

Love is Not a Theme. (So What Is?)

When discussing literature (as we will be doing in this course for this assignment), a theme is the central message of a written work.

Let's take a moment to think about the word *message*.

As an English teacher, I really like the association of the word *theme* with the word *message* because it means that the work really has something to say or something to show us—maybe even something we can learn or think about or disagree with or use to bring out change in our perspective or even our behaviors.

Moreover, when we think about receiving a message, we expect that message to express a specific point, not just a vague idea.

For example, consider the difference between the two following messages:

- ▶ Message 1: Family bonds prove to be stronger than any trials the family may be put through.
- ▶ Message 2: Family.

The meaning of the first message is clear and direct because, well, the first message actually *says* something whereas the second message presents a general idea but does not really *say* anything about family.

In fact, precisely because it does not communicate a specific point, the second message would not be considered a message at all when it comes to literature.

Yet most of the time when students are asked to identify a theme—which, let us remember, is the *message* of a work—the likely responses are *love, family, freedom, happiness*, and other vague one-word ideas.

But *love* is not a theme.

Neither are *family, freedom, happiness*, and other vague one-word ideas.

A theme is a message, and a message communicates a specific point.

When we talk about literature, a theme is the central message revealed through the literary work. This theme usually offers an insight into life or an observation about human nature and interaction.

So *love* is not a theme. What is?

Something like *Love hurts*.

While *Love hurts* may not be a long message or even the most original message, it is a message nonetheless because it communicates a specific point.

Where *love* may have the reader conjuring up all sorts of different ideas and experiences, *love hurts* makes the reader go, Oh, okay, that's what's going on in the story—hmmm, let me see if I can see that message at work when I read the piece.

So when you as a student are asked to identify a theme, the best thing to do is to phrase the theme as a message, which is to say as a complete sentence.

Let me repeat that: A theme is a complete sentence.

Again, as typified by the example of *love hurts*, the theme-sentence does not have to be long, but it should be complete sentence, which means it should...

- Have a subject.
- Have a verb.
- Make sense by itself/Express a complete thought.

Let's check *love* and *love hurts* using the above criteria:

Love hurts.

Does it...

- Have a subject? Yes ► *Love*
- Have a verb? Yes ► *hurts.*
- Make sense by itself? Yes ► Maybe too much for some of us.

So using our criteria for a theme-sentence, *Love hurts* passes as a theme.

Now for...

Love.

Does it...

- Have a subject? Um ► *Love* could be a noun.
- Have a verb? Um ► *Love* could a verb. What is meant in this instance? There is not enough context to make the meaning of the word clear.
- Make sense by itself? No ► Could refer to almost anything.

So using our criteria for a theme-sentence, *Love* is not a theme. *Love* is not even a sentence!

But *Love* is a topic. Along with *family, freedom, happiness*, and other vague one-word ideas. These are all topics. They could even be called thematic categories—that is, categories under which specific themes may fall.

For example, the theme of *Love hurts* would fall under the category of *Love*. Here are a few examples of thematic categories/topics with a related theme.

Thematic category/Topic	Theme/Theme-sentence
Love	Love hurts. Love conquers all.
Family	Family bonds prove to be stronger than any trials the family may be put through.
Freedom	Freedom is not free.
Death	Sometimes even death can provide opportunities for new life.

Other thematic categories or topics we may be familiar with are the *man versus** series. You know the ones: man versus man, man versus nature, and so on.

Again, these are not themes; they are thematic categories.

More specifically, the *man versus* series are actually types of conflicts, but conflict and theme can be very closely related and types of conflict can be used as thematic categories.

We will use the same breakdown as above to see how certain themes fall into these *man versus* categories of conflict.

Thematic category/Topic	Theme/Theme-sentence
Man versus Man	Sometimes it is not the strongest but the smartest who survive.
Man versus Nature	Nature is cruel and does not care about man.
Man versus Self	People can be their own worst enemy.
Man versus Society	Free-thinking individuals can bring out change in even the most oppressive regimes.
Man versus Machine/Technology	New technology is a threat to the existence of humankind.
Man versus Supernatural/Fate	Man cannot escape his fate.

As you can see from these examples, some themes are stronger, longer, and/or more specific than others. But all are phrased as a sentence, all have a subject and verb, all make sense alone, and all express a specific point.

So when you are asked to identify a theme, before you blurt out “love” or “Man versus Man,” remember LOVE IS NOT A THEME and MAN VERSUS MAN IS A CONFLICT CATEGORY.

Take a moment to phrase your thought as a complete sentence.

Your teacher will be happier with that answer—and you’ll probably be happier with your grade.

* Also referred to as *person versus* conflicts. For example, Person versus Person, Person versus Self, etc. Here using *man versus* as this phrasing is likely still more familiar to many people’s experience in former English and literature settings.