

Focus on Theme

Themes are the interwoven ideas that hold a story or novel together. If you compare a novel to a piece of fabric, the story (or plot) would be the threads that run one way, and the ideas (themes) would be the strands woven the other way. Many works have more than one theme, some major and some minor.

Sometimes you might confuse a story's theme with its topic or subject. The *subjects* of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, are a war and the young men who fought in it. The *themes* of that novel are larger, more abstract ideas that comment on that subject. For example, possible themes might be that "Young men in combat can lose their faith in the future" or "Soldiers on opposite sides in a war can still feel compassion for one another."

Some stories and novels have obvious themes. Alan Paton, for example, says throughout *Cry, the Beloved Country*, "Have no doubt it is fear . . ." and discusses different types of and reasons for fear throughout the book. *All Quiet on the Western Front* focuses on youth from the beginning, examining what youth is all about and when and how the soldiers lost their youth by fighting in the war.

In some stories, however, the themes may not be so obvious, or they are more complex. An author might develop a theme but may never come right out and say what the theme is. This section focuses on not only what themes are but how authors develop them.

Goals

Here you'll learn how to:

- ✓ identify and understand themes in fiction
- ✓ find details that develop themes in a literary work
- ✓ see the difference between a subject or topic and a theme

Before Reading

You can follow this three-step plan when focusing on the themes of a literary work:

Plan for Understanding Theme

Step 1 Identify the big ideas or central topics.

Step 2 Find out what the characters do or say that relates to the central topics.

Step 3 State what the author says about life that relates to the central topics.

Step 1: Identify the "big ideas" or central topics.

Think about a piece of music. Notice how certain sound patterns keep returning throughout the piece? This is how themes work in a story. They appear as ideas throughout the story and are expressed through what different characters do, think, or say.

Themes are often introduced through a story's title, although you may not realize the connection until you finish reading. A title such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, gives you little information about the themes, but when you finish reading, you realize that it relates to one of the book's big ideas.

How can you identify a central topic? Many stories have certain topics in common. Here are a number of topics you will find in many books. You can identify a central topic by noting the chief conflicts in a work or by concentrating on what characters do, say, and want.

COMMON TOPICS FOR THEMES

ambition
change
childhood
choices
courage
culture
differences
faith
family
freedom

friendship
future
growing up
hope
human needs
identity
independence
justice
loss
love

loyalty
money
power
prejudice
relationships
secrets
success
trust
truth
war

During Reading

Now that you know what possible topics to look for, these big ideas should be easier to find, right? As you take notes during your reading, you might simply list the topics that keep coming up. This technique helps you pay attention while you read and prepares you for figuring out the theme later on. Looking for recurring topics also gives you an additional purpose while reading, which helps you read with greater focus and insight.

Step 2: Find out what the characters do or say that relates to the central topics.

Once you identify a topic, see what the author says about it and how the characters' actions relate to the idea. These provide clues to understanding theme. In a short story such as Tim O'Brien's "On the Rainy River," for example, making decisions is an important topic. The main character struggles with decisions about whether to run away to Canada or fight in Vietnam, and what to believe and what not to believe about the war, his country, and even himself.

You will know if you choose a good topic to investigate. If you choose well, you will find examples and details relating to this topic throughout a story. Clues about the theme appear in several forms:

- repeated words, ideas, or symbols
- images and metaphors
- important plot events or dialogue
- changes in characters' actions, beliefs, or values

Reading Strategy: Using Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers, such as Summary Notes and Double-entry Journals, are a useful way of keeping track of details related to a topic.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*, for example, features many central topics. Any one of them can lead to a theme. The novel tells the story of a young Indian woman who flees her country after her husband's death. She changes identities and locations throughout the novel in an effort to find out who she is. Summary Notes show how a theme develops chapter by chapter.

SUMMARY NOTES

BOOK: JASMINE

TOPIC: IDENTITY

CHAPTER 1 In India a fortune-teller says Jasmine will be a widow and live in exile. The chapter ends with her living in Iowa years later.

CHAPTER 4 She compares herself as a girl in India with herself as a woman in America.

CHAPTER 12 Prakash, her Indian husband, changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine.

A Double-entry Journal can help you look at specific lines and passages to see what they mean and how they relate to a topic.

DOUBLE-ENTRY JOURNAL

BOOK: JASMINE

TOPIC: IDENTITY

QUOTES	WHAT I THINK ABOUT IT
"Masterji, you are here to tell me that there is a lotus blooming in the middle of all this filth, no?" (p. 50)	Jasmine's teacher comes to tell her father that she is not a common village girl and should not be married off. They have a discussion about Jasmine's future and what she really is. This is important because identity is based not only on what you are or where you are from, but on what you know and can do.
"Yogi's in a hurry to become all-American, isn't he?" (p. 28)	"Yogi" is the nickname school friends give to Jasmine and Bud's adopted Vietnamese son. His real name is Du. This quote brings up the question of what it means to be American now. Kids like Du change identities to meet the needs of the situation. Jasmine is always saying Du does whatever he must to survive. Changing names, identities—these are not big problems or sacrifices for him.

After Reading

Now it's time to use your notes and organizers to help you write about the themes the author explores.

Step 3: State what the author says about life that relates to the central topics.

Use a Topic and Theme Organizer to identify the themes in a story or novel. You can make an organizer for each big idea in a novel. First, list the big idea or main topic. Then, tell the details of what the characters say or do that relates to that topic. Next, write what is important to learn about this topic. Here's an organizer one reader made for *Jasmine*.

TOPIC AND THEME ORGANIZER

1. BIG IDEA

Identity

2. WHAT CHARACTERS DO OR SAY

Jasmine keeps changing her name every time she moves to a new place: Jasmine, Jane, Jazzy, Jase, and Jyoti.	Many different characters leave one place to go to another where they think they can be their "real" selves. People resist these changes: Taylor won't let Jasmine be "Jane." Prakash won't let Jasmine be "Jyoti," and Jasmine's teacher won't let her drop out of school.	Identity is also what you do: Darrel has always been a farmer; Prakash was born to be an engineer; Lillian Gordon lives to help immigrants; Bud is a banker.
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3. WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO LEARN

Who we are depends on where we are and the people we are with.

Note that the organizer includes several different examples, each of which relates to a different aspect of identity. Jasmine is the main character in the novel, but the topic of identity relates to all the characters. A good theme statement will not limit you to talking only about the main character.

TIPS FOR MAKING THEME STATEMENTS

Tip 1. State your idea. *Try not to summarize the story. Your theme statement should be a complete sentence that expresses the story's theme. Try completing the following sentence: "The point the author makes is that _____."*

Tip 2. Use precise words. *Vague words—such as good or important or bad—make it hard to get your point across.*

Tip 3. Avoid using characters' names. *Good theme statements are about the whole story and its ideas, not just one particular character.*

Summing Up

- A theme is different from a subject or topic. The topic is the big idea in a story or novel. Theme is the author's ideas about that subject.
- Follow the three-step plan for understanding theme:
1) Identify the "big ideas" or central topics. 2) Find out what the characters do or say that relates to the central topics. 3) Make a statement about life that relates to a central topic.
- Different readers will have different interpretations of a work. Readers bring their own experiences and ideas to a text, and these influence their interpretation. So long as you or another reader can provide evidence—examples and details—that supports your interpretation, you are reading well.