

Understanding Theme

“Winning isn’t everything.” “Follow your heart.” You’ve probably learned lessons like these at one time or another. Your own experience is usually the best teacher, but literature can also communicate important truths, or themes. A **theme** is a message about life or human nature that a writer wants readers to understand. In this workshop, you’ll learn how to figure out what the stories, poems, and plays you read *really* mean.

Part 1: Topic Versus Theme

Have you heard the fairy tale about the duckling who doesn’t fit in? His siblings call him the “ugly duckling” because he looks different from them. In the end, the duckling discovers that he is actually a beautiful swan.

The story of the ugly duckling is about being different. But this is not the theme of the story. It is simply a **topic**—one or two words that sum up what the story is about. The **theme** is the writer’s central idea or message *about* the topic. Two possible themes of the story are “It’s important to accept people for who they are” or “Differences are what make people special.”

While a topic can be described in a word or two, it takes a complete sentence to describe a theme, as you’ll notice in the following example.

EXAMPLE

The Drum

Poem by Nikki Giovanni

daddy says the world is
a drum tight and hard
and i told him
i’m gonna beat
out my own rhythm

TOPICS

- individuality
- being yourself

THEME STATEMENTS

- It’s important to be yourself.
- People should march to their own rhythm.
- Individuality is about doing your own thing.



COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:
RL 2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details.

MODEL 1: THEME IN A STORY

Fables are stories that teach lessons about human nature through the actions of animal characters. These lessons communicate important themes. As you read this fable, notice the mistake the dog makes.

The Dog and His Reflection

Fable by **Aesop**

A dog who thought he was very clever stole a steak from a butcher shop. As he ran off with it in his teeth, he crossed a bridge that spanned a small, still river.

As he looked over the side of the bridge and into the water, he saw his own reflection, but he thought it was another dog.

“Hmm,” thought the dog, “that other dog has a nice, juicy steak almost as good as the one I have. He’s a stupid-looking dog. If I can scare him, perhaps he’ll drop his steak and run.”

This seemed to the dog to be a perfect plan. But as he opened his mouth to bark, he dropped his steak into the water and lost it.

Close Read

1. Explain how the dog loses the steak he stole from the butcher.
2. What lesson can readers learn from the dog’s failed plan to get another steak when he already had one? State the theme of this fable in a sentence.

MODEL 2: THEME IN A POEM

This contemporary poem has a message about the topic of beauty.

The Stray Cat

Poem by **Eve Merriam**

It’s just an old alley cat
that has followed us all the way home.

It hasn’t a star on its forehead,
or a silky satiny coat.

No proud tiger stripes, no dainty tread,
no elegant velvet throat.

It’s a splotchy, blotchy
city cat, not a pretty cat,
a rough little tough little bag of old bones.

“Beauty,” we shall call you.
“Beauty, come in.”

Close Read

1. Notice the way the cat is described. Would most people consider this cat beautiful? Explain.
2. Reread the boxed lines. Choose the statement that best expresses this poem’s theme.
 - a. Beauty is something that everyone can agree on.
 - b. Different people have different ideas about what is beautiful.

Part 2: Clues to Theme

In some folk tales and stories, the theme is directly stated by a character or the narrator. In most works of literature, though, the theme is not usually revealed in the form of a direct statement but is conveyed through particular details. The theme is **implicit**, or not directly expressed. As a reader, you need to **infer**, or guess, the theme. To make a reasonable guess, you have to consider certain clues. The elements in the chart can all serve as clues.

THE CLUES

TITLE



The title may hint at a theme by highlighting an important idea, setting, image, or character. Ask:

- To what in the story does the title refer?
- What ideas does the title emphasize?

PLOT AND CONFLICT



A story's plot often focuses on a conflict that is important to the theme. Ask:

- What conflicts do the characters face?
- How are the conflicts resolved?

CHARACTERS AND ACTIONS



Characters can reflect a theme through their actions, thoughts, and words. Ask:

- What do the main characters do and say?
- How do the characters deal with the conflicts?
- What lessons do the characters learn?

SETTING, IMAGES, AND STYLISTIC ELEMENTS



The setting, images, and stylistic elements an author uses can suggest a theme. Ask:

- What aspects of the setting does the author emphasize?
- What stylistic elements, such as traditional motifs, or recurring ideas, does the author include? (Ideas and characters such as the trickster, the young fool, and the quest are all examples of motifs.)
- What images stand out as especially memorable?
- What conflicts does the setting create?

Part 3: Analyze the Text

As you read this folk tale, use the clues you just learned about to help you uncover the theme. The **Close Read** questions will guide you.

Gombei and the Wild Ducks



Japanese folk tale retold by **Yoshiko Uchida**

Once long ago, in a small village in Japan, there lived a man whose name was Gombei. He lived very close to a wooded marsh where wild ducks came each winter to play in the water for many long hours. Even when the wind was cold and the marsh waters were frozen, the ducks
5 came in great clusters, for they liked Gombei's marsh, and they often stayed to sleep on the ice.

Just as his father had done before him, Gombei made his living by trapping the wild ducks with simple loops of rope. When a duck stepped into a loop, Gombei simply pulled the rope tight and the duck was
10 caught. And like his father before him, Gombei never trapped more than one duck each day.

"After all, the poor creatures come to the marsh never suspecting that they will be caught," Gombei's father had said. "It would be too cruel to
trap more than one at a time."

15 And so for all the years that Gombei trapped, he never caught more than one duck a day.

One cold winter morning, however, Gombei woke up with a dreary ache in his bones. "I am growing too old to work so hard, and there is no reason to continue as my father did for so many years," he said
20 to himself. "If I caught one hundred ducks all at once, I could loaf for ninety-nine days without working at all."

Gombei wondered why he hadn't done this sooner. "It is a brilliant idea," he thought.

The very next morning, he hurried out to the marsh and discovered
25 that its waters were frozen. "Very good! A fine day for trapping," he murmured, and quickly he laid a hundred traps on the icy surface. The sun had not yet come up and the sky was full of dark clouds. Gombei knelt behind a tree and clutched the ends of the hundred rope traps as he shivered and waited for the ducks to come.

Close Read

- Which character does the title suggest is important to the story? As you read, look for details that show what this character is like and how he changes.
- Reread the boxed text. What impression do you have of Gombei? Explain whether you see any problems with his plan.

30 Slowly the sky grew lighter and Gombei could see some ducks flying toward his marsh. He held his breath and watched eagerly as they swooped down onto the ice. They did not see his traps at all and gabbled noisily as they searched for food. One by one as the ducks stepped into his traps, Gombei tightened his hold on the ropes.

35 “One—two—three—“ he counted, and in no time at all, he had ninety-nine ducks in his traps. The day had not even dawned and already his work was done for the next ninety-nine days. Gombei grinned at his cleverness and thought of the days and weeks ahead during which he could loaf.

40 “One more,” he said patiently, “just one more duck and I will have a hundred.”

The last duck, however, was the hardest of all to catch. Gombei waited and waited, but still there was no duck in his last trap. Soon the sky grew bright for the sun had appeared at the rim of the wooded
45 hills, and suddenly a shaft of light scattered a rainbow of sparkling colors over the ice. The startled ducks uttered a shrill cry and almost as one they fluttered up into the sky, each trailing a length of rope from its legs.

Gombei was so startled by their sudden flight, he didn't let go of the
50 ropes he held in his hands. Before he could even call for help, he found himself swooshed up into the cold winter sky as the ninety-nine wild ducks soared upward, pulling him along at the end of their traps. . . .

Soon one hand began to slip, a little at first, and then a little more. He was losing his grip on the ropes! Slowly Gombei felt the ropes slide
55 from his numb fingers and finally, he was unable to hold on any longer. He closed his eyes tight and murmured a quick prayer as he plummeted pell-mell down to earth. The wild ducks, not knowing what had happened, flew on trailing their ropes behind like ribbons in the sky.

As Gombei tumbled toward the ground, however, a very strange
60 thing began to take place. First, he sprouted a bill, and then feathers and wings, and then a tail and webbed feet. By the time he was almost down to earth, he looked just like the creatures he had been trying to trap. Gombei wondered if he were having a bad dream. But no, he was flying and flapping his wings, and when he tried to call out, the only
65 sound that came from him was the call of the wild duck. He had indeed become a wild duck himself. Gombei fluttered about frantically, trying to think and feel like a duck instead of a man. At last, he decided there was only one thing to do.

70 “If I am to be a wild duck, I must live like one,” he thought, and he headed slowly toward the waters of a marsh he saw glistening in the sun.

Close Read

3. What happens to Gombei as a result of his actions?

4. In lines 69–70, Gombei returns to a familiar setting—a marsh—but there is nothing familiar about the situation he's in. What conflict do you think he's about to have?

He was so hungry he simply had to find something to eat, for he had not even had breakfast yet. He swooped down to the marsh and looked about hungrily. But as he waddled about thinking only of his empty stomach, he suddenly felt a tug at his leg. He pulled and pulled, but he
 75 could not get away. Then he looked down, and there wound around his leg was the very same kind of rope trap that he set each day for the wild ducks of his marsh.

“I wasn’t harming anything. All I wanted was some food,” he cried. But the man who had set the trap could not understand what Gombei
 80 was trying to say. He had been trapped like a wild animal and soon he would be plucked and eaten.

“Oh-h-h-h me,” Gombei wailed, “now I know how terrible it is for even one wild duck to be trapped, and only this morning I was trying to trap a hundred poor birds. I am a wicked and greedy man,” he thought,
 85 “and I deserve to be punished for being so cruel.”

As Gombei wept, the tears trickled down his body and touched the rope that was wound tightly about his leg. The moment they did, a wonderful thing happened. The rope that was so secure suddenly fell apart and Gombei was no longer caught in the trap.

90 “I’m free! I’m free!” Gombei shouted, and this time he wept tears of joy. “How good it is to be free and alive! How grateful I am to have another chance,” he cried.

As the tears rolled down his face, and then his body, another strange and marvelous thing happened. First, his feathers began to disappear,
 95 and then his bill, and then his tail and his webbed feet. Finally he was no longer a duck, but had become a human being once more. . . .

“**N**ever again will I ever trap another living thing,” Gombei vowed when he reached home safely. Then he went to his cupboard and threw out all his rope traps and burned them into ash.

100 “From this moment on, I shall become a farmer,” he said. “I will till the soil and grow rice and wheat and food for all the living creatures of the land.” And Gombei did exactly that for the rest of his days.

As for the wild ducks, they came in ever-increasing numbers, for now they found grain and feed instead of traps laid upon the ice, and they
 105 knew that in the sheltered waters of Gombei’s marsh they would always be safe.

Close Read

5. Examine the boxed text. What does Gombei realize about himself and his plan? Explain what has caused the change in his attitude.
6. Think about the lesson that Gombei has learned. Choose a topic from the list below and write a statement that expresses a theme or central idea of the story. Explain whether the theme is directly stated or **implied** (suggested indirectly).
 - freedom
 - treatment of others
 - understanding others’ problems