

Theme is the central idea in a work of literature. It is an observation about life or human nature that the writer shares with a reader. A theme is similar to the moral tacked on to the end of an Aesop fable. For example, in the fable “The Lion and the Mouse,” the lion reluctantly lets a mouse go after the mouse promises to do him a favor some day. When the lion is captured by hunters a few days later, the mouse shows up to bite through the ropes, thus freeing the lion. The moral of the story: “Even a small friend may be a great friend.” Most themes are not as directly stated as Aesop’s morals, however. You have to infer themes from the combined elements of a story.

Distinguishing Between Subject and Theme

Theme should not be confused with the subject of a story, or what the story is about. Rather, **theme** is an observation that a writer expresses about a **subject**. For example, the subject of “My Wonder Horse” (page 557) is a boy’s capture of a legendary wild horse. The theme of the story is rooted in the boy’s recognition that the horse should remain free. The boy realizes that the horse would die or become just another horse if it remained in captivity.

YOUR TURN Read the passage at the right, taken from the end of the story after the horse escapes. Why is the boy so happy at the horse’s escape? How would you state the theme of the story?

Identifying Theme from Elements in a Story

The theme of a story usually doesn’t come into focus until after you’ve finished reading. But you can look for clues to theme as you read by closely observing the key elements of title, character, setting, and plot.

TITLE The title of a story is often a good clue to theme. The title of “To Build a Fire” (page 517), for example, emphasizes the most important feature of human survival in the arctic. Fire is something that humans can create, and according to the narrator, it can momentarily “outwit” the cold.

THEME

No matter how much it hurt me, I was rejoicing over the flight and the freedom of the Wonder Horse, the dimensions of his indomitable spirit. Now he would always be fantasy, freedom, and excitement. The Wonder Horse was transcendent. He had enriched my life forever.

—Sabine R. Ulibarri, “My Wonder Horse”



In “To Build a Fire,” a dog senses what a man eventually learns—the power of nature.

CHARACTER The way characters are presented and developed can also point toward theme. "To Build a Fire" only has one character—called simply "the man"—and refers to "an old-timer on Sulphur Creek" whose advice the man consistently ignores. Early in the story, the narrator gives important information about the man that not only hints at what eventually happens to him but also helps explain why.

YOUR TURN Read the passage at the right. Find ideas in the passage that point to the theme of the story.

SETTING AND PLOT The cold, arctic setting is so important in "To Build a Fire" that it functions as the **antagonist** opposing the man. Alone in the cold, the man has only a fire to protect him: "When it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire—that is, if his feet are wet." A few things go wrong for the man—he gets his feet wet and loses his second fire. But in such a harsh setting, there is no margin for error.

YOUR TURN Read the passage at the right that describes the **climax** of the story. How does this development in the plot confirm the dangers that have been given throughout the story? What can you infer about the theme from this passage?

Putting It All Together

Study the chart at the right for specific ways to look for themes in fiction. Then, using clues provided by the title, as well as the above excerpts on character, setting, and plot of "To Build a Fire," write a sentence stating the theme as you interpret it.

CHARACTER CLUES

The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold.

—Jack London, "To Build a Fire"

SETTING AND PLOT CLUES

High up in the tree one bough capsized its load of snow. . . . It grew like an avalanche, and it descended upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted out! Where it had burned was a mantle of fresh and disordered snow.

The man was shocked. It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death. . . . Perhaps the old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right. If he had only had a trail mate he would have been in no danger now. The trail mate could have built the fire.

—Jack London, "To Build a Fire"

Identifying Themes	
Key Elements	Clues
Title	• What idea the title emphasizes
Character	• How characters act alone and with each other • What the narrator says directly about the characters • How a character changes or what he or she learns
Setting	• How setting affects characters, plot, and/or mood
Plot	• How conflicts arise • How conflicts are resolved