

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

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.

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.*

Should You Use Thematic Concepts or Thematic Statements?

Some people argue that when describing a theme in a work that simply writing a thematic concept is insufficient, and that instead the theme must be described in a full sentence as a thematic statement. Other people argue that a thematic statement, being a single sentence, usually creates an artificially simplistic description of a theme in a work and is therefore can actually be more misleading than helpful. There isn't really a right answer in this debate.

In our [LitCharts literature study guides](#), we usually identify themes in headings as thematic concepts, and then explain the theme more fully in a few paragraphs. We find thematic statements limiting in fully

exploring or explaining a the theme, and so we don't use them. Please note that this doesn't mean we only rely on thematic concepts—we spend paragraphs explaining a theme after we first identify a thematic concept. If you are asked to describe a theme in a text, you probably should usually try to at least develop a thematic statement about the text if you're not given the time or space to describe it more fully. For example, a statement that a book is about "the senselessness of violence" is a lot stronger and more compelling than just saying that the book is about "violence."

Identifying Thematic Statements

One way to try to 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.



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](#). You can read more about the theme of The American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* [here](#).

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](#). You can read more about this theme in *Things Fall Apart* [here](#).

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

Poem's 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.**



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Themes are a huge part of what readers ultimately take away from a work of literature when they're done reading it. They're the universal lessons and ideas that we draw from our experiences of works of art: in other words, they're part of the whole reason anyone would want to pick up a book in the first place!

It would be difficult to write any sort of narrative that did *not* include any kind of theme. The narrative itself would have to be almost completely incoherent in order to seem theme-less, and even then

readers would discern a theme about incoherence and meaninglessness. So themes are in that sense an intrinsic part of nearly all writing. At the same time, the themes that a writer is interested in exploring will significantly impact nearly all aspects of how a writer chooses to write a text. Some writers might know the themes they want to explore from the beginning of their writing process, and proceed from there. Others might have only a glimmer of an idea, or have new ideas as they write, and so the themes they address might shift and change as they write. In either case, though, the writer's ideas about his or her themes will influence how they write.

One additional key detail about themes and how they work is that the process of identifying and interpreting them is often very personal and subjective. The subjective experience that readers bring to interpreting a work's themes is part of what makes literature so powerful: reading a book isn't simply a one-directional experience, in which the writer imparts their thoughts on life to the reader, already distilled into clear thematic statements. Rather, the process of reading and interpreting a work to discover its themes is an exchange in which readers parse the text to tease out the themes they find most relevant to their personal experience and interests.



OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on Theme:** An in-depth [explanation](#) of theme that also breaks down the difference between thematic concepts and thematic statements.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Theme:** A basic [definition](#) and etymology of the term.
- **Theme on Youtube:**
 - In this instructional [video](#), a teacher explains her process for helping students identify themes.

HOW TO CITE

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