

Theme Definition

What is theme? Here's a quick and simple definition:

A theme is a universal idea, lesson, or message explored throughout a work of literature. One key characteristic of literary themes is their universality, which is to say that themes are ideas that not only apply to the specific characters and events of a book or play, but also express broader truths about human experience that readers can apply to their own lives. For instance, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (about a family of tenant farmers who are displaced from their land in Oklahoma) is a book whose themes might be said to include the inhumanity of capitalism, as well as the vitality and necessity of family and friendship.

Some additional key details about theme:

- All works of literature have themes. The same work can have multiple themes, and many different works explore the same or similar themes.
- Themes are sometimes divided into *thematic concepts* and *thematic statements*. A work's thematic concept is the broader topic it touches upon (love, forgiveness, pain, etc.) while its thematic statement is what the work says about that topic. For example, the thematic concept of a romance novel might be *love*, and, depending on what happens in the story, its thematic statement might be that "Love is blind," or that "You can't buy love."
- Themes are almost never stated explicitly. Oftentimes you can identify a work's themes by looking for a repeating symbol, motif, or phrase that appears again and again throughout a story, since it often signals a recurring concept or idea.

Theme Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce theme: **them**

Identifying Themes

Every work of literature—whether it's an essay, a novel, a poem, or something else—has at least one theme. Therefore, when analyzing a given work, it's always possible to discuss what the work is "about" on two separate levels: the more concrete level of the plot (i.e., what literally happens in the work), as well as the more abstract level of the theme (i.e., the concepts that the work deals with). Understanding the themes of a work is vital to understanding the work's significance—which is why, for example, every LitCharts Literature Guide uses a specific set of themes to help analyze the text.

Although some writers set out to explore certain themes in their work before they've even begun writing, many writers begin to write without a preconceived idea of the themes they want to explore—they simply allow the themes to emerge naturally through the writing process. But even when writers *do* set out to investigate a particular theme, they usually don't identify that theme explicitly in the work itself. Instead, each reader must come to their own conclusions about what themes are at play in a given work, and each reader will likely come away with a unique thematic interpretation or understanding of the work.

Symbol, Motif, and Leitwortstil

<https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/theme>

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Thematic Concepts vs. Thematic Statements

A work's thematic *concept* is the broader topic it touches upon—for instance:

- *Judgement*
- *Love*
- *Revenge*
- *Forgiveness*

while its thematic *statement* is the particular argument the writer makes about that topic through his or her work, such as:

- *Human judgement is imperfect.*
- *Love cannot be bought.*
- *Getting revenge on someone else will not fix your problems.*
- *Learning to forgive is part of becoming an adult.*

Writers often use three literary devices in particular—known as symbol, [motif](#), and [leitwortstil](#)—to emphasize or hint at a work's underlying themes. Spotting these elements at work in a text can help you know where to look for its main themes.

- **Symbol:** Broadly defined, a symbol is anything that represents another thing. In literature, a symbol is often a tangible thing—an object, person, place, or action—that represents something intangible.
 - Near the beginning of [Romeo and Juliet](#), Benvolio promises to make Romeo feel better about Rosaline's rejection of him by introducing him to more beautiful women, saying "Compare [Rosaline's] face with some that I shall show....and I will make thee think thy swan a crow." Here, the swan is a *symbol* for how Rosaline appears to the adoring Romeo, while the crow is a *symbol* for how she will soon appear to him, after he has seen other, more beautiful women.
 - Symbols might occur once or twice in a book or play to represent an emotion, and in that case aren't necessarily related to a theme. However, if you start to see clusters of similar symbols appearing in a story, this may mean that the symbols are part of an overarching motif, in which case they very likely *are* related to a theme.
- **Motif:** A [motif](#) is an element or idea that recurs throughout a work of literature. Motifs, which are often collections of symbols, help reinforce the central themes of a work.
 - For example, Shakespeare uses the motif of "dark vs. light" in [Romeo and Juliet](#) to emphasize one of the play's main themes: the contradictory nature of love. To develop this theme, Shakespeare describes the experience of love by pairing contradictory, opposite symbols next to each other throughout the play: not only *crows and swans*, but also *night and day*, *moon and sun*. These paired symbols all fall into the overall pattern of "dark vs. light," and that *overall pattern* is called a *motif*.
- **Leitwortstil:** *Leitwortstil* is a literary device—less common than motif—in which writers use a repeated phrase to underscore important themes and concepts in a work.
 - A famous example is Kurt Vonnegut's repetition of the phrase "So it goes" throughout his novel [Slaughterhouse Five](#), a novel which centers around the events of World War II. Vonnegut's narrator repeats the phrase each time he recounts a tragic story from the war, an effective demonstration of how the horrors of war have become normalized for the narrator. The constant repetition of the phrase emphasizes the novel's primary themes: the death and destruction of war, and the futility of trying to prevent or escape such destruction, and both of those things coupled with the author's skepticism that any of the destruction is necessary and that war-time tragedies "can't be helped."

Symbol, motif and leitwortstil are simply *techniques* that authors use to emphasize themes, and should not be confused with the actual thematic content at which they hint. That said, spotting these tools and patterns can give you valuable clues as to what might be the underlying themes of a work.

Identifying Thematic Statements

One way to try to identify or describe the thematic statement within a particular work is to think through the following aspects of the text:

- **Plot:** What are the main plot elements in the work, including the arc of the story, setting, and characters. What are the most important moments in the story? How does it end? How is the central conflict resolved?
- **Protagonist:** Who is the main character, and what happens to him or her? How does he or she develop as a person over the course of the story?
- **Prominent symbols and motifs:** Are there any motifs or symbols that are featured prominently in the work—for example, in the title, or recurring at important moments in the story—that might mirror some of the main themes?

After you've thought through these different parts of the text, consider what their answers might tell you about the thematic statement the text might be trying to make about any given thematic concept. The checklist above shouldn't be thought of as a precise formula for theme-finding, but rather as a set of guidelines, which will help you ask the right questions and arrive at an interesting thematic interpretation.