

Help Centres – English Support



Theme in Prose Fiction

The theme (or themes) in a literary text is an underlying idea explored by the work of literature. Themes typically relate to human experience – it is, after all, humans who write texts— across a broad range of relationships with others, society, the environment, and even one’s self.

1. When exploring a theme, examine how textual elements -- such as plot, characters, and literary devices -- present and develop key ideas that are woven throughout the work.
2. Remember not to conflate theme with topic. The topic of a text is quite general, such as “war”, while the theme expresses a more nuanced interrogation of the topic, such as “military conflict both strengthens and severs human bonds”.
3. Theme is part of the figurative meaning of a text. One needs to first understand the literal, or surface, meaning of the text before one can understand figurative (connotative) meaning. To do so, read the work several times and consider:
 - the title of the story and how it can be understood on denotative and connotative levels.
 - whether there are any elements that function as symbols in the story. If so, what ideas do they suggest.
 - how conflict functions in the story, and what these conflicts might represent.
 - how conflicts are resolved or left unresolved at the end of the story, and whether a theme can be found in this condition.