

## Defining Theme

### What is a Theme?

The theme of a literary work is the writer's message or main <sup>point</sup> idea. The theme is what the writer wants you to remember most. Most stories, novels, plays, and poems have more than just one theme. Some themes are easier to see than others. A character might actually state the theme clearly by saying something about life that is obviously important. For example, in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, Wilbur the pig states the theme clearly at the end when he says, "Friendship is one of the most satisfying things in the world." That's a statement of one of the book's themes. However, often, you have to be a bit of a detective to discover the theme or themes. The author leaves clues, but it is up to the reader to put them together and decide what the important message or lesson is.

### How is a Subject Different from a Theme?

A story's theme is different from its subject or ~~subject~~. The subject is simply what the story is about. The theme is the author's main point or message about the subject. However, to identify a theme, sometimes it helps to create a list of subjects or big ideas in a story. Common subjects for themes that you'll find in stories are usually abstract nouns (love, faith, trust, betrayal,...) that deal with human relationships. The box below lists common subjects that lead to themes. You may even think of some additional subjects that aren't on the list.

### Subjects that Lead to Themes

Acceptance	Evil	Identity	Respect
Ambition	Failure	Independence	Resourcefulness
Anger	Fairness	Injustice	Revenge
Beauty	Faith	Inspiration	Self-esteem
Belonging	Family	Justice	Self-improvement
Bravery	Family Heritage (History)	Kindness	Self-reliance
Brotherhood	Fear	Loneliness	Serenity
Celebration	Flattery	Loss	Sin
Childhood	Forgiveness	Love	Sisterhood
Compassion	Freedom	Modesty	Stinginess
Cowardice	Friendship	Nature	Success
Cruelty	Generosity	Nobility	Survival
Culture	Greed	Outsider	Temptation
Daring	Growing up	Patience	Traditions
Death	Harmony	Patriotism	Tranquility
Deception	Hate	Perseverance	Trust
Desire	Heroism	Prejudice	Tyranny
Devotion	Home	Pride	Unhappiness
Discovery	Honor	Race relations	Vanity
Discrimination	Hope	Rejection	War
Duty	Humility	Resentment	

### What is a Theme Statement?

A theme is more than one word like "love" or "prejudice." Think of a subject as the "what" of the story and the theme as the "so what." Therefore, a theme statement must be a complete sentence (with at least a subject and a verb) that states the author's message or lesson about life or human relationships. A good theme statement applies to people in general, not just to the specific characters in the story. Below are some examples of theme statements. The subjects that lead to the theme statement are underlined. Notice how the theme statements say something *about* the subject.

- It is important to stand up for your beliefs.
- Prejudice is a destructive force in our society.
- Growing up means taking responsibility for yourself.
- It is important to accept people for what they are on the inside and not the outside.

## Where to Discover Theme

- **Through character**
  - Types of characters
  - Emphasis of author
- **Through plot**
  - By what happens to characters
  - By what characters do
  - By whether characters are active or passive
- **Through motivation**
  - Reason behind character's actions
  - Emphasis on dominant motivations
  - Character's understanding of own motives
- **Through setting**
  - Choice of environment
  - Importance of environment
- **Through statements**
  - Direct statements by the author—in the narration
  - Direct statements by the author's persona
  - Dramatic statements made by the characters

Why did the author choose the characters he did?

Might the organization of the story be seen as a function of theme?

How might the actions of the main character or characters be related to the theme?  
Are there any characters who may be measured according to how they live up to or fail to live up to the theme?

Does the setting have a relationship to the theme?

## THEME

Theme is the central, underlying and controlling idea of a literary work. As an abstract concept it may be represented by a character, actions, or images in the work. Its generalization about human conduct may be serious or comic; profound or unsurprising. Theme is almost always implicit.

**Thematic Topic = Word/Phrase**

**Theme = Complete Sentence**

**Theme = topic + attitude (author's)**

### *Characteristics of theme*

- Is moral-like, but more complex (See the Profundity Scale.)
- Is not subject matter, but is comment on a subject
- Is the meaning the story releases through implication
- Is the parallel action in fiction to man's desire in life to make sense of experience, to know who he is, where he stands, what his relation is to other men in the universe
- Is a general (universal) application but is unique because of particular details of story
- Can be explored on different levels
- Is a reflection of experiences, thoughts and values of an author