

THEME

WHAT ARE THEMES?

Themes are the ideas that run through narratives, enlivening them with deeper meaning, making them more compelling and emotional. The central idea, topic, or point of a story or novel is its theme. Themes often explore universal ideas that are common to all humans across history and culture. No matter where they are from, people all experience things like growing up, falling in love, or coping with loss. Themes can also consider philosophical and ethical questions: what it means to be human, why we are here, and how we should live.

The theme of a story is not constantly present in a narrative, but weaves in and out of the events of the plot. It might be conveyed through the characters, setting, dialogue, plot, or a combination of all these elements. Themes can range widely, and stories can have more than one. They might be big multi-layered ideas like 'conflict' or 'family', or they might be something quite specific like "fear of change leads to missed opportunities." In simpler stories, the theme may be a moral or message like "don't judge a book by its cover." In more complex stories, the central theme is typically a more open-ended exploration of some fundamental aspect of society or humanity.

Example

A mean-spirited and selfish old man is visited by a series of ghosts from his past, present and future. They take him on a journey through time to point out the errors of his ways and remind him that as his death is approaching, he does not have long left to change. After their visits he repents of his former actions and becomes a kinder and warmer-hearted man.

This classic tale by Charles Dickens has themes of:

- Redemption or change
- The importance of kindness and generosity
- Social injustice

THE IMPORTANCE OF THEME

The theme of a story is very important for two reasons:

1. It helps the reader relate to the characters, feel emotionally invested in the story and want to find out what happens next.
2. It gives the reader a message or lesson to take away, or just an idea to think about. The reader feels they have gained something from reading the story.

If a story has no major ideas for the characters to experience, consider, or learn from, the reader will find it difficult to become invested in the story, and might find the book meaningless or pointless. Themes give meaning to the story as a whole – they are the deeper reasons that the story has been written and shared.

THEMES IN CHINESE CINDERELLA

Family and relationships

Adeline is not so much disliked by her family as ignored. She is blamed for the death of her mother and therefore her siblings feel their family situation is her fault. 'If you had not been born, Mama would still be alive. She died because of you. You are bad luck.' (pg. 3) Adeline has no close friends or confidants. She has a close relationship with her Aunt Baba, but not with her school friends. Adeline holds herself apart from her peers in an effort to project the false impression that she has a happy family life. Adeline's relationship with her father exists only through her school performances or her misbehaviour. At other times, Adeline is barely acknowledged and rarely appreciated.

Abandonment and loneliness

Adeline has a close relationship only with Aunt Baba. Even then their contact is limited when she is abruptly sent to boarding school in Tianjin. Adeline is almost forgotten by her family and left in an increasingly hostile Tianjin. Her circumstances change only when her step-aunt collects her from the convent and takes her to Hong Kong. Adeline often feels left out of things with her siblings and, instead of attaining their approval for her school effort, she receives their scorn. Her friendship with her pet duck, PLT, best illustrates Adeline's feelings of isolation and loneliness: 'It comforted me to know I was needed.' (page 84) The loneliness Adeline felt at home was also felt at school, despite her pursuit of academic glory, because her friendships were empty of truth – she confided in no-one about her family situation. Despite the lack of true openness with her friends, the loyalty and support that she received from them was often the only thing that kept Adeline from utter despair, which suggests that a strong network of friends may be helpful in coping with trauma and may in some cases be able to compensate for a lack of family support.

Self-esteem

This novel explores the effect of Adeline's abusive and neglectful childhood on her sense of self-worth. There are many examples of poor self-esteem in the novel. Adeline is made to feel constantly on the outside by her family. She is rarely included in the family circle and when she is included, even slightly, she is overjoyed. When Adeline is the focus of a cruel joke by her brothers, she is saddened by Third Brother's involvement. Adeline's father only notices her when she has performed well in school. Attention from her father usually raises Adeline's self-esteem, while the long stretches of time when Adeline is ignored by her father has the opposite effect. Adeline is constantly insulted by Niang and even told, 'you are nothing without your father' (page 130). Despite the trauma she endures, Adeline is eventually able to rise above her circumstances and realise that her self-worth is based on her own abilities and strengths, and that she can create her own future without the approval or acceptance of her family.

The Power of Stories

Although Adeline stumbles into writing stories "by accident," she is immediately drawn to the ability to reshape the world around her. In reading stories, she can hear other people express many of the pained emotions she has long felt but been unable to voice, offering a reprieve from the "horrors of my daily life", and she uses her written stories to reimagine herself as bold and powerful rather than powerless and afraid. This becomes a way to escape from her dismal childhood, demonstrating the power of stories and how they can play an important role in helping individuals process and handle abuse or trauma, and counteract the negative messages they receive from others.