Theme

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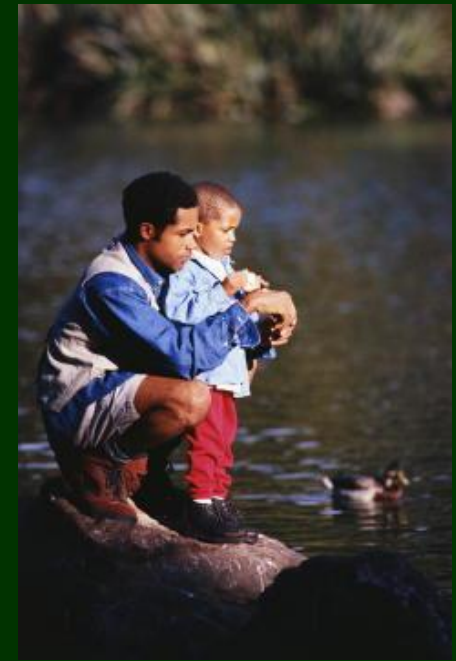[Practice](#)

What Is Theme?

What makes a story linger in our hearts and minds long after we've read it? Often it is the idea on which the story is built—it's **theme.**

What Is Theme?

Theme—the central idea, or insight, about life or human behavior that a story reveals ▾

Living a simple life leads to greater personal freedom.

The deepest loneliness is sometimes felt when we are among friends.

Genres

What Is Theme?

In most stories, the theme is not stated directly. Instead, it is revealed to us through the characters' experiences.

[End of Section]

Universal Themes

Different writers from different cultures often express similar themes. ▾

- A theme is a **generalization** about life or human nature. ▾

- Certain types of experiences are common to all people everywhere.

Universal Themes

Universal themes

- come up again and again in literature ▾

- deal with basic human concerns—good and evil, life and death, love and loss ▾

- shine a light on our common experiences ▾

- can help guide us through our lives

Universal Themes

Stories

The Little Red Hen

Beauty and the Beast

The Three Little Pigs

The Ugly Duckling

The Frog Prince

Match these familiar stories to the appropriate universal theme.

A It pays to work hard and plan ahead.

B Appearances can be deceiving.

Answer

[End of Section]

Finding the Theme

Keep the following guidelines in mind when you want to find and state the theme of a work. ▾

The theme is not the same thing as the subject. ▾

- The **subject** is simply the topic. It can be stated in a single word, such as *loyalty.* ▾

- The **theme** makes some revelation about the subject and should be expressed in a sentence: "Loyalty to a leader is not always noble."

Finding the Theme

Writers often express theme through what their characters learn. ▾

- Does the main **character** change? ▾

- Does a character realize something he or she did not know before?

Finding the Theme

Conflict helps reveal theme. ▾

- What is the **conflict,** or struggle between opposing forces, that the main character faces? ▾

- How is the conflict resolved? ▾

Conflict

Two friends find a wallet. One friend wants to return it to the owner; the other wants to keep it.
▾

Resolution

They return the wallet and share a small reward.
▾

Theme

People are often rewarded for making the right moral decision.

Finding the Theme

Sometimes the title gives clues. ▾

- Does the title have a special meaning? ▾

- Does it point to the theme? ▾

The theme applies to the entire work. ▾

- Test your statement of the theme. Does it apply to the whole work, not just to parts of it?

Finding the Theme

There is no single way to state the theme. ▾

- People may express the same theme in different words. ▾

- There may be different opinions about what the main theme is. ▾

- The most meaningful literary works often have more than one theme.

Finding the Theme

Quick Check

Because of a feud over a piece of land, Ulrich and Georg are bitter enemies. One night they encounter each other on the disputed land. Each thinks of killing the other. Suddenly a huge tree falls and pins them both under its weight.

At first the men threaten each other. After a while, however, they notice each other's suffering, make a pact of friendship, and look forward to being rescued and living in peace. Then they are attacked by wolves.

synopsis of "The Interlopers" by Saki

What is the conflict and how is it resolved?

Answer

What do the characters learn?

Answer

Finding the Theme

Quick Check

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synopsis of "The Interlopers" by Saki

What is the theme? (State it in a sentence.)

Answer

[End of Section]

Making a Judgment

Don't accept a story's theme as valid just because the story is in print. Instead, ask yourself: ▾

- Is this story's view of life too simplistic? Too idealistic? Too cynical? ▾

- Is the writer trying to push an idea that does not reflect real life?

Formula Fiction

Making a Judgment

Quick Check

True love solves all of life's problems.

People who have a lot of money or power are sometimes greedy for more.

People who do good deeds will be happy and will not suffer.

Classify each theme as either **valid** or **not valid**. Explain your choices.

Answer

[End of Section]

Practice

PRACTICE Think of a story you've read that had an impact on you. Then, use a map like the one here to help you figure out the story's theme. Compare your map with the ones your classmates made. Did you and any of your classmates map stories with similar themes?

Title:

Topic:

- How the main character changes:
- How the conflict is resolved:
- What the title suggests:

Theme:

[End of Section]

The End

Credits

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