

## Theme

A topic of discourse or discussion.

In literature, a **theme** is the main idea of the story, or the message the author is conveying. A **theme** is a generalization about life. It is more than “What is the story about?” It is what the work MEANS. This message is usually about life, society or human nature. Not all stories have explicit themes. However, some readers would say that, because all stories choose certain areas of life to focus on and deal with, all stories inherently project some kind of outlook on life that can be taken as a **theme**, regardless of whether or not this is the intent of the author. In doing literary analysis, arriving at a work’s purpose or **theme** - whether the work be a short story, novel, play, poem, or film – is the most difficult analytical task.

Themes are either:

1. **Explicit** - Stated directly – the “meaning” of the story is said in the story.
2. **Implicit** - A reader must decide what the message of the story is by looking at other elements such as plot outcomes.

The theme is the unifying element of a story. Characters in the text are not mentioned by name - theme is not a summary of characters or events. Rather, it is the controlling idea or central insight of the story.

- The theme of a fable is its moral.
- The theme of a parable is its teaching.
- The theme of a piece of fiction is its view about life and how people behave.

In fiction, the theme is not intended to teach or preach. In fact, it is not presented directly at all. You extract it from the characters, action, and setting that make up the story. In other words, you must figure out the theme yourself. The writer's task is to communicate on a common ground with the reader. Although the particulars of your experience may be different from the details of the story, the general underlying truths behind the story may be just the connection that both you and the writer are seeking.

There is no set method for determining **theme**, but sometimes we may discover theme by examining (a) the way in which the main character has changed or what he or she has learned, combined with (b) the nature of the central conflict:

CENTRAL CONFLICT + CHANGE IN MAJOR CHARACTER → THEME

The theme is comprised of both a topic and an assertion about the topic.

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

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

General rules for stating a theme are:

1. Use complete sentences.
2. Make a point about a specific topic. For example: A statement like, “The theme of the story is love” is incorrect - What about love?
3. Do not use names. Instead use one, a person, people, etc.
4. Do not use absolutes or sweeping generalizations. For example: *always, never, everyone, must, everybody*, etc.
5. Do not use clichés, e.g. *Crime doesn't pay*.
6. Do not give lessons or morals.
7. A theme must be based on and supported by the entire story (all the major details – specific details can be listed to support the theme even though they are not part of the theme statement).

Warning: A theme must not be so general that it says nothing. For example, the statement “The effects of risk taking can be positive or negative” is so broad that it says very little. Hint: To overcome this, ask the questions, “In the text, what are the positive effects of risk taking, and what are the negative effects of risk taking? Why is risk taking positive, and why is risk taking negative?”

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.

Here are some ways to uncover the theme in a story:

- Check out the title. Sometimes it tells you a lot about the theme.
- Notice repeating patterns and symbols. Sometimes these lead you to the theme.
- What allusions are made throughout the story?
- Look at the conflicts in the story and how they are resolved.
- What are the details and particulars in the story? What greater meaning may they have?
- Remember - theme, plot, and structure are inseparable, all helping to inform/reflect back on each other.
- Be aware that a theme we determine from a story never completely explains the story. It is simply one of the elements that make up the whole.
- A theme does not have to be a moral. Ask - *what does this story reveal?* Not - *what does this story teach?*
- Determine the story's central purpose, what view of life it supports, or what insight into life it reveals.

### **Example Theme Poem (By: LeRoi Jones)**

Morning uptown, quiet on the street,  
no matter the distinctions that can be  
made, quiet, very quiet, on the street.  
Sun's not even up, just some kid and me,  
Skating, both of us, at the early sun, and  
amazed there is grace for us, without our  
having to smile too tough, or be very pleasant  
even to each other. Merely to be merely to be.

What is the poem about?

- The speaker and “some kid” find themselves skating on a quiet street at sunrise. The two are surprised because at this quiet hour they can go about their ways peacefully, just being themselves.

What is the theme of this poem?

- The quiet of the early morning is magical
- Tensions between people let up when they can just be themselves.