Theme

Feature Menu

What Is Theme?
Discovering a Theme
Stating a Theme
Practice
What Is Theme?

A work’s **theme** is the central idea or insight about human life that it reveals.

Many elements contribute to a work’s theme.

- characters
- conflict
- plot
- setting

**Note**
What Is Theme?

The theme of a work of literature is its root. It reveals the writer’s personal attitude toward the world and the people in it and may give readers insight into life and human nature or help them realize the importance of what they already know.

- gives meaning to the work’s characters and events
- reveals the writer’s personal attitude toward the world and the people in it
- may give readers insight into life and human nature or help them realize the importance of what they already know
A work’s theme is sometimes confused with its

- subject—what the story is about
- plot—the events of the story
- moral—the rule of conduct that the story teaches

These parts of a story are important, but they are not its theme.
What Is Theme?

Quick Check

Listen to your elders.

Three siblings go swimming in a creek even though their grandfather warns them not to. One sibling is almost swept away by the current.

The story of a dangerous swim

Young people’s overconfidence can put them in danger; young people often learn a lesson the hard way.

Identify each item as one of the following:
- subject
- plot
- moral
- theme

[End of Section]
Discovering a Theme

Identifying a work’s theme is not easy but can help the reader understand the work more fully.

• The theme is rarely stated outright and must be inferred.

• A long and complex work may present more than one theme, or insight into human life.
Discovering a Theme

Here are some guidelines for discovering theme.

- Think about the title.
- Consider how the protagonist changes.
- Pay attention to story’s conflict and how it is resolved.
- Consider the work as a whole.
Discovering a Theme

Think about the title.

Readers may find clues to the theme in the first words they read, the work’s title.

“How might these three things—a fish, a river, and a girl—affect the main character’s life?”

“The Bass, the River, and Sheila Mant”
Discovering a Theme

Consider how the protagonist changes.

Often what the main character learns about life is the truth the writer wants to reveal to the reader.

At the beginning . . .

There was a summer in my life when the only creature that seemed lovelier to me than a largemouth bass was Sheila Mant. I was fourteen.
Discovering a Theme

Consider how the protagonist changes.

Often what the main character learns about life is the truth the writer wants to reveal to the reader.

At the end . . .

Poor Sheila! Before the month was over, the spell she cast over me was gone, but the memory of that lost bass haunted me all summer and haunts me still. . . . I never made the same mistake again.
Discovering a Theme

Pay attention to story’s conflict and how it is resolved.

Conflict is central to most literature and often contains clues to the theme.

“I think fishing’s dumb,” she said, making a face. “I mean, it’s boring and all. Definitely dumb.”

... I would have given anything not to appear dumb in Sheila’s severe and unforgiving eyes.

What conflict does the protagonist face? How does he initially respond to the conflict?
Discovering a Theme

Consider the work as a whole.

Other elements of the story, such as setting or characters, may also contribute to the theme.

“Eric said I have the figure to model, but I thought I should get an education first. I mean, it might be a while before I get started and all. I was thinking of getting my hair styled, more swept back . . . ?”

How does the development of Sheila’s subordinate character add to your understanding of the theme?
Stating a Theme

You should use at least one complete sentence to state the theme of a work.

- Express the theme as a generalization about life or human nature. Do not refer to specific characters or events in the work.

“The Bass, the River, and Sheila Mant” reveals the extremes to which people will go when they are in love and reminds readers that these sacrifices often fail to win love.

Note
Choose a story that meant something to you. Use this chart to help you discover and then state the story’s theme. Compare your statement with those of other students who chose the same story.

## Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps to Determining a Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What the title suggests:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the main character changes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the conflict is resolved:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What, in general, the story reveals about life and people:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The story’s theme:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[End of Section]
The End