# Exploring and Identifying Theme

Theme: the meaning of the story; a central or dominating idea  
a “meaning of the work as a whole”

### 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.

### 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.

### 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 writer create?

#### Plot

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

#### Motivation

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

#### Tone

What is the author’s attitude towards the subject?   
What is the narrator’s attitude?   
Are the two different?

#### Values

What values does the writer have the characters hold?   
What values does the writer promote?

#### 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 writers to control or give order to their perceptions about life.

# 32 Master Topics

***Alienation—***creating emotional isolation

***Betrayal—***fading bonds of love

***Birth—***life after loss, life sustains tragedy

***Coming of age—***child becomes adult

***Conformity—***industrialization and the conformity of people

***Death—***death as mystery, death as a new beginning

***Deception—***appearance versus reality

***Discovery—***conquering unknown, discovering strength

***Duty—***the ethics of killing for duty

***Escape—***escape from family pressures, escaping social constraints

***Family—***destruction of family

***Fortune—***a fall from grace and fortune

***Generation gap—***experience versus youthful strength

***God and spirituality—***inner struggle of faith

***Good and evil—***the coexistence of good and evil on earth

***Heroism—***false heroism, heroism and conflicting values

***Home—***security of a homestead

***Hope—***hope rebounds

***Hopelessness—***finding hope after tragedy

***Individualism—***choosing between security and individualism

***Isolation—***the isolation of a soul

***Journey—***most journeys lead back to home

***Judgment—***balance between justice and judgment

***Loss—***loss of innocence, loss of individualism

***Love—***love sustains/fades with a challenge

***Patriotism—***inner conflicts stemming from patriotism

***Peace and war—***war is tragic, peace is fleeting

***Power—***lust for power

***Race relations—***learned racism

***Sense of self—***finding strength from within

***Suffering—***suffering as a natural part of human experience

***Survival—***humans against nature

*Definition of Theme: Marysville (TN) High School Composition Guide* [*http://www.ci.maryville.tn.us/mhs/studyskills/compguide/LitAnaTheme.htm*](http://www.ci.maryville.tn.us/mhs/studyskills/compguide/LitAnaTheme.htm) *Theme List: M. Wood, Patriot High School, Riverside, CA https://sites.google.com/a/patriothighschool.com/english-­‐10-­‐2011-­‐12/assignments/themes  
adapted: Mary Louise Wells and Skip Nicholson*