

Understanding Theme

Everyone likes a story with a good plot, but there is more to a story than what happens to the characters. Often there is a deeper meaning, or theme. A **theme** is a message about life or human nature that a writer wants you to understand. A story usually has at least one theme. However, a story may have more than one theme or **multiple themes**.

Some popular themes, such as those about loyalty and friendship, appear in many different stories. They are called **recurring themes**.

Part 1: Themes in Literature

It's easy to confuse a story's theme with its topic. Here's a way to tell the difference: A topic can be summed up in a word or two, such as "taking risks." A theme, however, is a writer's message *about* a topic. It usually takes at least one complete sentence to express a theme—for example, "Life's biggest rewards come from taking risks."

Stories can mean different things to different people. Two people reading a story might describe its theme differently or find different themes.

COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:

RL 1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL 2 Determine a theme and analyze its development over the course of the text.

EXAMPLES OF THEMES IN LITERATURE



Thank You, M'am

Unit 1
pages 68–72

PLOT SUMMARY

Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones catches Roger trying to steal her purse. She drags him to her home, makes him wash up, and feeds him. Then she gives him the ten dollars he was trying to steal.

TOPIC

- Second chances

POSSIBLE THEMES

- Everyone deserves a second chance.
- An act of kindness can make a difference in a person's life.



Casey at the Bat

Unit 1
pages 134–136

PLOT SUMMARY

When the hometown baseball hero Casey comes to bat, there are two outs and two men on base. Instead of winning the game with a home run, Casey strikes out, and his team loses.

TOPIC

- Baseball

POSSIBLE THEMES

- Even a hero can fail.
- Overconfidence can lead to failure.

MODEL 1: THEME IN A STORY

Fables often convey themes about human nature through the actions of animal characters. What lesson can readers learn from this fable?

The **LION** and the **MOUSE**

Fable by **Aesop**

A lion was idling in the sun, pretending to sleep, when he felt a tickle on his nose. He opened one eye and, with a swipe of his huge paw, caught a small mouse trying to run away. The lion roared angrily and tossed the mouse into the air. The mouse cried, "Please don't hurt me! If only you will spare my life, I promise I will repay you." Surprised and amused by the little creature's earnest promise, the lion laughed and let the mouse go.

Time passed, and then one day the lion became ensnared in a trap. As he struggled to free himself, the ropes tightened around him until he couldn't move. The little mouse was close by and heard the lion's roars. She came and set the lion free by gnawing through the ropes. "When you kindly spared my life," said the mouse, "you laughed at the idea that one day I would repay you."

Close Read

1. What does the lion decide to do after capturing the mouse? Explain how the mouse repays the lion.
2. What lesson can readers learn from the way the lion and the mouse treat each other?

MODEL 2: THEME IN A POEM

In this poem, the writer presents a strong message about family.

LiTTLE **Si**STER

Poem by **Nikki Grimes**

little sister
holds on tight.
My hands hurt
from all that squeezing,
5 but I don't mind.
She thinks no one will bother her
when I'm around,
and they won't
if I can help it.
10 And even when I can't
I try
'cause she believes in me.

Close Read

1. How does the little sister rely on the speaker of the poem? Explain how the speaker feels about his or her sister.
2. Reread the boxed lines. Which statement best expresses the theme?
 - a. When family members believe in you, it makes you stronger.
 - b. Families should spend more time together.

Part 2: A Closer Look at Theme

Sometimes the theme of a story is stated directly by the narrator or a character. Most often, though, a theme is implied—hinted at but not stated directly. In such a case, you need to **infer** the theme by finding clues in the text. This chart tells you where to look for those clues. Use the questions shown to help you uncover the theme of any story you read.

CLUES TO THEME

TITLE



The title may reflect a story's topic, its theme, or both. Ask:

- What does each word in the title mean?
- What ideas does the title emphasize?

PLOT



A story's plot often revolves around a conflict that is important to the theme. Ask:

- What conflicts do the characters face?
- How are the conflicts resolved?

CHARACTERS



What characters do and learn can reflect a theme. Ask:

- What are the main characters like? (Analyze their speech, thoughts, and actions.)
- How do the characters respond to the conflicts?
- How do the characters change?
- What lessons do the characters learn?

SETTING



A setting (place and time) can suggest theme through its effects on the characters and on the events in the story. Ask:

- How does the setting influence the characters?
- How does the setting affect the conflicts?
- What might the setting represent? (For example, a historical setting, such as London in the mid-1800s when many people lived in poverty, may suggest a theme related to generosity or greed.)

Part 3: Analyze the Text

In this story, two brothers respond to a challenge by making very different choices. As you read, use the clues in the story to help you understand what the writer is saying about their choices.



THE TWO BROTHERS

Short story by **Leo Tolstoy**

Two brothers set out on a journey together. At noon they lay down in a forest to rest. When they woke up they saw a stone lying next to them. There was something written on the stone, and they tried to make out what it was.

- 5 “Whoever finds this stone,” they read, “let him go straight into the forest at sunrise. In the forest a river will appear; let him swim across the river to the other side. There he will find a she-bear and her cubs. Let him take the cubs from her and run up the mountain with them, without once looking back. On the top of the mountain
- 10 he will see a house, and in that house will he find happiness.”

Close Read

1. The title of this story suggests that the two brothers are central to the theme. As you read, think about the differences in the brothers’ outlooks on life.
2. What challenge do the brothers face? Predict how they might respond to the challenge.

When they had read what was written on the stone, the younger brother said:

15 “Let us go together. We can swim across the river, carry off the bear cubs, take them to the house on the mountain, and together find happiness.”

20 “I am not going into the forest after bear cubs,” said the elder brother, “and I advise you not to go. In the first place, no one can know whether what is written on this stone is the truth—perhaps it was written in jest. It is even possible that we have not read it correctly. In the second place, even if what is written here is the truth—

25 suppose we go into the forest and night comes, and we cannot find the river. We shall be lost. And if we do find the river, how are we going to swim across it? It may be broad and swift. In the third place, even if we swim across the river, do you think it is an easy thing to take her cubs away from a she-bear? She will seize us, and, instead of finding happiness, we shall perish, and all for nothing. In the fourth place, even if we succeeded in carrying off the bear cubs, we could not run up a mountain without stopping to rest.

30 And, most important of all, the stone does not tell us what kind of happiness we should find in that house. It may be that the happiness awaiting us there is not at all the sort of happiness we would want.”

35 “In my opinion,” said the younger brother, “you are wrong. What is written on the stone could not have been put there without reason. And it is all perfectly clear. In the first place, no harm will come to us if we try. In the second place, if we do not go, someone else will read the inscription on the stone and find happiness, and we shall have lost it all. In the third place: if you do not make an effort and try hard, nothing in the world will succeed. In the fourth place: I should not want it thought that I was afraid of anything.”

40 The elder brother answered him by saying: “The proverb says: ‘In seeking great happiness small pleasures may be lost.’ And also: ‘A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.’”

Close Read

3. Reread the **boxed** text. The setting—the forest, the river, the bears, and the mountain—all represent danger to the elder brother. What does his reaction to the setting’s challenges tell you about him?

4. Reread lines 16–39. How are the brothers’ attitudes different? Describe each brother’s outlook on life.

The younger brother replied: "I have heard: 'He who is afraid of the leaves must not go into the forest.' And also: 'Beneath a stone
45 no water flows.'"

Then the younger brother set off, and the elder remained behind.

No sooner had the younger brother gone into the forest than
he found the river, swam across it, and there on the other side
was the she-bear, fast asleep. He took her cubs, and ran up the
50 mountain without looking back. When he reached the top of the
mountain the people came out to meet him with a carriage to take
him into the city, where they made him their king.

He ruled for five years. In the sixth year, another king, who was
stronger than he, waged war against him. The city was conquered,
55 and he was driven out.

Again the younger brother became a wanderer, and he arrived
one day at the house of the elder brother. The elder brother was
living in a village and had grown neither rich nor poor. The two
brothers rejoiced at seeing each other, and at once began telling
60 of all that had happened to them.

"You see," said the elder brother, "I was right. Here I have lived
quietly and well, while you, though you may have been a king, have
seen a great deal of trouble."

"I do not regret having gone into the forest and up the mountain,"
65 replied the younger brother. "I may have nothing now, but I shall always
have something to remember, while you have no memories at all."

Close Read

5. How do the brothers resolve their conflict?

6. Reread lines 61–66. How does each brother feel about the choice he made? Explain whether the brothers' attitudes have changed.

7. Consider what the writer might be saying about the choices people make. (Hint: Is there always a right or wrong choice?) Write a statement that expresses the theme of the story.