Theme

Definition of Theme

Theme is defined as a main idea or an underlying meaning of a literary work, which may be stated directly or indirectly.

Major and Minor Themes

Major and minor themes are two types of themes that appear in literary works. A major theme is an idea that a writer repeats in his literary work, making it the most significant idea in the work. A minor theme, on the other hand, refers to an idea that appears in a work briefly, giving way to another minor theme.

Difference between a Theme and a Subject

It is important not to confuse a theme of a literary work with its [subject](https://literarydevices.net/subject/). Subject is a topic that acts as a foundation for a literary work, while a theme is an opinion expressed on the subject. For example, a writer may choose a subject of war for his story, and the theme may be his personal opinion that war is a curse for humanity.

Presentation of Themes

A writer presents themes in a literary work through several means. A writer may express a theme through the feelings of his main [character](https://literarydevices.net/character/) about the subject he has chosen to write about. Similarly, themes are presented through thoughts and conversations of different characters. Moreover, the experiences of the main character in the course of a literary work give us an idea about its theme. Finally, the actions and events taking place in a narrative are consequential in determining its theme.

Short Examples of Theme

Following are sentences with corresponding themes in parentheses.

1. The space travelers were travelling to the moon, when their spaceship suddenly ran out of fuel. They were all frightened to learn that they wouldn’t be able to return to Earth, and could only land on the moon.  
   (fear)
2. The baseball game was reaching a highpoint, the fans of both teams screaming their support. It was an excellent game.  
   (cheerfulness)
3. The teacher said that he hoped all of his students would pass with good grades.  
   (optimism)
4. The father of the slowwitted student said he had no false hopes about his son’s future.  
   (pessimism)
5. The conference was in full swing, with scholars delivering knowledgeable lectures on varying subjects. The [audience](https://literarydevices.net/audience/) enjoyed it immensely.  
   (learning)
6. The politician was delivering a speech on the need for peace between two neighboring states. He said through peace they could achieve what not possible through war.  
   (peace)

Examples of Theme in Literature

Example #1: *Love and Friendship Theme*

Love and friendship are frequently occurring themes in literature. They generate emotional twists and turns in a narrative, and can lead to a variety of endings: happy, sad, or bittersweet

Example #2: *War Theme*

The theme of war has been explored in literature since ancient times. Literary works utilizing this theme may either glorify or criticize the idea of war. Most recent literary works portray war as a curse for humanity, due to the suffering it inflicts. Some famous examples include:

* *Iliad and Odyssey* by Homer
* *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy
* *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell

Example #3: *Crime and Mystery Themes*

Crime and mystery are utilized in detective novels. Such narratives also include sub-themes, such as “crimes cannot be hidden,” “evil is always punished,” and others. Some well-known crime and mystery theme examples include:

* *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie
* *Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown

Example #4: *Revenge Theme*

Revenge is another recurrent theme found in many popular literary works. A character comes across certain circumstances that make him aware of his need for revenge. The outcome of his action is often bitter, but sometimes they may end up being satisfied. Examples are:

* *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare
* *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexander Dumas

Function of Theme

Theme is an element of a story that binds together various essential elements of a narrative. It is often a truth that exhibits universality, and stands true for people of all cultures. Theme gives readers better understanding of the main character’s conflicts, experiences, discoveries, and emotions as they are derived from them. Through themes, a writer tries to give his readers an insight into how the world works, or how he or she views human life.