



Finding the Theme in Short Stories, Novels, and Plays

A theme is an idea about human nature, a moral lesson about right and wrong, or a theory of how the world works. For example:

- Children are innocent and become corrupt and cynical with age (human nature)
- There is no such thing as an ethical billionaire (morality or economics)
- Society's attention span will always be short and easily changeable (how the world works)

Where is the theme?

The theme is not usually plainly stated in a literary work. Instead, there are hints throughout the short story, novel, or play that help to build that message.

How do I know if I'm right?

People can interpret the same story in different ways because of differing cultural backgrounds and life experiences. But that doesn't mean *anything* can be the theme! In the end, your answer is "right" if you can explain *how the author developed the theme*.

What if I've found the theme, and I think it's upsetting, offensive, or outdated?

That would be a good problem to address in an essay. Ask your instructor for approval.

Here are some things you can do to discover the theme:

- Read the work carefully, more than once. Make notes on your personal reactions.
- Use a highlighter or pen to identify *literary devices* in the work. (**Hint:** Grab our Literary Devices handout!). Make notes on what kind of impression each device creates.
- Pay attention to the *genre* of the story. For example, a children's book will often present a clear moral lesson, but a satire will express its themes indirectly, using irony and dark humour.
- Pay attention to *character arcs*:
 - What lesson does the main character learn, or how do they change? This lesson often matches the theme. On the other hand, sometimes the author intends for us to learn the *opposite* lesson (there will be clues in the text if this is the case).
 - If the character does not learn anything, the author might be making a point about some un-changeable aspect of people or the world.
- Pay attention to the *conflict* or *tension* in the story:
 - Do you want the main character to succeed? The author may be making a moral argument about the character's goal by showing that it is either a wise or foolish thing to want.
 - Does the main character succeed? What sacrifices or compromises do they make along the way? The author may be creating a theme around what is or isn't possible and why.