

Theme and Symbol

What makes a story memorable? Long after you've forgotten the names of the characters and the events of the plot, you'll likely remember the theme—the big idea at the heart of the story. A **theme** is a message about life or human nature that a writer wants you to understand. In this unit, you'll discover that themes in literature can give you insights into events, issues, and relationships in your life.

COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:

RL 1 Cite evidence that supports inferences drawn from the text.

RL 2 Determine a theme of a text and analyze its development, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide a summary of the text.

Part 1: What's the Big Idea?

Friendship, war, and family are subjects that people of all ages and in all parts of the world think about. Writers explore and comment on these topics, too—in their writing. Some writers present themes that only apply to a particular time, place, or situation. Others explore **recurring themes**, or messages that appear repeatedly in literature. Some recurring themes are considered **universal themes** because they address big ideas so fundamental to human existence and true for most people that they recur in the literature of many time periods and cultures. For example, "Good will triumph over evil" is a universal theme.

Whether it is universal or one of a kind, a theme is often communicated through different elements in a story, such as the characters, setting, and plot. A writer may also use symbols to hint at a theme. A **symbol** is an object, activity, place, or person that stands for something beyond itself. Notice how the theme is communicated in the following example.

Character

The main character is **14-year-old Eva**, who has recently moved with her family to a new city. **Sullen and angry**, Eva desperately misses her friends back home.



Setting

Eva can't stand the thought of exploring an **unfamiliar city** and an **intimidating school**. Being in this new setting reminds her of what she left behind.



Symbol

Eva shuts herself in her room all day, looking through old yearbooks and e-mailing her friends. **Eva's room symbolizes the past**, where she remains trapped and isolated from the world.



Plot and Conflict

Eva gets upset when her parents suggest that she make new friends. She also feels hurt when **her friends don't e-mail very often**.

Resolution: Eventually, Eva realizes that she must move on. While she can hold onto the past in her memories, she has to live in the present.



THEME
LIVE IN THE PRESENT,
NOT THE PAST.

MODEL: THEME AND SYMBOL

Alfred is a high-school dropout who is barely staying out of trouble with the law. One night after getting beaten up, he steps into a gym to see if he can join the neighborhood boxing club. As he talks to Mr. Donatelli, the gym owner, about the challenges of training as a fighter, Alfred realizes Mr. Donatelli may be talking about more than just boxing.

from

THE CONTENDER



Novel by Robert Lipsyte

“How far did you go in school?”

“Eleventh grade.”

“What happened?”

“I quit.”

5 “Why?”

“Didn’t seem like any reason to stay.”

“What makes you think you won’t quit here too?”

Alfred swallowed. He suddenly wished he hadn’t come up the steps, that he was somewhere else, anywhere. He thought of the cave.

10 “Well?”

“I want to be somebody.”

“Everybody is somebody.”

“Somebody special. A champion.”

15 Donatelli’s thin lips tightened. “Everybody wants to be a champion. That’s not enough. You have to start by wanting to be a contender, the man coming up, the man who knows there’s a good chance he’ll never get to the top, the man who’s willing to sweat and bleed to get up as high as his legs and his brains and his heart will take him. That must sound corny to you.”

“No.”

20 “It’s the climbing that makes the man. Getting to the top is an extra reward.”

“I want to try.”

Donatelli shrugged. “Boxing is a dying sport. People aren’t much interested anymore. They want easy things like television, bowling, car rides. Get yourself a good job. Finish high school. Go at night if you have to.”

25 “I’ll try hard.”

“Talk it over with your parents.”

“I don’t have any. I live with my aunt.”

30 The pale blue eyes came around again. They seemed softer now. But the voice was still cold and flat. “It’s not easy trying to become a contender. It’s never any fun in the beginning. It’s hard work, you’ll want to quit at least once every day. If you quit before you really try, that’s worse than never starting at all.”

Close Read

1. Reread the boxed text. What conflict is set up?
2. What is Alfred’s goal? What does Mr. Donatelli think about that goal?
3. Given what Mr. Donatelli says in lines 14–20, what do you think boxing might symbolize to him?
4. Reread lines 29–31. What lesson might Alfred learn from training as a boxer? State this lesson as a theme.

Part 2: Identifying Theme

Sometimes the theme of a story is stated directly by the narrator or a character. More often, the theme is implied, which means you have to do some digging to uncover it. It helps to look closely at the characters, the plot, and other clues when you're trying to identify a story's theme. The questions in the chart, as well as these reminders, can help you discover the message.

- The theme is not the topic of a story, but the writer's message *about* the topic. While a topic can be described in a word or two, it can take one or two sentences to express a theme. For example, "first impressions" is a topic. "First impressions aren't always right" is a theme.
- Some works of literature have multiple themes, but one may stand out more than the others.
- Different people can interpret the same story differently.

CLUES TO THEME

TITLE

The title of a story can suggest an important idea or symbol. Ask:

- What in the story does the title refer to?
- What idea or symbol does the title highlight?
- Could the title have more than one meaning?



CHARACTERS

Characters can influence theme by how they act or what they learn. Ask:

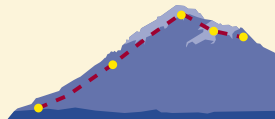
- What do the main character's actions and thoughts tell you about him or her?
- How does the character change?
- What lessons does the character learn?



PLOT AND CONFLICT

A story revolves around conflicts that are central to the theme. Ask:

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



SETTING

Setting can connect to a theme because of what it means to the characters or to readers. Ask:

- How does the setting affect the characters or influence their actions?
- What might the setting represent to readers?



IMPORTANT STATEMENTS

The narrator or a character may make statements that hint at the theme. Ask:

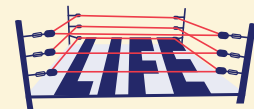
- What key statements are made in the story?
- Could any statement be reworded as an overall theme?



SYMBOLS

A symbol can convey a theme because of what it means to the main character. Ask:

- Does anything seem to stand for something beyond itself?
- What might the symbol mean to the main character? What might it represent to readers?



Part 3: Analyze the Text

Connie is not crazy about spending time with her Puerto Rican grandmother—her *abuela*. What lesson will Connie learn when her grandmother comes to visit? As you read, use what you’ve learned to uncover the theme of this story.

Abuela INVENTS THE Zero

Short story by Judith Ortiz Cofer

“You made me feel like a zero, like a nothing,” she says in Spanish, *un cero, nada*. She is trembling, an angry little old woman lost in a heavy winter coat that belongs to my mother. And I end up being sent to my room, like I was a child, to think about my grandmother’s idea of math.

5 It all began with Abuela coming from the Island¹ for a visit—her first time in the United States. My mother and father paid her way here so that she wouldn’t die without seeing snow, though if you asked me, and nobody has, the dirty slush in this city is not worth the price of a ticket. But I guess she deserves some kind of award for having had ten kids and survived to tell
10 about it. My mother is the youngest of the bunch. Right up to the time when we’re supposed to pick up the old lady at the airport, my mother is telling me stories about how hard times were for *la familia on la isla*,² and how *la abuela* worked night and day to support them after their father died of a heart attack. I’d die of a heart attack too if I had a troop like that to support. Anyway, I
15 had seen her only three or four times in my entire life, whenever we would go for somebody’s funeral. I was born here and I have lived in this building all my life. But when Mami says, “Connie, please be nice to Abuela. She doesn’t have too many years left. Do you promise me, Constancia?”—when she uses my full name, I know she means business. So I say, “Sure.” Why wouldn’t I be
20 nice? I’m not a monster, after all.

So we go to Kennedy³ to get *la abuela* and she is the last to come out of the airplane, on the arm of the cabin attendant, all wrapped up in a black shawl. He hands her over to my parents like she was a package sent airmail. It is January, two feet of snow on the ground, and she’s wearing a shawl over a thin
25 black dress. That’s just the start.

Ønce home, she refuses to let my mother buy her a coat because it’s a waste of money for the two weeks she’ll be in *el Polo Norte*, as she calls New Jersey, the North Pole. So since she’s only four feet eleven inches tall, she walks around in my mother’s big black coat looking ridiculous. I try to walk
30 far behind them in public so that no one will think we’re together. I plan to

1. **the Island:** Puerto Rico.

2. **la familia on la isla:** the family on the island.

3. **Kennedy:** John F. Kennedy International Airport.

Close Read

1. Examine the title of the story and reread the first paragraph. What symbol do you predict will be central to the theme?
2. Reread the boxed details, in which Connie shares her thoughts about her grandmother. Based on these details, how would you describe Connie?
3. What conflicts do you think might arise for Connie during her grandmother’s visit?

stay very busy the whole time she's with us so that I won't be asked to take her anywhere, but my plan is ruined when my mother comes down with the flu and Abuela absolutely *has* to attend Sunday mass. . . . My father decides that he should stay home with my mother and that I should escort la abuela to church. He tells me this on Saturday night as I'm getting ready to go out to the mall with my friends.

"No way," I say.

I go for the car keys on the kitchen table: he usually leaves them there for me on Friday and Saturday nights. He beats me to them.

"No way," he says, pocketing them and grinning at me.

Needless to say, we come to a compromise very quickly. I do have a responsibility to Sandra and Anita, who don't drive yet. There is a Harley-Davidson fashion show at Brookline Square that we *cannot* miss.

"The mass in Spanish is at ten sharp tomorrow morning, *entiendes?*" My father is dangling the car keys in front of my nose and pulling them back when I try to reach for them. He's really enjoying himself.

"I understand. Ten o'clock. I'm out of here." I pry his fingers off the key ring. He knows that I'm late, so he makes it just a little difficult. Then he laughs. I run out of our apartment before he changes his mind. I have no idea what I'm getting myself into.

Sunday morning I have to walk two blocks on dirty snow to retrieve the car. I warm it up for Abuela as instructed by my parents, and drive it to the front of our building. My father walks her by the hand in baby steps on the slippery snow. The sight of her little head with a bun on top of it sticking out of that huge coat makes me want to run back into my room and get under the covers. I just hope that nobody I know sees us together. I'm dreaming, of course. The mass is packed with people from our block. It's a holy day of obligation and everyone I ever met is there.

I have to help her climb the steps, and she stops to take a deep breath after each one, then I lead her down the aisle so that everybody can see me with my bizarre grandmother. If I were a good Catholic, I'm sure I'd get some purgatory⁴ time taken off for my sacrifice. She is walking as slow as Captain Cousteau⁵ exploring the bottom of the sea, looking around, taking her sweet time. Finally she chooses a pew, but she wants to sit in the *other* end. It's like she had a spot picked out for some unknown reason, and although it's the most inconvenient seat in the house, that's where she has to sit. So we squeeze by all the people already sitting there, saying, "Excuse me, please, *con permiso*, pardon me," getting annoyed looks the whole way. By the time we settle in, I'm drenched in sweat. I keep my head down like I'm praying so as not to see or be seen. She is praying loud, in Spanish, and singing hymns at the top of her creaky voice.

4. **purgatory**: spiritual place in which souls purify themselves of sin before going to heaven.

5. **Captain Cousteau**: Jacques Yves Cousteau (zhäk év kōō-stō') (1910–1997), a French underwater explorer, film producer, and author.

Close Read

4. How would you describe Connie's attitude toward and treatment of her grandmother? Support your answer.

I ignore her when she gets up with a hundred other people to go take communion.⁶ I'm actually praying hard now—that this will all be over soon. But the next time I look up, I see a black coat dragging around and around the church, stopping here and there so a little gray head can peek out like a periscope on a submarine. There are giggles in the church, and even the priest has frozen in the middle of a blessing, his hands above his head like he is about to lead the congregation in a set of jumping jacks.

I realize to my horror that my grandmother is lost. She can't find her way back to the pew. I am so embarrassed that even though the woman next to me is shooting daggers at me with her eyes, I just can't move to go get her. I put my hands over my face like I'm praying, but it's really to hide my burning cheeks. I would like for her to disappear. I just know that on Monday my friends, and my enemies, in the *barrio*⁷ will have a lot of senile-grandmother jokes to tell in front of me. I am frozen to my seat. So the same woman who wants me dead on the spot does it for me. She makes a big deal out of getting up and hurrying to get Abuela.

The rest of the mass is a blur. All I know is that my grandmother kneels the whole time with her hands over *her* face. She doesn't speak to me on the way home, and she doesn't let me help her walk, even though she almost falls a couple of times.

When we get to the apartment, my parents are at the kitchen table, where my mother is trying to eat some soup. They can see right away that something is wrong. Then Abuela points her finger at me like a judge passing a sentence on a criminal. She says in Spanish, "You made me feel like a zero, like a nothing." Then she goes to her room.

I try to explain what happened. "I don't understand why she's so upset. She just got lost and wandered around for a while," I tell them. But it sounds lame, even to my own ears. My mother gives me a look that makes me cringe and goes in to Abuela's room to get her version of the story. She comes out with tears in her eyes.

"Your grandmother says to tell you that of all the hurtful things you can do to a person, the worst is to make them feel as if they are worth nothing."

I can feel myself shrinking right there in front of her. But I can't bring myself to tell my mother that I think I understand how I made Abuela feel. I might be sent into the old lady's room to apologize, and it's not easy to admit you've been a jerk—at least, not right away with everybody watching. So I just sit there not saying anything.

My mother looks at me for a long time, like she feels sorry for me. Then she says, "You should know, Constanca, that if it wasn't for this old woman whose existence you don't seem to value, you and I would not be here."

That's when *I'm* sent to *my* room to consider a number I hadn't thought much about—until today.

6. **communion:** the part of a Christian service in which bread and wine are consumed in memory of Christ's sacrifice.

7. **barrio:** Spanish-speaking community or neighborhood.

Close Read

5. Why do you think the author chose a church as the setting for this scene? How might she want you to react to Connie's behavior there?

6. Summarize what Connie has learned from the conflict with her grandmother. Where on this page do you see this lesson directly stated as a theme?

7. What new understanding of the word *zero* does Connie now have? What understanding do you have of the story's title?