

# EXPLORING AND IDENTIFYING THEME

Theme: the meaning of the story; central or dominating idea

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## What a theme is not:

- It is not the “moral” of the story. A *moral* is a piece of practical advice gained from a work to apply to our own lives. Works with morals are said to be “didactic”.
  - A *theme* is more complex than a moral and may have no direct advice or philosophical guidance for a reader
    - It is not the **subject or topic** of the story and *not* a one-word label.
    - It is not a “hidden meaning” that needs to be pulled out of the story.

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## What theme is:

Theme is a meaning released by the work when we take all aspects of the work in its entirety into account.

It is a comment on an aspect of human experience that the author expresses.

A theme is expressed in a full sentence that tells in some detail what the work says about the topic.

Great works of literature have multiple themes.

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## Discovering theme

We discover theme only by becoming aware of the relations among the parts of a story and of the relations of the parts to a whole:

### Characters

What kind of people does the story deal with?

### Tone

What is the author’s attitude towards the subject?

### Plot

What do the characters do? Are they in control of their lives, or are they controlled by fate or something else?

### Values

What are the values of the characters in the story? What values does the author promote?

### Motivation

Why do the characters behave as they do; what motives dominate them?

### Style

How does the author express reality?

The importance of theme in literature can be overestimated; the work of fiction is more than just the theme. However, the theme allows authors to control or give order to their perceptions about life.