[What is Theme](http://theeditorsblog.net/2010/10/24/what-is-theme/" \o "Link to What is Theme)

**What is theme?**

When students of literature are asked to identify elements of a novel or short story, they’re pressed to pinpoint what the story is about.

They could answer with plot details, something about the actions of the characters.

However, they could also go for a behind-the-plot meaning, something less about events and more about **significance**, perhaps even a **conclusion** they’ve drawn from the book.

I’m talking about theme.

Plot is the events of story; theme is the meaning behind or revealed by story.

**Theme is sometimes defined as the moral of a story**, though theme doesn’t have to be a moral. Morals that double as theme include these: *cheaters never win*, *honesty wins the day*, and *good guys finish first*.

Of course, a story may just as easily prove that *cheaters often win, liars quite often succeed*, and *bad guys beat out the good guys*.

But a story’s theme may not come out as a moral at all.

**Themes are often a declaration of the human condition**. Or a truth that explains human behavior.

Consider an author whose books seem similar. You may even tire of them, saying they’re all the same. What do you mean by that?

Maybe each is about mothers and daughters. Maybe the author pursues the same theme in every book—*the relationship between mothers and daughters is complex*.

There’s no moral there. But there is a theme to the body of work and to each story in that author’s list of books. The theme is a recognizable one that speaks to the human condition.

**Themes may deal with a specific group**—*pre-school boys are fearless; immigrants are both clannish and brave; pirates live out the maxim, I’m looking out for number one*.

**Themes may deal with principles and abstractions rather than people**—love means sacrifice, hope is painful, death stalks each of us from the moment of birth.

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**Themes don’t have to be true in the real world**—they *are* true in terms of the story they come from. That is, you don’t have to believe the theme is true in your daily life; you may actually hold the opposite viewpoint. But if the story has been written such that the theme is obvious to readers, the theme is true in terms of the people and events in the story.

**Theme is often stated in absolutes**: someone/something is/does something.

**Themes tend to be universal**. The theme *love conquers all* can work for peasants in 1350 Europe, wealthy owners of a 1880 New York townhouse, colonists on Nebulus 5 in 3535.

**Themes tend to be serious**, even in humorous works. When you describe the way people behave or how big concepts (such as love) work, you’re getting into people’s beliefs and strongly held opinions. You might hear an argument from a reader who disagrees. You might hear from legions of fans who agree. You might start a war between factions from both sides. (Which could only help sales and bring attention to your writing.)