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Determining the Theme of a Story or Play

PART 1

Introduction

THEME: >>> Memorable Moments

The **theme** is the big idea of a story or play. It is a lesson or messages about life that the author wants to share. To understand the theme of a story, you must make an inference, or a logical guess, based on the events in a story or play and how the main character responds to those events. You must also identify the main conflict in the story, and then ask how the conflict is resolved. For example, if a character overcomes a big problem by working hard, the theme might be that hard work pays off. The author establishes theme through the characters' responses to events, and through description and dialogue.

Look at the illustration. Think about how the girl feels in each illustration, Then complete the chart.



What challenge does the character face?	She is trying to shape a bowl on the potter's wheel.
How does she respond to the challenge at first?	
What happens in the end?	
What is the theme or lesson?	

Remember, the theme of a story is the lesson or message. To identify the theme, you should look at how characters respond to challenges.

Read the first part of the story. Then answer the questions.

Detectives with Backpacks

by Shandra White

1 It was Jason's fault that she was late. Her brother seemed to take longer in the bathroom every day. That was something to take up at a family meeting.

2 Katrina was glad for her soccer training as she ran the last block to school, although she never played soccer while wearing a backpack full of books. The five-minute bell had rung, and kids were filing into the building. Katrina hated being late for anything, even school. You never know what you might miss, and she was proud of her perfect attendance record.

3 A knot of kids was talking excitedly in front of Room 114. The classroom door was ajar, but here were Monica and Henry and the Hazewood twins and two or three others all jabbering at once. Katrina heard the words "police" and "stolen" before Emma Hazewood half-turned and saw her.

4 "Katrina, have you heard?"

5 "Heard what?"

6 Six kids started talking, but it was Monica Peters, a head taller than anyone else, who broke in and said, "Quiet, all of you. Let me tell it." She was excited and out of breath. "The police were just here, and they took Mr. Dabney away."

7 "Mr. Dabney the custodian?" Katrina wasn't sure she had heard Monica correctly. "Mr. Dabney" and "police" hardly belonged in the same sentence together.

8 "You know any other Mr. Dabney?" Monica said. "You know the money the PTA raised to pay for new band instruments? Well, Mr. Dabney stole it."

9 "Oh, come on, Monica! You don't know that!" Henry Campbell said. "Innocent until proven guilty."

10 "Oh, right, Henry," Monica said. "They found the envelope in his broom closet and a big wad of cash in his wallet. And maybe you don't know this," she added importantly to Katrina, "but my mom told me that Mr. Dabney has been in trouble with the police before!"



11 “That still isn’t proof of anything,” Henry objected, but just then the door opened fully and Ms. Vetzner stood there with her stern face on.

12 “Class, it’s nine o’clock. And maybe you don’t know *this*,” she said, with a look at Monica, “but a wise man once called gossip ‘the evil tongue.’” The teacher made sure she made eye contact with everyone.

13 “Now, let’s get started on our work for today, and we’ll let the police do theirs.”

Think About It

What challenge does the main character Katrina face? To answer the question, think about what Katrina does and thinks.

What has happened to Mr. Dabney? _____

Read these lines from the story

“‘Mr. Dabney the custodian?’ Katrina wasn’t sure she had heard Monica correctly. ‘Mr. Dabney’ and ‘police’ hardly belonged in the same sentence together.”

What can you infer about Katrina’s opinion of Mr. Dabney? _____

What does the teacher tell Monica about gossip? _____

What is the main problem Katrina has? _____

A CLOSER LOOK

How does Katrina feel about the story she's just heard? Circle words the author uses to describe Katrina's actions after hearing about Mr. Dabney.

What did Katrina learn about Mr. Dabney as she came to know him?

Continue reading the passage. Then answer the questions.

14 Still talking, the kids filed into class. Katrina hung back, last in line. She was thinking of the first grade, when she was always leaving her jacket or a book or something behind in class. Mr. Dabney had seemed like a giant from a fairy tale to her then, monstrous and slow-moving and a little scary. When he frowned and said, "Oh, Katrina, not again!" he might as well have been saying "fee-fie-fo-fum." But he was really very kind. He would joke and chat with her dad as he unlocked the classroom door for her, and he would always leave her with a smile. Everyone liked Mr. Dabney. Katrina couldn't imagine him being a thief.

15 "That's impossible!" she murmured aloud, entering the classroom just before Ms. Vetzner shut the door behind her.

Part A

How does Katrina's memory of Mr. Dabney contribute to the theme of the story?

- A It shows that Mr. Dabney has worked at the school for a long time.
- B It shows that Mr. Dabney is very sneaky and cannot be trusted.
- C It shows that things are not always as they seem at first.
- D It shows that Katrina doesn't have a very good memory.

Part B

Which detail from the story *best* supports the answer to Part A?

- A "She was thinking of the first grade, when she was always leaving her jacket or a book or something behind in class."
- B "When he frowned and said, 'Oh, Katrina, not again!'"
- C "Mr. Dabney always seemed like a giant from a fairy tale to her then, monstrous and slow-moving and a little scary."
- D "Everyone liked Mr. Dabney. Katrina couldn't imagine him being a thief."

DISCUSS IT

Think about the story's theme. Do you know of other stories that share this theme? Turn to another student and talk about other stories that share the theme that things or events are not always as they first seem.

A CLOSER LOOK

What has Pocahontas done for Captain John Smith and the settlers before? Underline the lines that tell you.

Read the play. Then answer the questions.

Jamestown

CAST:

POCAHONTAS, *the daughter of Chief Powhatan*

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH, *an English colonist*

scene 2

It is midnight in Jamestown in the colony of Virginia. POCAHONTAS enters, running. She knocks at the door of CAPTAIN SMITH'S cabin.

SMITH: (*within*) Who knocks?

POCAHONTAS: Pocahontas!

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH *comes from the cabin.*

POCAHONTAS: Powhatan is coming! He is coming with his braves! They come creeping while you sleep!

SMITH: What is this?

POCAHONTAS: They come to take you prisoner!

SMITH: What? Now? (*runs hands through hair*) It is brave of you to warn us, Pocahontas.

POCAHONTAS: I could not bear it if bad things happened. I love my father, but I hate the fighting.

SMITH: You have saved us, Pocahontas. This is the second time you have saved me.

POCAHONTAS *starts to go.*

POCAHONTAS: Good-bye, Captain. I go now.

SMITH: Girl! Girl! You must not go! They will know you warned us!

POCAHONTAS: They will not know, Captain. At midnight they were to leave the camp. I will get back by that time.

SMITH: It is midnight now. They have missed you by this time, Pocahontas.

POCAHONTAS: (*fearfully*) What shall I do? What shall I do?

SMITH: You must stay with us.

POCAHONTAS: I cannot leave my father, Captain. (*She starts to go.*)

SMITH: You must not go! I fear not even your father can save you now!

POCAHONTAS: I do not know what to do.

SMITH: You are so brave, Pocahontas! Stay with us. Do not go back.

Why does Pocahontas say she came to the cabin?

- 1 What challenge does Pocahontas face?
- A She must go against her people to help the settlers.
 - B She is not allowed to visit the settlement.
 - C She does not like the settlers.
 - D She is afraid of Powhatan.

What does Captain Smith say about her?

- 2 What can you infer about Pocahontas?
- A She is disobedient.
 - B She is brave.
 - C She is angry.
 - D She is friendly.

What is the message the play is trying to convey?

- 3 What is the theme of the play?
- A Disobeying your parents is wrong.
 - B You should always help strangers.
 - C You should think carefully about your actions.
 - D Courage is doing the right thing even when you are afraid.

How do Pocahontas's actions and words support the theme?

- 4 What details from the play support the theme?

Read the story. Then answer the questions.

The Guitar

- 1 “I can’t believe we had cereal again,” Josh complained as he and his friend Steven walked from the cafeteria to their morning activity.
- 2 “Hey, what do you expect? This is summer camp, man!” Steven said, elbowing Josh in the ribs.
- 3 As the boys passed the office, they noticed a familiar face through the window.
- 4 “I wonder what Gary’s doing in there,” Josh said. “He looks worried.” Josh paused and turned back toward the office window.
- 5 “I’m sure it’s nothing. Come on, we’re going to be late for music,” Steven said, walking faster toward a structure in the middle of the camp.
- 6 The boys walked into the building, their eyes slowly adjusting to the dim lights. A group of kids were huddled together, talking quietly.
- 7 Josh pulled on his friend Aidan’s shirt. “Hey, what’s going on?” he asked quietly.
- 8 Aidan looked around and lowered his voice. “You won’t believe this, Josh, but Gary stole the electric guitar. He must have taken it from the music room last night. He’s in the camp’s office now! Jennifer says she saw him coming in here late yesterday,” Aidan said. And then, as if to prove his point, he added, “She said Gary looked really suspicious.”
- 9 Josh sank down into a chair. Josh thought about the events of the day before. Ms. Ramos had said that everyone would be performing for their families at the end of camp by playing a musical instrument. Gary *had* said how much he wanted to play the electric guitar. But then again, *everyone* wanted to play the electric guitar. Josh remembered something else, something far more troubling. After dinner, Gary had left early, saying something about finding the baseball cap he’d lost.
- 10 As much as Josh didn’t want to admit it, he couldn’t deny the facts. His best friend Gary was a thief—the evidence was right there, for everyone to see. Josh sighed and looked around. The rest of the kids were still huddled, talking quietly. Then suddenly, the door opened and Gary walked in; the room grew quiet. Josh looked away, and the other kids turned their backs.



- 11 “What’s up?” Gary asked, looking first to the group of kids and then to Josh. “Did something happen?”
- 12 Josh paused, and then began to speak. But then he noticed Gary’s baseball cap. “Hey, I thought you said you lost that?” he asked.
- 13 “Ah, yeah,” Gary replied. “I did, but the camp counselor found it and gave it back to me. Pretty lucky, huh?” he said, smiling.
- 14 Josh hesitated. He wanted to ask about the electric guitar, but he didn’t know exactly what to say. Just then, Ms. Ramos opened the door. In her right hand was a guitar case. She paused, unsure why all eyes in the room were on her and why the room had gone silent.
- 15 Steven spoke up first. “Where’d you find the guitar, Ms. Ramos?” he asked, glancing over at Gary as he spoke.
- 16 Ms. Ramos walked into the room and set the guitar case down. “I took it with me last night to replace the strings,” she explained, taking the guitar out. She strummed the strings, and looked up cheerfully. “See, good as new!”
- 17 Josh relaxed, grinning. “Yeah. Good as new,” he repeated, smiling at Gary.

- 1 What is the problem that Josh faces?
- A He does not like summer camp.
 - B He is sick of cereal for breakfast.
 - C He believes his best friend is a thief.
 - D He does not like to face the truth.
- 2 Josh is clearly bothered by the evidence against Gary that seems to be piling up. Choose two details from the story that show that Josh is upset by the idea that Gary stole the guitar.
- A “Josh sank down into a chair.”
 - B “Josh pulled on his friend Aidan’s shirt.”
 - C “But then again, everyone wanted to play the electric guitar.”
 - D “Josh looked away, and the other kids turned their backs.”
 - E “Gary *had* said how much he wanted to play the electric guitar.”
 - F “Josh relaxed, grinning. ‘Yeah. Good as new,’ he repeated, smiling at Gary.”

3 Part A

How does Ms. Ramos's appearance at the end of the story *best* contribute to the theme?

- A** It shows that people were right about their assumptions.
- B** It shows that people are sensitive to body language.
- C** It shows that people should not jump to conclusions without all the facts.
- D** It shows that people usually want to think the worst about others.

Part B

Which detail from the story *best* supports the answer to Part A?

- A** "I took it with me last night to replace the strings," she explained, taking the guitar out."
- B** "She strummed the strings, and looked up cheerfully."
- C** "'See, good as new!'"
- D** "Josh relaxed, grinning. 'Yeah. Good as new,' he repeated, smiling at Gary."

- 4** The theme of the story is that appearances can be deceiving. How do Josh's and the other kids' reactions to the missing guitar help develop the theme? Use at least two details from the story to support your answer.
