

# Universal Themes in Literature

**\*Remember** – themes need to be referred to in phrase format rather than a one or two-word statement.

1. Alienation - creating emotional isolation
2. Betrayal - fading bonds of love
3. Birth - life after loss, life sustains tragedy
4. Coming of age - boy becomes a man
5. Conformity - industrialization and the conformity of man
6. Death - death as mystery, death as a new beginning
7. Deception - appearance versus reality
8. Discovery - conquering unknown, discovering strength
9. Duty - the ethics of killing for duty
10. Escape - escape from family pressures, escaping social constraints
11. Family - destruction of family
12. Fortune - a fall from grace and fortune
13. Generation gap - experience versus youthful strength
14. God and spirituality - inner struggle of faith
15. Good and evil - the coexistence of good and evil on earth
16. Heroism - false heroism, heroism and conflicting values
17. Home - security of a homestead
18. Hope - hope rebounds
19. Hopelessness - finding hope after tragedy
20. Individualism - choosing between security and individualism
21. Isolation - the isolation of a soul
22. Journey - most journeys lead back to home
23. Judgment - balance between justice and judgment
24. Loss - loss of innocence, loss of individualism
25. Love - love sustains/fades with a challenge
26. Patriotism - inner conflicts stemming from patriotism
27. Peace and war - war is tragic, peace is fleeting
28. Power - Lust for power
29. Race relations - learned racism
30. Sense of self - finding strength from within
31. Suffering - suffering as a natural part of human experience
32. Survival - man against nature

These themes can be identified in most classic books.

The exception is tragic flaw found in Shakespeare's tragic heroes. If you remember *Romeo And Juliet* from 9th grade English , Romeo's impulsiveness was his tragic flaw, and it ended up destroying him.

### **Universal Themes in Literature**

1. Rites of passage. Loss of innocence. (This suggests a character's awareness of his/her world changes as the book progresses.)
2. Betrayal in various forms: Includes self-deception and misconception.
3. The delineation or dramatization of evil as a force within or beyond man--or the absence of it in modern fiction and drama; the fight between good and evil
4. The individualist in revolt against social conformity, or in conflict with the rules of society
5. The past as a loss, a value, an obsession, or an escape
6. Alienation, isolation, or impotence of modern man
7. The search for moral structure, purpose, hope, truth, or a personal dream
8. Man's inhumanity to his fellow man
9. The irrationality of the "rational" institution
10. Slavery, "absolute power," domination over others, or possessiveness
11. Conflicting loyalties: You're in trouble if you do; you're in trouble if you don't.
12. The tragic vanity: A character's attempt to perfect society or his/her part in it
13. Idolatry: Worshipping false gods, etc.
14. Psychological freedom through love and integrity
15. Illusion vs. Reality
16. Man: The social beast
17. Fate: The dominating force in man's life

18. Tragic Flaw (really most applicable to Shakespeare)

19. Violation of the guest-host relationship

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### *Definition of Theme*

The theme of a piece of fiction is its controlling idea or its central insight. In order to figure out theme, a reader must ask what view of life a work supports or what insight into life in the real world it reveals.

### *Definition of Universal Theme*

Frequently, a work of fiction implies a few ideas about the nature of all men and women or about the relationship of human beings to each other or to the universe. These are called universal themes.

### *Examples of Universal Themes*

As expressed by authors, themes involve positions on these familiar issues:

- A human being's confrontation with nature
- A human being's lack of humanity
- A rebellious human being's confrontation with a hostile society
- An individual's struggle toward understanding, awareness, and/or spiritual enlightenment
- An individual's conflict between passion and responsibility
- The human glorification of the past/ rejection of the past
- The tension between the ideal and the real
- Conflict between human beings and machines
- The impact of the past on the present
- The inevitability of fate
- The evil of unchecked ambition
- The struggle for equality
- The loss of innocence/disillusionment of adulthood
- The conflict between parents and children
- The making of an artist in a materialistic society
- The clash between civilization and the wilderness
- The clash between appearance and realities
- The pain of love (or what passes for it)
- The perils or rewards of *carpe diem*