of life cycle is illustrated in many ways throughout the essay. It tells of Stafford’s effort to salvage an old barn to create a new one, during which time he rescues a hive of bees in the barn, and numerous visitors come to take a piece of the barn to create something new from it.

"The Barn and the Bees" has three main sections. The first section consists of two subsections. In the first subsection, Stafford recognizes that despite the fact that the barn appears destroyed, it has actually just changed shape. Life still exists there, and has adapted rather than ceased to exist. He points out that "Blackberry vines had held the barn upright for years, and now that it was down the vines trailed over the tangle, dangling in a veil from the south and east walls that still stood crooked somehow." The fact that the blackberry continued to grow, taking on a new shape shows the persistence of the life cycle. The reference is subtle, but beautifully symbolic of the theme. In the second subsection Stafford explores the barn and realizes there is more to it than meets the eye: "I had to inhabit what was left of this palace before it came all the way down..." Stafford recognizes quality in the wreckage. The fact that he sees potential instead of trash is representative of the theme of the life cycle. If the scraps can still be reused, they can continue to exist in a new form.

The second section consists of three subsections. In the first subsection, Stafford returns to the barn to gather the bees that live there. He notices their persistence. The bees "might hang around the old vacancy, working the local blossoms and resting under a leaf..."
until their wings are too frayed to hold in the air. Bees die when they sting, or when work
finally shatters their wings." This shows that no matter what, the bees will always try to
continue. Even after death, their mark is left in the honey combs and new generations of bees
left behind. This is a literal representation of the life cycle. In the second subsection Stafford
begins salvaging what he can from the barn. He is visited by "...neighbors [who] came by in
little groups or alone to leave with [him] some story about the barn, and to seek some scrap
of it to carry away." This supports the theme of the life cycle because almost every visitor
wanted to use a piece of the barn to create something new. The pieces of the barn can live on,
in many different forms, even if the barn itself is gone. In the third subsection, Stafford
reflects on the history of the scraps he gathers. He tells us, "stacks of lumber rose with a new
barn intrinsic in each board, in the rivet of right work I had yet to do to knit all together
again." This is representative of the theme of the life cycle because he is referring to the
rebirth of the barn.

The third section consists of two subsections. In the first subsection Stafford
discusses the history of the timber he collects from the barn. He says, "I remembered how
these boards stood face to face in a forest harvesting nineteenth-century light..." This
represents the theme of the life cycle because it traces the history of something that still
exists. This evidence points out the lumber’s continued existence despite time and
change of form and location. In the second subsection, Stafford has finished building his
barn. He reflects on the life of the bees he gathered in the beginning and released when he
finished: "Soon the bees, daughters of the daughters of the bees I took care of, will
winnow out from their white box beyond the pear tree into sunlight." The discussion of
the future generations and their presence near the new barn is symbolic of a new
The most common evidence found in the "The Barn and the Bees" is physical description. This form of evidence can be found in every paragraph except for very short passages of dialogue, and in most individual sentences. One of the best examples can be found in the last paragraph: "Dust-colored rafters join in marriage above me. The hay-beam behind my head aims toward sunrise. Soon the blackberry pasture out this window will blossom." This particular example relates to the theme because the words marriage, sunrise, and blossom all represent a new beginning. But even in parts where it does not seem so obvious the physical detail supports the theme. For example, when the wrecker visits Stafford he offers significant details about the man’s clothes: “On the shoulder of his black jacket were stitched the red names of his friends or victims: Rick, Joe, Rollo.” These three men are in a sense reborn in memory through the biker’s jacket, and then again when Stafford notices their names. Earlier, describing the contents of the barn, Stafford offers the following detail: “I passed a boat filled with hay, its bow beached on a bale that sprouted green, its keel turned to earth.” The boat has died, in a sense, but the hay is sprouting new life and the boat, returning to earth, will nourish that life.

Further references to the theme are present in the passage on page 181 that begins, "The afternoon was a long season of history...," which describes his work dismantling the barn. The dominant kind of evidence found in this passage is physical detail. The description of the wood, the sky, and the jar turned blue with age are examples. The wood started as a tree and ended up a part of the barn. The sky is endless just like a cycle, and burlap is often used again and again for many purposes. All of these facts represent the theme. The other type of evidence used is Stafford's specialized knowledge of the
history of the barn. His reference to archeology and ancestors, and the wood polished by the flanks of the cows, are examples. Archeology, one could say, brings long-dead objects back to life. Ancestors are representative of generations which also helps support the theme.

Stafford revealed that the cycle of life is resilient even in the face of destruction. This theme was apparent in many ways throughout the essays, some being obvious and some subtle. The ultimate point was that the life cycle is a circle; without the old there can be no new creation. This essay clearly illustrates that through respect for the resilience of nature, and careful observation, you can see that new life can always be possible.

NOTE: How you relate examples to theme depends a lot on the type of essay you are reading. In this example, the evidence is physical detail, so often simply showing that the theme is present is enough. But in an essay that uses mostly stories, for example, the presence of the theme may be obvious. In that case, you have to go beyond showing it is present to explain what a given story says about the theme. What specific aspect of the theme does that example bring out?