

Universal Theme

A **theme** is the central idea, message, or insight that a literary work reveals. A **universal theme** is a message about life that is important to people from all times and places. Love and war are universal themes that many writers explore. Sometimes, writers connect the themes of love and war. In every war, the fierce fighter who kills and dies on a battlefield is also someone's beloved, someone's parent, someone's friend.

A Read the following summary. Then, answer the questions that follow.

In a story about a king in ancient Greece, the gods have told the king to have one of his soldiers kill a monster that is terrifying the people of a faraway kingdom. The king refuses, saying that he needs the soldier for battles that are closer to home. The gods punish the king by bringing the monster to his kingdom, where he must have it killed in order to save the people of his kingdom.

1. What is the universal theme of the story?

2. What makes the theme universal? Explain.

B Read the following summary. Then, answer the questions that follow.

1. During a war, a soldier is stationed in a faraway country. While there, he falls in love with a woman whose father is a sergeant in the enemy army. When the war ends, he returns home alone. Years later, he marries the woman.

- A. Love can conquer all.
- B. A person should never fall in love in another country.

2. A soldier is gravely injured in battle. While recovering at a military hospital, he meets his future wife, who is a nurse at the hospital.

- A. Sometimes, a bad situation can lead to something positive.
- B. Being injured always leads to something positive.

A Read the following summary. Then, answer the questions that follow.

The Trojan War started with an argument between the goddesses Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite. After Eris gave them a golden apple marked "for the fairest," the goddesses went to Paris, who judged that Aphrodite, should receive the apple. In exchange, Aphrodite made Helen, the most beautiful of all women, fall in love with Paris, who took her to Troy. Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and the brother of Helen's husband Menelaus, besieged the city for ten years. After the deaths of many heroes, including the Achaeans Achilles and Ajax, and the Trojans Hector and Paris, the city fell to the ruse of the Trojan Horse. The Achaeans killed the Trojans and returned Helen to Menelaus.

1. What is the universal theme of the story?

2. What makes the theme universal? Explain.

B Circle the letter of the universal theme that matches each scenario.

1. In the middle of a battlefield, a soldier notices a crying child. Without thinking of his own safety, he runs to the child, picks her up, and brings her to shelter.

- A. A true hero must put the safety of others first.
- B. A soldier should only think of his or her own safety.

2. A woman learns that her husband has died at war. She starts a foundation that provides emotional and financial support to widows and widowers who have lost loved ones in battle. Over time, she comes to terms with his death.

- A. Nothing good comes from the loss of a loved one.
- B. Sometimes people find strength and healing in helping others.

Universal Themes in Literature

1. Alienation - creating emotional isolation
2. Betrayal - fading bonds of love
3. Birth - life after loss, life sustains tragedy
4. Coming of age - boy becomes a man
5. Conformity - industrialization and the conformity of man
6. Death - death as mystery, death as a new beginning
7. Deception - appearance versus reality
8. Discovery - conquering unknown, discovering strength
9. Duty - the ethics of killing for duty
10. Escape - escape from family pressures, escaping social constraints
11. Family - destruction of family
12. Fortune - a fall from grace and fortune
13. Generation gap - experience versus youthful strength
14. God and spirituality - inner struggle of faith
15. Good and evil - the coexistence of good and evil on earth
16. Heroism - false heroism, heroism and conflicting values
17. Home - security of a homestead
18. Hope - hope rebounds
19. Hopelessness - finding hope after tragedy
20. Individualism - choosing between security and individualism
21. Isolation - the isolation of a soul
22. Journey - most journeys lead back to home
23. Judgment - balance between justice and judgment
24. Loss - loss of innocence, loss of individualism
25. Love - love sustains/fades with a challenge
26. Patriotism - inner conflicts stemming from patriotism
27. Peace and war - war is tragic, peace is fleeting
28. Power - Lust for power
29. Race relations - learned racism
30. Sense of self - finding strength from within
31. Suffering - suffering as a natural part of human experience
32. Survival - man against nature