

SMART™ Lesson

Exploring Theme in Literature

Understanding Theme

A theme is the underlying meaning or message of a work of literature. It is the unifying and central idea that ties together all the elements of a story, such as characters, plot, setting and style.

Theme is not the same thing as the subject of a story. The subject is the topic or idea that the writer is writing about, whereas the theme is the writer's perspective on that topic. For example, the subject of a story might be love, but the theme could be about the power of love to overcome all obstacles.

Often the theme of a story is not directly stated, but instead has to be inferred by the reader. This is because writers often convey themes through symbolism, imagery, repetition and other literary techniques.

Examples of Themes

Here are some common themes in literature:

- Love and its various forms (romantic, family, friendship)
- Death and mortality
- Good vs. evil
- Coming of age
- Survival and resilience
- Freedom and oppression
- Prejudice and discrimination

Identifying Themes

Identifying the theme of a story can help you gain a deeper understanding of the text and appreciate the author's message. To identify a theme, you should:

1. Look for patterns and recurring elements in the text.
2. Consider what the characters are trying to achieve and what obstacles they face.
3. Think about how characters change throughout the story.
4. Pay attention to symbolism and imagery used by the writer

Practice Questions

Read the following excerpts and answer the questions that follow:

Excerpt 1: "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee

"Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

This was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something, and I asked Miss Maudie about it.

"Your father's right," she said. "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corn cribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

1. What is Atticus's message in this excerpt?
2. What message is conveyed about mockingbirds?
3. What might the mockingbird symbolize in this story?

Excerpt 2: "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

1. What decision does the speaker of this poem have to make?
2. How does the speaker feel about not being able to choose both roads?
3. What might the two roads symbolize in this poem?