

Lesson 7

Finding the Theme of a Story or Drama



Learning Target

Understanding characters in stories and dramas, including how they respond to challenges, helps you understand the themes of such texts.

► **Read** In a fictional text, a **theme** is a lesson about life that an author wants readers to understand. For example, a fictional text might present the lesson that loyalty to friends is important. Or, it might develop the idea that living a full life sometimes means taking risks. Themes are always developed by a text's **details**.

One way to determine a theme is to look at how **characters** respond to **challenges**. A challenge is a problem a character must face.

In the cartoon below, what challenge does the girl face? How does she respond to it? What does that tell you about the theme?

Monday afternoon, 3 P.M.



Monday evening, 7 P.M.



► **Think** What have you learned about identifying the theme of a fictional text? Use the organizer below to help you identify the characters, setting, and character experiences that develop the theme.

Characters

Setting

Character Experiences

Theme

► **Talk** Share your organizer with a partner.

- Did you write down the same character experiences?
- How did the main character react to the challenge?
- Did you arrive at roughly the same theme?



Academic Talk

Use these words to talk about the text.

- **theme**
- **challenge**
- **details**
- **characters**

THE MISER

based on a fable by Aesop

Scene 1: The MISER's garden

[The MISER digs up the gold he's buried and then counts it piece by piece.]

MISER *[rubbing his hands with delight]*: Yes, every last coin is there—the exact sum I've had for years! Now I must bury my treasure again to hide it.

THIEF *[watching from behind a tree]*: Every day this man digs something up and then buries it again. I shall see what it is he digs up and buries! *[waits for the MISER to leave, then digs up and steals the gold]*

Scene 2: The next morning

MISER *[digging where his gold was]*: My gold! My gold! I've been robbed! *[A STRANGER hears the MISER's cries and comes to see what is wrong.]*

STRANGER: Your gold? There in that hole? Why did you put it there? Why didn't you keep it in the house where you could easily get at it when you had things to buy?

MISER: Buy? Why, I never touched the gold except to count it! I couldn't think of spending it!

STRANGER *[throws a large stone into the hole]*: If that is the case, then cover up that stone.

MISER *[scoffing]*: You are a fool! That is not gold. It is a mere stone.

STRANGER: It may be a mere stone, but it is worth just as much to you as the treasure you lost.
[The STRANGER walks off, leaving the MISER to consider his words.]

Close Reader Habits

When you reread the drama, **underline** a line of dialogue that explains why the Miser acts as he does. Then **circle** the Stranger's lesson to the Miser.

Explore

What is the theme of "The Miser"?



Think about how the characters interact to figure out the theme of the drama.

Think

- 1 Complete this organizer by identifying the details of the drama.

Characters

Setting

Character Experiences

Theme

Talk

- 2 Discuss how you figured out the theme of the drama. If you identify more details that you'd like to add to your organizer, do so now.



Write

- 3 **Short Response** Describe the theme of the drama. Explain which details develop the theme. Use details from the organizer in your response. Use the space provided on page 126 to write your answer.

HINT In your answer, identify how the characters behave or interact with each other.

The Wise Man

a Chinese folktale

- 1 There once was an elderly farmer who lived with his son. One day the old man discovered that his only horse had run off. His friends helped him search for the animal, but to no avail. The old man's friends offered their condolences. "We are so sorry about this unfortunate incident," they said.
- 2 The old man laughed and replied, "What makes you think this is not a blessing? All will be shown for its true worth in time." The old man's friends were stunned by his reaction.
- 3 Some months later, the old man's horse returned, bringing with it a stallion of great worth. His friends came to celebrate. But the old man shook his head and said to them, "What makes you think this is a good thing? All will be shown for its true worth in time." The old man's friends were surprised again.
- 4 A week later, the old man's son took the stallion for a ride and suffered a fall, breaking his leg in several places. Again, the old man's friends came to offer their sympathy, but the old man greeted them calmly and replied, "What makes you think this is not a blessing? All will be shown for its true worth in time."
- 5 A short while later, the country was involved in a terrible war. A group of soldiers came to the old man's house to recruit his son. But when they saw that he had a broken leg, they left him behind. The old man's neighbors gathered to congratulate him, declaring with amazement, "What wisdom you have, for you can foresee both good and bad incidents for what they truly are."

Close Reader Habits

How does the old man respond to the challenges he faces? Reread the folktale. **Underline** the sentences that show his responses to challenges.



A folktale is a story told again and again over generations of people. Many folktales teach lessons or have messages.

Think Use what you learned from reading the folktale to respond to the following questions.

- 1** This question has two parts. Answer Part A. Then answer Part B.

Part A

How do the actions of the old man's friends contribute to the theme of the story?

- A** They want to celebrate with the old man.
- B** They jump to conclusions about what events are blessings and misfortunes.
- C** They are glad because the old man's son does not have to go to war.
- D** They are confused by the old man's happiness.

Part B

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

- A** "The old man's friends offered their condolences. 'We are so sorry about this unfortunate incident,' they said."
- B** "The old man's friends were stunned by his reaction."
- C** "Some months later, the old man's horse returned, bringing with it a stallion of great worth."
- D** "A group of soldiers came to the old man's house to recruit his son."

Talk

- 2** What is the theme of the passage? Use details from the passage to support your answer. Use the organizer on page 127 to identify the characters, setting, theme, and evidence for the theme.

Write

- 3 Short Response** Use the information in your organizer to determine the theme of the folktale. Use details from the passage to support your response. Use the space provided on page 127 to write your answer.

HINT Be sure to say how the old man responds to events and interacts with his friends.



Write Use the space below to write your answer to the question on page 123.

THE MISER

- 3 Short Response** Describe the theme of the drama. Explain which details develop the theme. Use the details from the organizer in your response.

HINT In your answer, identify how the characters behave or interact with each other.



Don't forget to check your writing.

Check Your Writing

- ☐ Did you read the prompt carefully?
- ☐ Did you put the prompt in your own words?
- ☐ Did you use the best evidence from the text to support your ideas?
- ☐ Are your ideas clearly organized?
- ☐ Did you write in clear and complete sentences?
- ☐ Did you check your spelling and punctuation?

The Wise Man

2 Use the graphic organizer below to organize your ideas and evidence.

Characters	Setting
Character Experiences	
Theme	



Write Use the space below to write your answer to the question on page 125.

3 Short Response Use the information in your organizer to determine the theme of the folktale. Use details from the passage to support your response.

HINT Be sure to say how the old man responds to events and interacts with his friends.

WORDS TO KNOW

As you read, look inside, around, and beyond these words to figure out what they mean.

- justice
- judgment

The Bell of Atri

retold by Jane Carey

1 Atri is the name of a little town in Italy. A long time ago, the King of Atri had a large bell hung up in a tower in the marketplace. A rope that reached almost to the ground was fastened to the bell so that even the smallest child could ring the bell by pulling upon this rope. All the men, women, and children of Atri came down to the marketplace to look at the bell. It was a very pretty bell, and it was polished until it looked as bright and yellow as the sun.

2 “My people,” said the king, “do you see this beautiful bell? It is the bell of justice. If any of you is wronged at any time, you may come and ring the bell. Then the judges shall come together at once, hear your case, and give you justice. Rich and poor, old and young, all alike may come, but you must not pull the rope unless you know you have been wronged.”

3 Many years passed, and many times did the bell ring out to call the judges together. Many wrongs were righted and many ill-doers punished. At last the rope, worn and broken, became so short that only a tall man could reach it. “This will never do,” said the judges one day. “What if a child should be wronged? He or she could not reach the bell to ring it.” They gave orders that a new rope should be put on the bell, but there was not a rope to be found in all of Atri. They would have to send across the mountains for one, and it would be many days before it could be brought.

4 “Let me fix it,” said a man who stood by. He ran to his garden and soon came back with a long grapevine. He climbed up and fastened it to the bell. The slender vine, with its leaves and tendrils still upon it, trailed to the ground. The judges thought it to be a very good rope.

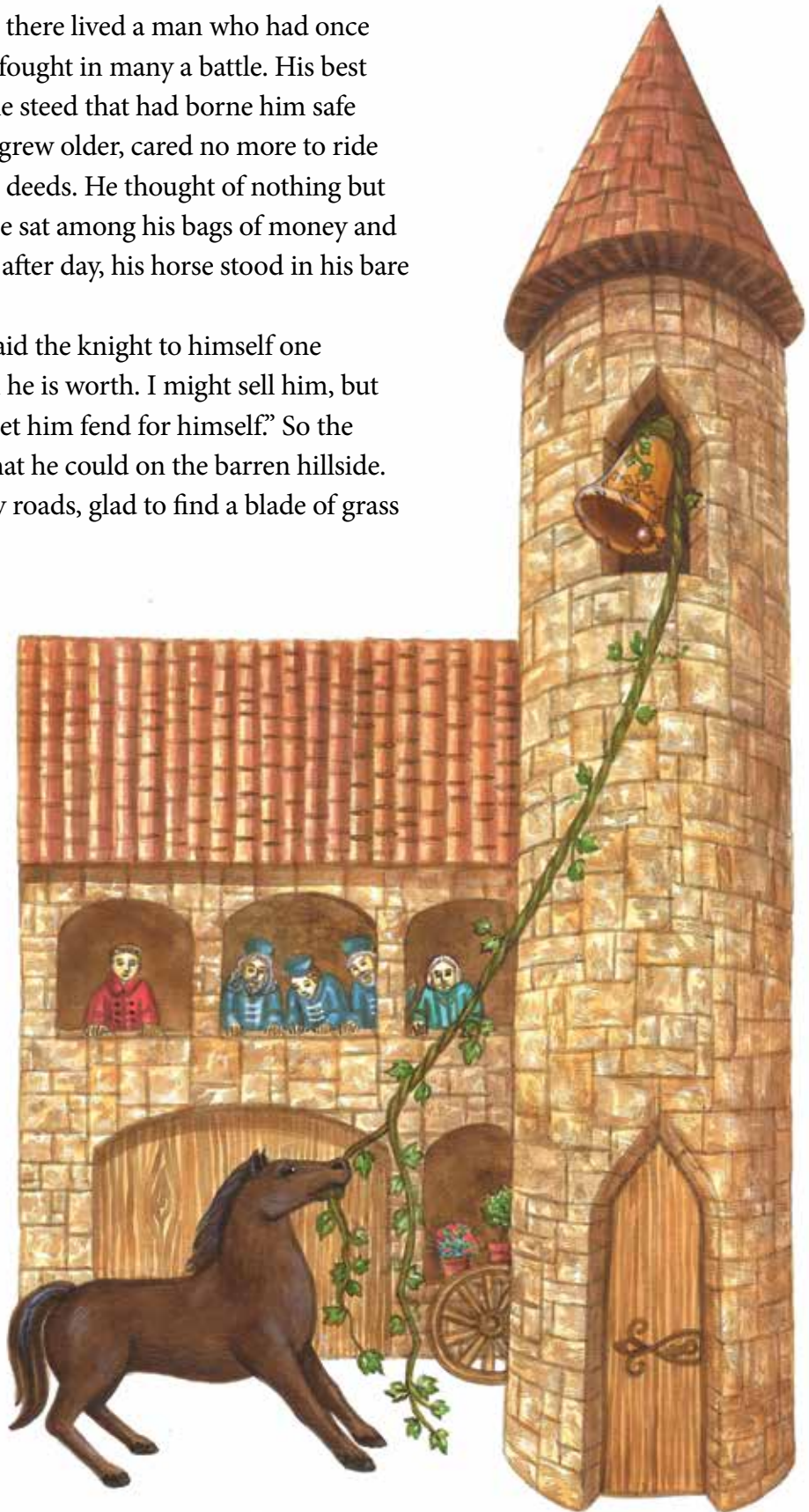


5 Now, on the hillside above the village, there lived a man who had once been a brave knight. In his youth, he had fought in many a battle. His best friend had been his horse—a strong, noble steed that had borne him safe through danger. But the knight, when he grew older, cared no more to ride into battle and cared no more to do brave deeds. He thought of nothing but gold and became a miser. Day after day, he sat among his bags of money and planned how he might get more, and day after day, his horse stood in his bare stall, half starved and miserable.

6 “What is the use of that lazy steed?” said the knight to himself one morning. “It costs more to keep him than he is worth. I might sell him, but there is not a man who wants him. I will let him fend for himself.” So the brave old horse was turned out to find what he could on the barren hillside. Weak and sick, he strolled along the dusty roads, glad to find a blade of grass or a thistle.

7 One hot afternoon, the horse wandered into town. Not a person was there, for the heat had driven them all indoors. It wasn’t long before the poor beast saw the grapevine that hung from the bell, the leaves and tendrils upon it still fresh and green. What a fine dinner they would be for a starving horse! He stretched his neck and took one of the tender morsels in his mouth, but it was hard to break it from the vine. He pulled at it, and the great bell began to ring.

8 The judges put on their robes and went out through the hot streets to the marketplace, where they saw the old horse nibbling at the vine. “Ha!” cried one. “It is the knight’s steed. He has come to call for justice, for his master, as everybody knows, has treated him shamefully.”






9 Meanwhile a crowd had gathered, eager to learn what cause the judges were about to try. When they saw the horse, everyone stood still in wonder. Then all were ready to tell how they had seen him wandering the hills, uncared for and unfed.

10 The judges ordered the knight to be brought before them. And when he came, they bade him stand and hear their judgment. “This horse has served you well,” they said. “He has saved you from many a peril. He has helped you gain your wealth. Therefore, we order that half your gold shall be set aside to buy him shelter and food, a green pasture where he may graze, and a warm stall to comfort him in his old age.”

11 The knight hung his head and grieved to lose his gold, but the people shouted with joy, and the horse was led away to his new stall and a dinner such as he had not had in many a day.



 **Think** Use what you learned from reading the folktale to respond to the following questions.

- 1** This question has two parts. First, answer Part A. Then answer Part B.

Part A

How are the events in paragraphs 1, 2, and 3 important to one of the themes of the story?

- A** They show that townspeople are concerned about whether children can seek justice.
- B** They show that judges must be very wise in order to provide justice for everyone.
- C** They show that the bell's new rope must come from far away, across the mountains.
- D** They show that the town's leaders want everyone to have equal access to justice.

Part B

Which **two** sentences from the story provide the **best** support for the answer in Part A?

- A** "A rope that reached almost to the ground was fastened to the bell so that even the smallest child could ring the bell by pulling upon this rope."
- B** "It was a very pretty bell, and it was polished until it looked as bright and yellow as the sun."
- C** "'If any of you is wronged at any time, you may come and ring the bell.'"
- D** "Many years passed, and many times did the bell ring out to call the judges together."
- E** "At last the rope, worn and broken, became so short that only a tall man could reach it."
- F** "They would have to send across the mountains for one, and it would be many days before it could be brought."

- 2** This question has two parts. First, answer Part A. Then answer Part B.

Part A

How do the knight's actions contribute to a theme of the story?

- A** His decision to appear in front of the judges shows that it is brave to stand up for yourself.
- B** His treatment of his horse demonstrates that animals should be allowed to roam freely.
- C** His choices show that wealth should be used to help those who have been loyal friends.
- D** His actions show that a person can behave poorly but still be respected in the community.

Part B

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

- A** "... his master, as everybody knows, has treated him shamefully."
- B** "... they had seen him wandering the hills, uncared for and unfed."
- C** "... they bade him stand and hear their judgment."
- D** "'Therefore, we order that half your gold shall be set aside to buy him shelter and food, ...'"

- 3** Read the sentence from the text. Then answer the question.

Day after day, he sat among his bags of money and planned how he might get more, and day after day, his horse stood in his bare stall, half starved and miserable.

What does the use of the word miserable suggest?

- A** The horse is unhappy.
- B** The horse is greedy.
- C** The horse is hungry.
- D** The horse is loyal.

**Write**

- 4 Short Response** One theme of “The Bell of Atri” is that you should help those who have helped you. Write a paragraph that explains how the theme of the story is shown through the characters’ actions and their responses to events.

**Learning Target**

In this lesson, you determined the themes of fictional texts. Explain how the skills you practiced will help you figure out the themes of fictional texts you read in the future.
