

## Tips for Identifying Themes

Because theme emerges from a work in its entirety and from all the other elements working together, there is no “one-size-fits-all” method for identifying theme. Here, however, are some things to look for and consider as you read and re-read the work.

TIP	EXAMPLE
<p>1. Pay attention to the title. A title will seldom spell out in full a work's main theme, but some titles do suggest a central topic or topics or a clue to theme. Probe the rest of the story to see what, if any, insights about that topic it ultimately seems to offer.</p>	<p>What might Bharati Mukherjee's "The Management of Grief," suggest about whether and how grief can be "managed"?</p>
<p>2. List any recurring phrases and words, especially those for abstract concepts (e.g., love, honor). Certain concrete terms (especially if noted in the title) may likewise provide clues; objects of value or potency might attract significant attention in the text (an heirloom, a weapon, a tree in a garden). Then probe the story to see how and where else it might implicitly deal with that concept or entity and what, if any, conclusions the story proposes.</p>	<p>Versions of the word <i>blind</i> occur six times in the relatively short first paragraph of Raymond Carver's "Cathedral," and the word recurs throughout the story. What different kinds of blindness does the story depict? What truth or insight about blindness might it ultimately offer?</p>
<p>3. Identify any statements that the characters or narrator(s) make about a general concept, issue, or topic such as human nature, the natural world, and so on. Look, too, for statements that potentially have a general meaning or application beyond the story, even if they refer to a specific situation in it. Then consider whether and how the story as a whole corroborates, overturns, or complicates any one such view or statement.</p>	<p>In A. S. Byatt's "The Thing in the Forest," one of the two protagonists observes, "I think there are things that are real—more real than we are—but mostly we don't cross their paths, or they don't cross ours. Maybe at very bad times we get into their world, or notice what they are doing in ours" (par. 55). How does the rest of the story both flesh out what these "things" might be and either corroborate or complicate this character's generalization about them?</p>
<p>4. If a character changes over the course of the story, articulate the truth or insight that he or she seems to discover. Then consider whether and how the story as a whole corroborates or complicates that insight.</p>	<p>The end of "The Thing in the Forest" implies that one of its protagonists has come to believe that even the most fantastic stories have an important function in real life. What is that function? Does the story as a whole confirm her conclusions?</p>

## TIP

5. Identify a conflict depicted in the work and state it in general terms or turn it into a general question, leaving out any reference to specific characters, situations, and so on. Then think about the insight or theme that might be implied by the way the conflict is resolved.

## EXAMPLE

Through Sarty, William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" raises the question of how we should reconcile loyalty to our family with our own individual sense of right and wrong. In the end, the story implies that following our own moral code can sometimes be the more painful, as well as the more noble, option.



## STEPHEN CRANE

(1871-1900)

*The Open Boat*

One of fourteen children, Stephen Crane and his family moved frequently before settling, after his father's death in 1880, in Asbury Park, New Jersey. Crane sporadically attended various preparatory schools and colleges without excelling at much besides baseball. Determined to be a journalist, he left school for the last time in 1891 and began contributing pieces to New York newspapers. His city experiences led him to write *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, a realist social-reform novel published in 1893 at his own expense. His next novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), presented a stark picture of the Civil War and brought him widespread fame; many of his stories were published in the collections *The Open Boat and Other Tales of Adventure* (1898) and *The Monster and Other Stories* (1899). Crane served as a foreign correspondent, reporting on conflicts in Cuba and Greece, and lived his last years abroad, dying of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-eight.

### A Tale Intended to Be after the Fact:<sup>1</sup> Being the Experience of Four Men from the Sunk Steamer *Commodore*

None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were of the hue of slate, save for the tops, which were of foaming white, and all of the men knew the colors of the sea. The horizon narrowed and widened, and dipped and rose,

1. Crane had an experience very like the one here re-created in fiction. His autobiographical account of his adventure at sea was published in the *New York Press* on January 7, 1897.