What is the "human condition"? by C. Welch

The "human condition" is an important part of our understanding of literature. Literary critics often label a piece of writing as literature . . . if it tries to describe this "human condition."

Essentially, the human condition is the "characteristics, key events, and situations which compose the essentials of human existence, such as birth, growth, emotionality, aspiration, conflict, and mortality" (Wiktionary). These challenges and experiences mark us as a species, and we will likely all face them at some point in our lives. Thus, any discussion of the human condition is a concern for human nature, human society and how we live our lives. One of literature's central concerns is to comment on these issues; it might be better at it than psychology or philosophy!

If you are asked to make a theme statement about a piece of writing, the easiest way to identify a theme is to look for some challenge within the human condition. Look for common problems that any person – you included - might face sometime in his or her life.

So let's be more specific. What kind of issues connected to "human nature, human society or how we live our lives" are we talking about? Well, it can mean MANY different things! Here are a few examples that come to mind:

**How We Live Our Lives**
- What is the good life?
- How do parents act towards their children?
- How do we deal with death?
- What is the nature of love?
- How do we define friendship?
- How do we deal with alienation from those around us?
- Should we conform or be original?
- How do we become adults? What is the process of maturation?
- What is the relationship between different generations or genders?
- How do we deal with excessive poverty or wealth?

**Human Nature**
- Are we naturally evil or good?
- Are we born with inherited traits or are we a "blank slate"?
- What's more important for human beings? Law and order or freedom?
- Are we determined by our genetic structure, environment, etc., or do we have free will?
- Are we naturally social beings or are we individuals first?
- Can we know universal truths?
- Are we selfish or altruistic?

**Human Society**
- What's the best way to live together?
- Should we care for the weak and poor, or let them fend for themselves?
- What is a natural society: equality or hierarchy?
- Is civilization positive or negative?
- How should society treat the environment?

Some authors will merely describe these issues, while others will provide their particular perspective and beliefs.