

The Literary Element of Theme

Theme is:

- the central, underlying, and controlling idea or insight of a work of literature.
- the idea the writer wishes to convey about the subject—the writer's view of the world or a revelation about human nature.

Theme is NOT:

- expressed in a single word
- the purpose of a work
- the moral
- the conflict

Identifying the Theme in Five Steps

To identify the theme, be sure that you've first identified the story's plot, the way the story uses characterization, and the primary conflict in the story.

Use these steps to determine the theme for a work:

1. Summarize the plot by writing a one-sentence description for the exposition, the conflict, the rising action, the climax, the falling action, and the resolution.
2. Identify the subject of the work.
3. Identify the insight or truth that was learned about the subject.
 - How did the protagonist change?
 - What lesson did the protagonist learn from the resolution of the conflict?
4. State how the plot presents the primary insight or truth about the subject.
5. Write one or more generalized, declarative sentences that state what was learned and how it was learned.

Theme Litmus Test

- Is the theme supported by evidence from the work itself?
- Are all the author's choices of plot, character, conflict, and tone controlled by this theme?