

# Understanding Literary Theme

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Analyzing Literature

# What is Theme in Literature?

When you are talking about literature, one of the most important things you need to discuss is the “Central Theme” of the text.

The Theme refers to the central idea or underlying message of the text. The Theme is rarely stated in the text – instead, the reader must usually consider the plot, characters, and setting to infer the theme.



# What is Theme in Literature?

Theme is often confused with other literary elements such as Plot or Topic (or Subject)

However, the Theme of a piece of literature is a *message about people, life, and the world we live in that the author wants the reader to understand.*

The Topic, on the other hand, is the main idea or gist of the story.



# What is Theme in Literature?

For example, think about the Topic and Theme of the classic story *Cinderella*.

If you are describing the TOPIC, you might say it is a story about a poor girl who marries a prince.

But if you are describing the THEME, it could be described as an example of karma or good things happening to good people.



# What is Theme in Literature?

## *Charlotte's Web*

**Topic**

**A talking spider  
helps a pig.**



**Theme(s)**

**Self-Sacrifice  
True Friendship  
Perseverance**



# What is Theme in Literature?

## *The Ugly Duckling*

**Topic**

**An ugly duckling  
grows up to become  
a beautiful swan**



**Theme(s)**

**Patience  
Self-Confidence  
Individuality**



# What is Theme in Literature?

## *The Wizard of Oz*

Topic	Theme(s)
<p>A girl goes on an adventure in a magic land.</p> 	<p>Friendship Appreciate What You Already have</p> <p>Things You Seek Are Already Inside You</p>



# What is Theme in Literature?

The theme can also be described in terms of a moral, or message, or lesson that the reader can gain from the piece of literature.

*The Tortoise and the Hare* is a lesson in perseverance.



*The Gingerbread Man* is a lesson in arrogance and the folly of pride.



# Identify the Theme

Now you try it.

Which of the following is the **THEME** of *The Midas Touch*?

- A. A king gains magic powers.
- B. Magic can cause problems.
- C. Greed never leads to happiness.





# Identify the Theme

Now you try it.

Which of the following is the **THEME** of *City Mouse Country Mouse*?

- A. A country mouse visits his cousin in the city.
- B. A mouse discovers he does not like the city.
- C. Be grateful for what you already have.





# Identify the Theme

Now you try it.

Which of the following is the **THEME** of *Horton Hears a Who?*

- A. An elephant struggles to save a community.
- B. Elephants have very good hearing.
- C. True friendship knows no boundaries.





# Identify the Theme

Think about studying theme across different works of literature with your class.

How many stories can you think of that have a central theme of:

- Friendship?
- Generosity?
- Self-Sacrifice?
- Honesty?