Theme Notes

**Essential Question:** What is a “Theme” and how can I identify one in the stories we read?

**Background**

* Literature is an art, and the beauty of art is that it can be interpreted differently. The message of a fiction book is much like the message of a beautiful painting: It is not something that is stated in a particular sentence and easily located; it is something that is comprehended upon reflection.

**What is a “theme”?**

* Theme is the central insight the story gives us about human nature or life.
* What the author is trying to say with his/her work.
  + The main message (or The “Big” Idea)
  + The moral of the story
  + The fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work
* Theme is a universal idea or message that stretches through an entire story. A theme may show up in a pattern or a theme may come through as the result of a buildup. It is often a lesson that we learn about life or people.
  + When you were younger, your parents may have read you stories (such as Fairy Tales or Fables) that ended with “the moral of this story is…”
  + Do you remember the story “The Three Little Pigs”? In it, we learned about the importance of planning a project well. We know this, because we witnessed that building a brick house works, while building a straw house is short-sighted.
    - So, the theme could be “Planning a project is important”
  + But from that story, we also learn that it’s a good idea to take shelter in a structure that is strong and built well.
    - So we could also say the theme was about making smart choices. “Making smart choices in life is a valuable skill” could also be a theme.
  + As you can see, a theme isn’t something that's stated outright; it often appears as a lesson or message that the reader understands by reading between the lines. A book of fiction can have **many** themes because different people can find different meanings in books.
* **Finding a Theme in Two Steps**

1. When you finish reading a story (book, etc.) ask yourself to sum the entire thing up in a single word.
   * For example, a single word for the book Little Red Riding Hood could be “*deception*”.
2. Next, stretch that single word into a message. Such as: “innocence can lead to deception.” Then, this would be an example of a theme for Little Red Riding Hood.

IMPORTANT

* + A **theme** should be MORE THAN ONE single word.
    - For example, “Racism” is not a theme of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
    - “Love” is not a theme for ANY of Shakespeare’s plays.

**Examples of Common Themes**

1. The Circle of Life
2. Death is a part of all of us
3. Dangers of Ignorance
4. Losing Hope in Life
5. Loss of Innocence
6. Quest for Discovery or Power
7. Temptation and Destruction
8. The Will to Survive
9. Overcoming Fear
10. Coming of Age (or Growing Up)

**Final Hint: Symbols Can Be Clues to Your Themes**

* Sometimes an object such as a bridge or a large body of water will appear over and over in a book. The object could actually be a **symbol** (or **motif**) which represents the theme.
  + - * If you notice that an object seems to be a strong and meaningful symbol in a story, try to determine a deeper meaning of that object.
      * Example: A bridge represents a crossover or change. If you notice a few bridges in a story, and you notice the main character is going through a big change, you know that the bridge is being used as a symbol.
* Let’s watch a short video, based on the story “The Missing Piece Meets the Big O” by Shel Silverstein.
* As you watch, please write down **PHRASES** that describe what’s going on:
  + **Example**
    - Looking for her missing piece
    - Seeking something that’s missing
    - Searching for his identity