



# **LITERARY ELEMENT REVIEW**

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# CHARACTERS

Individuals who participate in the action of a literary work

Most important characters are called **MAIN CHARACTERS**.

A main character usually has many **TRAITS**, mirroring the psychological complexity of a real person.

# CHARACTERS

Individuals who participate in the action of a literary work

Less prominent characters are called **MINOR CHARACTERS.**

A minor character may have only one or two dominant traits.

# CHARACTERS

Individuals who participate in the action of a literary work

Some characters, especially main characters, undergo change as the plot unfolds.

These characters are called **dynamic characters**.

**Static characters** are characters who remain the same.

# CONFLICT

Struggle  
between  
opposing forces

**External conflict** occurs when a character is pitted against an outside force, such as

- Another character
- A physical obstacle
- A force of nature or society

# SETTING

Time and place  
in which the  
action of a story  
occurs

Time can be past, present, or future.

Setting can also include larger  
historical and cultural contexts  
important to a story

Setting often plays an important role  
in **what** happens and **why**.

# THEME

Idea about the human condition that we draw from a work of literature

**Recurring themes** are themes found in a variety of works.

**Universal themes** are themes found throughout the literature of all time periods.

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# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 1. Recognize difference between subject and theme.

SUBJECT: “The poem is about love.”

THEME: “The poem shows that love remains constant even when assaulted by tempestuous events or by time.”

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 2. Theme applies to world outside the work.

“Rapid change in Rip van Winkle’s environment threatens his identity.”

*This statement is thoughtful and interesting but does not state a theme.*

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 2. Theme applies to world outside the work.

“Rip van Winkle’s experience shows that environment causes many people to feel their identity is threatened.”

*A statement of theme becomes a form of philosophy – a universal wisdom about the statement of the world.*

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 3. Theme as dilemma

Theme may be presented as intellectual dilemma rather than “message” that neatly solves problem.

“Robert Penn Warren’s novel *All The King’s Men* raises the problem of morality in politics. . . . He shows that politics is morally contradictory, never simply right or wrong.”

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## **4. Look at comments made by narrators and characters for statements of theme**

If the statement of a character or narrator expresses a universal truth that is consistent with the moral and philosophical concept of a work, that may be a theme. Do other aspects of the work support that theme?

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## **5. Areas of philosophical inquiry**

Philosophers and theologians have for generations raised questions about the human experience.

You can seize upon these to interpret works of literature by thinking in four areas of inquiry.

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 5. Areas of philosophical inquiry

### *Human nature.*

What image of humankind emerges from the work? Are people, for example, generally good? Deeply flawed?....???

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 5. Areas of philosophical inquiry

### *The nature of society.*

Does the author portray a particular society or social scheme as life-enhancing or life-destroying?



# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 5. Areas of philosophical inquiry

### *The nature of society.*

Are characters we care about in conflict with their society? Do they want to escape from it?

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 5. Areas of philosophical inquiry

### *The nature of society.*

What causes and perpetuates this society?

If the society is flawed, how it flawed?

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 5. Areas of philosophical inquiry

### *Human freedom.*

What control over their lives do the characters have? Do they make choices in complete freedom? Are they driven by forces beyond their control?

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 5. Areas of philosophical inquiry

### *Human freedom.*

Does Providence or some grand scheme govern history, or is history simply random and arbitrary?

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 5. Areas of philosophical inquiry

### ***Ethics.***

What are the moral conflicts in this work? Are they clear cut or ambiguous? That is, is it clear to us exactly what is right and exactly what is wrong? When moral conflicts are ambiguous in a work, right often opposes *right*, not wrong.

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 5. Areas of philosophical inquiry

### *Ethics.*

If right opposes wrong, does right win in the end?

To what extent are the characters to blame for their actions?

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 5. Moral center.

Who, if anyone, serves as *moral center* of the work? A *moral center* is the one person whom the author vests with right action and right thought (that is, what the *author* seems to think is right action and right thought), the one character who seems clearly “good” and who often serves to judge others.

# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## **5. Moral center.**

Not every work has a moral center, but in the works that do, its center can lead you to some of the work's themes.



# GUIDELINES FOR STATING AND DESCRIBING THEME

## 5. Moral center.

How can you tell that a character is the *moral center*?

What values does the moral center embody?

Is the moral center flawed in any way that might diminish his/her authority?

What effect does the moral center have on other characters and on us?