

## Theme, Plot, and Conflict

**Purpose:** Use this resource to learn about how theme, plot, and conflict are different from one another but yet work together in literature.

When reading literature, the reader needs to make a distinction between three key elements:

- Theme
- Plot
- Conflict

So what are the differences between these elements?

### Theme



The theme is a common idea that is incorporated and repeated throughout a literary work. A theme is often also called “the moral of the story.” The author uses the characters, plot, and other literary devices to build and enhance the theme. The theme weaves through the entire story and is highlighted by symbols, setting and character actions.

Some common themes include:

Revenge: *Hamlet*, *Star Trek: Wrath of Khan*, *A Time to Kill*

Unrequited Love: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Forest Gump*

The Journey: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*

Coming-of-Age: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Pride and Downfall: *Macbeth*, *Downfall* (a movie about Hitler’s last days)

Racism: “A Worn Path,” *Mississippi Burning*

Fight Between Good and Evil: “Where are You Going, Where Have You Been,” “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” *Superman*, *The Terminator*

War is often a theme, though can be represented in different ways:

- War as futile: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Farewell to Arms*
- War as brutal: *The Things They Carried*, *Full Metal Jacket*
- War as glory: *Courage Under Fire*
- War as opposing evil: *Braveheart*, *The Dirty Dozen*
- War as tragedy: *Schindler’s List*, *Taking Chance*
- War as survival: *The Pianist*, *Defiance*
- The Effects of War: *The Brothers*,

Sometimes a theme can entwine two different ideas, so that there is a **main** theme and a **minor** theme.

*To Kill A Mockingbird*: coming of age theme that also incorporates racism

*A Farewell to Arms*: unrequited love theme also linked to war as brutal

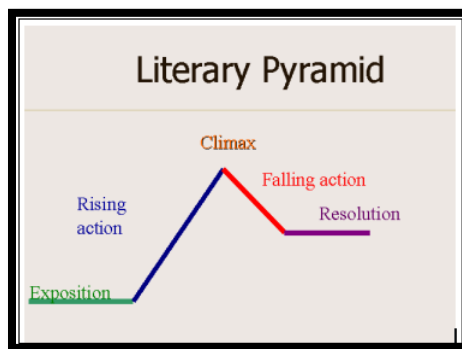
*Lord of the Rings*: a journey theme combined with the fight against good and evil

Do not confuse “theme” with the subject. The subject is the foundation on which the theme is built on.

For instance, *A Christmas Carol* is based on the subject of Christmas, yet its theme is generosity and charity.

“The Things They Carried” focuses on war, which is its subject, but its theme is how the individual soldier experiences war.

## Plot



Plot is composed of events that create an entire story. These events are organized in a sequential manner or a specific narrative pattern that links them together. The structure of a story or novel depends on the organization of events in the plot.

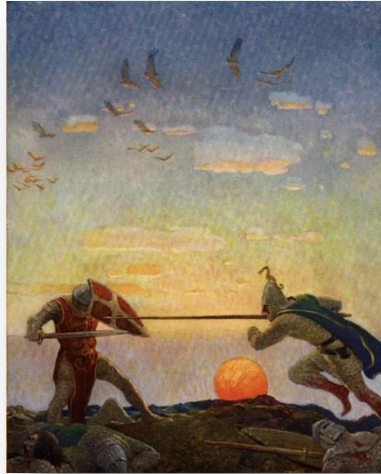
The plot centers the reader's attention on the characters and their roles in the story. Elements of the plot motivate or impel characters to behave in a specific way, which can either create a positive or negative results for the character. Events in the plot contribute to the story's rising action, the climax and the falling action, resulting in the story's end.

In short, a plot is what occurs in a story or novel. When a movie-goer describes an exciting film they just saw, they usually tell of the sequence of events and thus are reciting the plot of that movie. Most plots start with a main character who faces a small or large problem. The main character attempts to solve his problem, but in the process, more problems and obstacles crop up. By the end of the story or novel, the protagonist has solved his/her problem, usually a "happy ending," or has failed to solve the problem. Failure, however, may allow the protagonist to gain to insight, self-awareness and growth (or not).

An example of plot in Macbeth:

- Macbeth and his pal Banquo meet three witches, who tell Macbeth he will become the Thane of Cawdor, then King.
- Macbeth, then made Thane of Cawdor, begins to believe the witches and he tells his wife of their prophecy.
- Macbeth and his wife plot to kill the King to rush the process, and lay the blame on his guards.
- The King's sons flee for their lives and Banquo becomes suspicious of Macbeth.
- Macbeth kills Banquo, but his son Fleance escapes.
- The witches tell Macbeth to beware of Macduff, so he massacres his whole family. The King's son Malcolm leads an army against Macbeth. Lady Macbeth commits suicide.
- Macduff kills Macbeth and Malcolm claims the throne.

## Conflict



N.C Wyth, King Arther and Mordred

In literature, a conflict is a common literary element that involves a struggle between two opposing forces. Those forces can take a variety of forms, and include several different combinations, including:

- Individual against individual (protagonist against the antagonist)
- Individual against nature
- Individual against society
- Individual against self
- Individual against technology

**Conflict can either be internal or external.** An internal conflict shows how a character struggles within their minds. It can be a psychological struggle, an emotional one or an ethical dilemma the character faces. Hamlet faces an internal struggle when he cannot decide to act once he learns his uncle killed his father.

An external struggle involves forces generated by the environment or random events that work to impede the protagonist. These forces come from outside the character. For instance, Hamlet's uncle creates external conflict when he kills Hamlet's father and marries his mother. Hamlet feels compelled to fix this situation.

## **Working Together**

Theme, plot and conflict all work together to create a story. Both internal and external forces arise out of the action/events of the plot and contribute to the theme. For instance, one of the themes of Hamlet is revenge. Hamlet's uncle kills his father, so Hamlet must seek revenge (external conflict), though he doesn't quite know how to do so (internal conflict). The plot sets events in motion, arranging them in a sequential manner.