

Exploring and Identifying Theme

Theme: the meaning of the story; a central or dominating idea
a “meaning of the work as a whole”

What a theme is not:

- It is not the “moral” of the story. A *moral* is a piece of practical advice gained from a work to apply to our own lives. Works with morals are said to be “didactic”.
 - A *theme* is more complex than a moral and may have no direct advice or philosophical guidance for a reader.
 - It is not the **subject or topic** of the story and *not* a one-word label.
 - It is not a “hidden meaning” that needs to be pulled out of the story.

What theme is:

Theme is a meaning released by the work when we take all aspects of the work in its entirety into account.

It is a comment on an aspect of human experience that the author expresses.

A theme is expressed in a full sentence that tells in some detail what the work says about the topic.

Great works of literature have multiple themes.

Discovering theme

We discover theme only by becoming aware of the relations among the parts of a story and of the relations of the parts to a whole:

Characters

What kind of people
does the writer create?

Plot

What does the writer have the characters
do?

Are they in control of their lives, or are
they controlled by fate or something else?

Motivation

Why do the characters behave as they do;
what motives dominate them?

Tone

What is the author’s attitude towards
the subject?

What is the narrator’s attitude?
Are the two different?

Values

What values does the writer have the
characters hold?

What values does the writer promote?

Style

How does the author express reality?

The importance of theme in literature can be overestimated; the work of fiction is more than just the theme. However, the theme allows writers to control or give order to their perceptions about life.

32 Master Topics

Alienation—creating emotional isolation

Betrayal—fading bonds of love

Birth—life after loss, life sustains tragedy

Coming of age—child becomes adult

Conformity—industrialization and the conformity of people

Death—death as mystery, death as a new beginning

Deception—appearance versus reality

Discovery—conquering unknown, discovering strength

Duty—the ethics of killing for duty

Escape—escape from family pressures, escaping social constraints

Family—destruction of family

Fortune—a fall from grace and fortune

Generation gap—experience versus youthful strength

God and spirituality—inner struggle of faith

Good and evil—the coexistence of good and evil on earth

Heroism—false heroism, heroism and conflicting values

Home—security of a homestead

Hope—hope rebounds

Hopelessness—finding hope after tragedy

Individualism—choosing between security and individualism

Isolation—the isolation of a soul

Journey—most journeys lead back to home

Judgment—balance between justice and judgment

Loss—loss of innocence, loss of individualism

Love—love sustains/fades with a challenge

Patriotism—inner conflicts stemming from patriotism

Peace and war—war is tragic, peace is fleeting

Power—lust for power

Race relations—learned racism

Sense of self—finding strength from within

Suffering—suffering as a natural part of human experience

Survival—humans against nature