



Theme

What Is Theme?

Theme is the main or central idea in a literary work. It is the unifying element of a story. A theme is not a summary of characters or events. Rather, it is the controlling idea or central insight of the story.

Determining Theme:

- A theme does not have to be a moral. Ask, *What does this story reveal?* not *What does this story teach?*
- Determine what the story's central purpose is, what view of life it supports, or what insight into life it reveals.

Creating a Theme:

The theme is comprised of both a topic and an assertion about the topic. To create a theme, you must add an assertion.

Ex of topic: "Joseph Conrad's *Youth* is about enthusiasm of youth."
(topic) (assertion)

Ex of theme: "The enthusiasm of youth lends glamour and romance to hardship, danger, and calamity in Joseph Conrad's *Youth*."

Note: It is common for students and instructors to refer to certain themes in general terms, leaving out the specific assertion. Some of these general themes are:

Love and death
Appearance vs. reality
Journey of self-discovery
Loss of innocence or coming of age
Journey or quest
Oedipus complex
Individual vs. society
Fate

While all of the above are valid concepts of theme, be sure to add your specific assertion.

Guidelines for Understanding Theme:

- Consider how certain literary elements in a work (imagery, setting, character, etc.) contribute to the main idea.
- The central idea in a story reflects the author's views of life, and these views will entail an emphasis on certain values.
- Keep in mind each of the three areas integral to theme:
 1. **Human condition.** What facet of the human condition is the author concerned with?
 2. **Author's particular views on the human condition.** What is the author saying about the human condition?
 3. **Universal truths.** Discuss how or why the author's ideas about an aspect of life aspire to a universal truth. Remember that a "truth" is an idea believed by many people.
- Examine appropriate "-isms." Many writers are associated with certain literary movements, and these movements often provide clues to theme. Some of the more prominent movements and ideas in literature are:

Platonism	Transcendentalism
Humanism	Realism
Primitivism	Naturalism
Romanticism	Existentialism
Marxism	Feminism
New Criticism	New Historicism

Writing about Theme:

- Try to write the theme in one sentence.
- Theme should be expressible in the form of a statement with a subject and a verb. The theme must be a statement about the topic.
- Avoid any statement that reduces the theme to some familiar saying. For example, "You can't judge a book by its cover."
- There is no one right way of stating the theme of a story.
- The theme should be stated as a generalization. You should not use the names of the characters or refer to precise places or events.
- Don't just summarize the plot, events, or characters.
- Be careful not to exaggerate the generalization. Terms like *every*, *all*, and *always* should be used cautiously.

Remember: Theme is the central and unifying concept of a story.