

## Theme Examples

The following examples not only illustrate how themes develop over the course of a work of literature, but they also demonstrate how paying careful attention to detail as you read will enable you to come to more compelling conclusions about those themes.

### Themes in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Fitzgerald explores many themes in *The Great Gatsby*, among them the corruption of the American Dream.

**Plot:** The novel takes place in the summer of 1922 on Long Island, in a community divided between West Egg, a town full of newly rich people with no social connections, and East Egg, a town full of "old money"—inherited wealth—and people with extensive connections.

-The story's narrator is Minnesota-born Nick Caraway, a New York bonds salesman. Nick befriends Jay Gatsby, the protagonist, who is a wealthy man who throws extravagant parties at his mansion.

-The central conflict of the novel is Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy, whom he met and fell in love with as a young man, but parted from during World War I.

-He makes a fortune illegally by bootlegging alcohol, to become the sort of wealthy man he believes Daisy is attracted to, then buys a house near her home, where she lives with her husband.

-While he does manage to re-enter Daisy's life, she ultimately abandons him and he dies as a result of her reckless, selfish behavior.

#### **Prominent Symbol: The Green Light**

-Gatsby's house is on the water, and he stares longingly across the water at a green light that hangs at the edge of a dock at Daisy's house which sits across a the bay. The symbol of the light appears multiple times in the novel—during the early stages of Gatsby's longing for Daisy, during his pursuit of her, and after he dies without winning her love. It symbolizes both his longing for daisy and the distance between them (the distance of space and time) that he believes (incorrectly) that he can bridge.

#### **Prominent Motif: Green**

-In addition to the green light, the color green appears regularly in the novel. This motif of green broadens and shapes the symbolism of the green light and also influences the novel's themes. While green always remains associated with Gatsby's yearning for Daisy and the past, and also his ambitious striving to regain Daisy, it also through the motif of repeated green becomes associated with money, hypocrisy, and destruction. Gatsby's yearning for Daisy, which is idealistic in some ways, also becomes clearly corrupt in others, which more generally impacts what the novel is saying about dreams more generally and the American Dream in particular. Gatsby pursues the American Dream, driven by the idea that hard work can lead anyone from poverty to wealth, and he does so for a single reason: he's in love with Daisy. However, he pursues the dream dishonestly, making a fortune by illegal means, and ultimately fails to achieve his goal of winning Daisy's heart. Furthermore, when he actually gets close to winning Daisy's heart, she brings about his downfall. Through the story of Gatsby and Daisy, Fitzgerald expresses the point of view that the American Dream carries at its core an inherent corruption.

### Themes in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe explores the theme of the dangers of rigidly following tradition.

**Plot:** The novel takes place in the Igbo community of Umuofia in Nigeria. It provides an account of the clan's traditional way of life, and tells the story of its brave and self-made

leader, Okonkwo. When white colonists and Christian missionaries begin to arrive, they undermine the traditional culture and threaten the world Okonkwo has built.

-Okonkwo is obsessed with embodying the masculine ideals of traditional Igbo warrior culture.

-Okonkwo's dedication to his clan's traditions is so extreme that it even alienates members of his own family, one of whom joins the Christians.

-The central conflict: Okonkwo's community adapts to colonization in order to survive, becoming less warlike and allowing the minor injustices that the colonists inflict upon them to go unchallenged. Okonkwo, however, refuses to adapt.

-At the end of the novel, Okonkwo impulsively kills a Christian out of anger. Recognizing that his community does not support his crime, Okonkwo kills himself in despair.

### **Prominent Motif: Sacrifice**

Throughout the novel, animals and humans alike are sacrificed according to the clan's traditions. These physical sacrifices also represent the deeper sacrifice individuals make when they suppress their own beliefs and desires to follow a traditional code of behavior.

-Clanswomen who give birth to twins abandon the babies in the forest to die, according to traditional beliefs that twins are evil.

-Okonkwo kills his beloved adopted son, a prisoner of war, according to the clan's traditions.

-Okonkwo sacrifices a goat in repentance, after severely beating his wife during the clan's holy week.

Through the tragic story of Okonkwo, Achebe is clearly dealing with the theme of tradition, but a close examination of the text reveals that he's also making a clear thematic statement that following traditions too rigidly leads people to the greatest sacrifice of all: that of personal agency.

### **The Road Not Taken**

BY ROBERT FROST

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>

NB: Check also the poem guide.

### **Themes in Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken***

Poems have themes just as plot-driven narratives do. One theme that Robert Frost explores in this famous poem, *The Road Not Taken*, is the illusory nature of free will.

#### **Situation:**

-The poem's speaker stands at a fork in the road, in a "yellow wood."

-He (or she) looks down one path as far as possible, then takes the other, which seems less worn.

-The speaker then admits that the paths are about equally worn—there's really no way to tell the difference—and that a layer of leaves covers both of the paths, indicating that neither has been traveled recently.

-After taking the second path, the speaker finds comfort in the idea of taking the first path sometime in the future, but acknowledges that he or she is unlikely to ever return to that particular fork in the woods.

-The speaker imagines how, "with a sigh" she will tell someone in the future, "I took the road less travelled—and that has made all the difference."

-By wryly predicting his or her own need to romanticize, and retroactively justify, the chosen path, the speaker injects the poem with an unmistakable hint of **irony**.

#### **Prominent Motif: Life is a Journey**

-The speaker's journey is a symbol for life, and the two paths symbolize different life paths, with the road "less-travelled" representing the path of an individualist or lone-wolf. The fork where the two roads diverge represents an important life choice. The road "not taken" represents the life path that the speaker would have pursued had he or she had made different choices.

Frost's speaker has reached a fork in the road, which—according to the symbolic language of the poem—means that he or she must make an important life decision. However, the speaker doesn't really know anything about the choice at hand: the paths appear to be the same from the speaker's vantage point, and there's no way he or she can know where the path will lead in the long term. By showing that the only truly informed choice the speaker makes is how he or she explains their decision *after they have already made it*, Frost suggests that although we pretend to make our own choices, our lives are actually governed by chance.

#### **For Practice:**

Think of a story you've read that had an impact on you. Then, use a map like the one here to help you figure out the story's theme (or thematic statement).

- **Title:**
- **Topic (thematic concept):**
  - **How the main character changes:**
  - **How the conflict is resolved:**
  - **What the title suggests:**
  - **Symbols and/or motifs :**
- **Theme:**