

## Theme

The definition of **theme** is the central idea of a work of literature. Also, a theme, as we will use that term in this class, is different than a **subject** (or **topic**). The topic of the story is a general area of life the theme is concerned with. The topic is always made up of abstract nouns, never concrete nouns, and it is always stated in 1-2 words: love, hate, war, pride, growing up.

By contrast, the **theme**, makes a revelation about the subject. It is always a sentence—a statement that reveals a truth about human behavior or about life in general

For example, in *Romeo & Juliet*, some **topics** would be love, impatience, rashness. A **theme** could be something like the following: Impatient love can sometimes lead to tragedy.

For any work of literature, there can be major themes and minor themes. Be sure to focus on the major themes unless asked otherwise.

When **determining a theme**, consider the following steps:

1. It is usually not stated directly, so you need to search for it, which means you need to **consider the story as a whole**, including all the major aspects of the story:
  - Title
  - Characters
  - Plot and conflict
  - Setting
  - Important statements
  - Symbols
2. Next, **determine important subjects or topics** (love, friendship, bitterness, etc.) Write down several topics, not just one or two.
3. Decide **what the story suggests is true about the subject or topic** based on all the elements of the story. (Sometimes the best themes will be about two or three subjects at once.)
4. Make sure **the theme is a complete sentence** (and also verify that your subject is included in that sentence).
5. When constructing a theme, **avoid the following**:
  - Clichés (overused expressions)
  - commands
  - “you”
  - “should” or “must” (morals)  
A theme does not tell us what we should do; it simply suggests what is true about life.
  - Overly general or obvious statements: “Revenge is bad.”

### Always think critically about a story’s theme

- Do you agree with the theme?
- Question the writer’s presentation.
- Is the theme valid or not?
- Is the writer presenting a truth about life or forcing us to accept a view of life we think is false?
- Is there a significant theme, or is the work more of a shallow piece of “formula fiction”?

## Symbol

A symbol is anything that represents something more than itself. Letters are symbols, as are flags, road signs, or business brands. There are many different types of symbols

- universal (archetypal): a black bird, a dove, the sun
- cultural or religious: cross, Star of David, yin yang
- national: flags, stars and stripes, sickle and hammer
- local: Pegasus for MTSU
- literary: what we will be focusing on

Each of these has a meaning within a specific context.

A **symbol in literature** is defined as an object, a person, or an event that functions as itself but also stands for something beyond itself.

**To identify symbols in literature, consider the following steps:**

1. Look at key features of the story:
  - the title
  - prominent objects
  - colors
  - names (characters, places)
2. Note characteristics of the object or person
3. Look for similarities to other prominent features (characters, topics, ideas, etc.)
4. Look beyond the basic, or universal, meaning (make it specific to the text)
5. Analyze how the symbol reinforces a theme