

Common Themes in Literature

What is the main idea or controlling theme of the work of literature? What does the work "mean"? Does it say something about life, death, love, happiness...? A theme is a recurrent idea with a certain amount of universality. We study the main ideas of stories, and compare them to other works through history to discover what writers have to say about life, death, loneliness, sadness, hope, and other themes related to society, human nature, and beyond. In literature, a theme is a broad idea in a story, or a message or lesson conveyed by a work. This message is usually about life, society or human nature. Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. Themes are usually implied rather than explicitly stated. A theme is not the same as the subject of a work. For example, the subject of *Green Eggs and Ham* is "green eggs and ham are well worth eating, no matter the location". The theme might be "have an open mind". Themes differ from motifs in that themes are ideas conveyed by a text, while motifs are repeated images that represent those ideas. Simply having repeated symbolism related to chess, does not make the story's theme the similarity of life to chess. Themes arise from the interplay of the plot, the characters, and the attitude the author takes to them (tone), and the same story can be given very different themes in the hands of different authors.

The Great Journey

This follows a character or characters through a series of episodic adventures as they travel. It may be a sad story or a happy story, or it may even be comedic. *Huckleberry Finn*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and *The Odyssey* are good examples. In film, this theme can be seen in *Apocalypse Now* and *National Lampoon's Vacation*.

Loss of Innocence

Sometimes called the "coming of age story," this most commonly introduces an "innocent" character to the evil or complexity of the real/adult world. In literature, we might look at *David Copperfield* or most of the Nick Adams stories by Ernest Hemingway, like "Indian Camp" and "The End of Something." In film, we might look at *Stand by Me*.

The Noble Sacrifice

The sacrifice can be for any reason except self--a loved one, an enemy, a group of people, the whole of humanity, a dog--but the bottom line is that the protagonist sacrifices himself or herself in an effort to save others. In literature, this is demonstrated in the story of Jesus in the *New Testament* and King Arthur in Mallory's *Morte d'Artur*. This theme is used in the films *Glory*, *Armageddon*, *The Green Mile*, and in just about any war movie where the hero dies gloriously.

The Great Battle

The Iliad and *A Tale of Two Cities* are classic examples of this theme. It is about people or groups of people in conflict. It is sometimes a good vs. evil story like *1984* by George Orwell, but not always. The film *The War of the Roses*, starring Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas, is an example of a battle in which neither character is wholly good or evil. In theatre, we see this theme at work in *Westside Story* and *Les Misérables*. We often see this theme in horror or science fiction, like in *Alien* and *Terminator*, where the antagonist--a monster/creature/human/alien/computer/etc.-- is trying

to kill the protagonist, who must fight to stay alive and/or defeat the antagonist. Sub-categories would be person vs. person, person vs. nature, person vs. society, person vs. technology and etc.

The Fall From Grace

This theme shows us people going where only God should go, doing what only God is meant to do, or attempting to do something that human beings should never do. This is always followed by misfortune, whether it is the direct result of their action or an act of God. We see this in the tales of Coyote's theft of fire in the Native American tradition, or in the story of the Tower of Babel and the Garden of Eden in *The Old Testament*. Other examples would be the Prometheus myth, Pandora's Box, and the story of Icarus. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly is another work exploring this theme, and we have seen it at work in the films *Jurassic Park* and *Westworld*.

Love and Friendship

Romeo and Juliet is a classic love story, as is the story of Lancelot and Guenivere. The films *You've Got Mail* and *Message in a Bottle* are also love stories. The ending may be happy, sad, or bittersweet, but the main theme is romantic love. Also included in this theme is platonic love--friendship--like in the movies *Wrestling Ernest Hemingway* and *Midnight Cowboy*. All Romance novels, whether straight or gay, fit into this category. All "buddy films" like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Thelma and Louise* fit into this category.

The Capriciousness of Fate

Greek tragedies fit this category. Often, there is a major reversal of fortune. It could be from good-to-bad or from bad-to-good. *Oedipus Rex* is a classic work that explores the concept of fate and destiny, having an unhappy ending. *Cinderella* is also a reversal of fortune story, but has a happy ending. In film, we have seen this theme at work in *Pretty Woman*. The common element is that there is some force guiding the person's life over which he or she has no control.

Revenge

The subject is obvious, but the outcome differs. Sometimes the outcome is good, like in the movies *Revenge of the Nerds* or *Animal House*. Sometimes the outcome is bad, as in *Macbeth* and *Moby Dick*. Other movies based on this theme are *Revenge*, starring Anthony Quinn and Kevin Costner, and *Payback*, starring Mel Gibson.

The Big Trick

In this one, someone or some group of people intentionally trick someone else. *Rumpelstiltskin* and *Little Red Ridinghood* are in this category. *Stone Soup* is an old story in which several men trick the inhabitants of a village into providing them with food. This theme was evident in *Snatch*, starring Brad Pitt, and *The Sting*, starring Robert Redford and Paul Newman.

The Big Mystery

Something unexplained happened and it is the protagonist's job to find an explanation for it. The story of *Sherlock Holmes* are good examples, as are the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* mysteries. In film, we have seen it *Silence of the Lambs* and *The Maltese Falcon*, and it took a comedic turn in *Clue* and *The Pink Panther*. Almost all police and detective dramas work within this form, as do most espionage and spy thrillers. Agatha Christy and Tom Clancy work within this form.

Common Themes in Literature

1. The Individual in Nature

- a. Nature is at war with each of us and proves our vulnerability.
- b. People are out of place in Nature and need technology to survive.
- c. People are destroying nature and themselves with uncontrolled technology.

2. The Individual in Society

- a. Society and a person's inner nature are always at war.
- b. Social influences determine a person's final destiny.
- c. Social influences can only complete inclinations formed by Nature.
- d. A person's identity is determined by place in society.
- e. In spite of the pressure to be among people, an individual is essentially alone and frightened.

3. An individual's Relation to the gods.

- a. The god(s) are benevolent and will reward human beings for overcoming evil and temptation.
- b. The gods mock the individual and torture him or her for presuming to be great.
- c. The gods are jealous of and constantly thwart human aspiration to power and knowledge.
- d. The gods are indifferent toward human beings and let them run their undetermined course.
- e. There are no gods in whom people can place their faith or yearning for meaning in the universe.

4. Human Relations

- a. Marriage is a perpetual comedy bound to fail.
- b. Marriage is a relationship in which each partner is supported and enabled to grow.
- c. An old man marrying a young woman is destined to be a cuckold.
- d. Parents should not sacrifice all for a better life for their children.
- e. There are few friends who will make extreme sacrifices.

5. Growth and Initiation

- a. A boy and a girl must go through a special trial or series of trials before maturing.
- b. Manhood or womanhood is often established by an abrupt, random crisis, sometimes at an unusually early age.
- c. Aspects of childhood are retained in all of us, sometimes hindering growth, sometimes providing the only joy in later life.
- d. A person grows only in so far as he or she must face a crisis of confidence or identity.

6. Time

- a. Enjoy life now, for the present moment, because we all die too soon.
- b. By the time we understand life, there is too little left to live.

7. Death

- a. Death is part of living, giving life its final meaning.
- b. Death is the ultimate absurd joke on life.
- c. There is no death, only a different plane or mode of life without physical decay.
- d. Without love, death often appears to be the only alternative to life.

8. Alienation

- a. An individual is isolated from human beings and foolishly tries to bridge the gaps.
- b. Through alienation comes self-knowledge.
- c. Modern culture is defective because it doesn't provide group ties which in primitive cultures makes alienation virtually impossible.