

Exploring and Identifying Theme

Theme: the meaning of the story; central or dominating idea



What a theme is not:

- It is not the “moral” of the story.

A *moral* is a piece of practical advice that can be gained from the novel to apply to our own lives.

A *theme* is more complex than a moral and may have no direct advice or philosophical value that the reader can apply

- It is not the **subject** of the story.
- It is not a “hidden meaning” that needs to be pulled out of the story.

What theme is:

- Theme is the meaning released by the work when we take all aspects of the work in its entirety into account.
- It is an aspect of human experience that the author wishes to express.

Discovering theme

Theme can be discovered 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 story deal with?

Plot: What do the characters do? Are they in control of their lives, or are they controlled by fate?

Motivation: Why do the characters behave as they do, and what motives dominate them?

Style: How does the author perceive reality?

Tone: What is the author's attitude towards his subject?

Values: What are the values of the characters in the story? What values does the author seem to promote?

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

32 Master Themes

- Alienation** - creating emotional isolation
- Betrayal** - fading bonds of love
- Birth** - life after loss, life sustains tragedy
- Coming of age** - boy becomes a man
- Conformity** - industrialization and the conformity of man
- 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** - man against nature

Definition of Theme: Marysville (TN) High School Composition Guide
<http://www.ci.maryville.tn.us/mhs/studyskills/compguide/LitAnaTheme.htm>

Theme List: M. Wood, Patriot High School, Riverside, CA
<https://sites.google.com/a/patriothischool.com/english-10-2011-12/assignments/themes>