# Understanding Literary Theme

Analyzing 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 <u>infer</u> the theme.

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.

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.

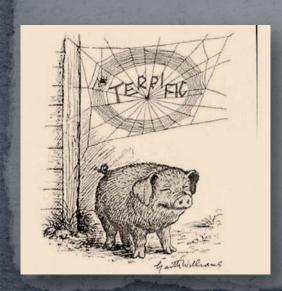
Charlotte's Web

**Topic** 

Theme(s)

A talking spider helps a pig.

Self-Sacrifice
True Friendship
Perseverance



The Ugly Duckling

**Topic** 

Theme(s)

An ugly duckling grows up to become a beautiful swan

Patience
Self-Confidence
Individuality



The Wizard of Oz

**Topic** 

Theme(s)

A girl goes on an adventure in a magic land.



Friendship
Appreciate What You
Already have
Things You Seek Are

Things You Seek Are Already Inside You

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.



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.



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.



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.



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?