



# 1 Theme and the Oral Tradition

Stories from the oral tradition teach a culture's central values and beliefs. They also convey universal themes.

**Oral Tradition** Storytellers and poets of long ago did not write down the tales they told. Instead, they learned the stories and poems of their culture from others and recited them from memory. The term **oral tradition** refers to the literature they passed down through the ages by word of mouth. Eventually, these spoken stories and poems were retold in writing.

The tales of love, ambition, and friendship in the oral tradition do more than entertain. They record the history, customs, beliefs, and values of the cultures from which they sprang. The **points of view**, or perspectives on life, expressed in this literature reflect the **cultural experiences** of the tellers—the basic experiences that shaped life in their society. For example, the stories of a warrior culture tell of battle and adventure, heroism and sacrifice. Experiences of war along with the emphasis placed on bravery and loyalty form the **social and cultural context** for such tales—the values, beliefs, and experiences the tales reflect and affirm.

**Themes** Like much literature, works in the oral tradition convey **themes**—deeper meanings or insights. A **universal theme** is an insight into life and human nature that appears in the literature of many different times and cultures.

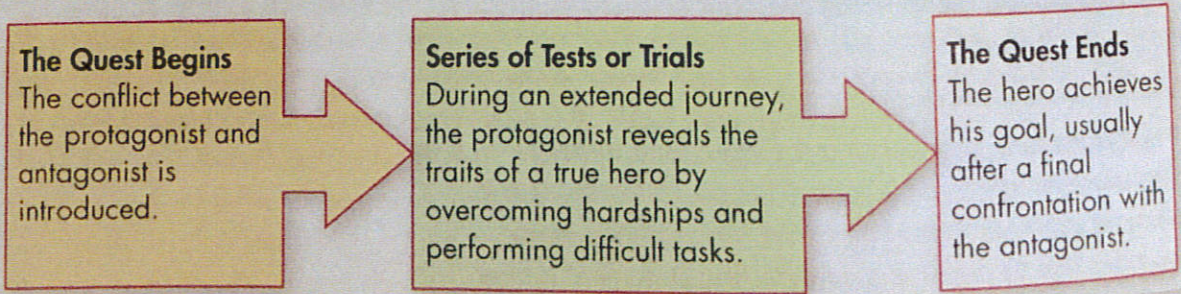
Universal themes concern fundamental ideas such as the importance of heroism, the strength of loyalty, the power of love, the responsibilities of leadership, the struggle between good and evil, and the dangers of greed.

Storytellers in the oral tradition often explore universal themes, and they frequently do so using archetypes. An **archetype** is an element that recurs throughout the literature of different cultures. Character types, plot patterns, images, and symbols all may be archetypes, as in the examples shown below.

### Example: Archetypes

- The **trickster** is a clever person or animal who can fool others but often gets into trouble through curiosity.
- In the **hero's quest**, a clever or brave person undergoes a series of tests or trials while on a search for something of great importance.
- The character of the hero is often called the **protagonist**, and his **antagonist** is the character or force that opposes him. Often, the opposing force is a **monster**, a nonhuman or semi-human figure that menaces society and must be destroyed by the hero.

The **hero's quest** follows an archetypal plot pattern similar to the one shown here.



## 2 Forms from the Oral Tradition

Across cultures, storytellers in the oral tradition developed specific narrative forms. Among these forms are myths, folk tales, legends, and epics.

Narratives in each of these forms express the values, ideals, and behaviors held important by the culture from which they

came. They also reflect the oral nature of the tradition. For example, epics may feature *epithets*, or descriptive phrases that are repeated when a character is named. These epithets may have helped storytellers memorize the story. They might also have helped listeners recognize and remember the characters.

### Literary Forms in the Oral Tradition

Form	Characteristics	Example
Myth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>describes the actions of gods or heroes or explains the origins of elements of nature</li><li>is present in the literature of every ancient culture. Ancient Greek and Roman myths are known as <b>classical mythology</b>.</li></ul>	Prometheus, son of the Greek god Zeus, defies his father and the other gods by giving fire to humans.
Folk Tale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>follows a simple formula</li><li>deals with heroics, adventure, magic, or romance</li><li>frequently contains animal characters with human traits, such as the trickster coyote</li><li>includes fables and fairy tales</li></ul>	A poor fisherman catches a golden fish. The fish and the man strike a deal: in exchange for its freedom, the fish will grant the man a wish. The man agrees, but he and his wife become greedy and demand more wishes. The fish vanishes, leaving the fisherman in poverty once more.
Legend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>recounts the adventures of a hero from the past</li><li>relates events that may or may not be based on a historical truth</li><li>includes tall tales, which feature exaggeration</li></ul>	Stories of Davy Crockett portray this real-life hero as a superhero who frees the sun, uses lightning to fly, and defeats the entire British navy.
Epic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>is a long narrative poem</li><li>describes the deeds of a larger-than-life hero</li><li>combines features of myths and legends</li><li>depicts a hero who usually goes on a dangerous journey or quest; the hero is helped or hindered by supernatural creatures or gods</li><li>gives a detailed portrait of a culture</li></ul>	The ancient Mesopotamian king Gilgamesh, who is part human and part god, displays wisdom and strength as he struggles against the gods, nature, and his own human weaknesses.

## 3 In This Section

### Theme and the Oral Tradition

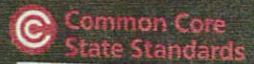
#### Determining Themes

#### Analyzing Point of View and Cultural Experience

#### Close Read: Theme and Point of View

- Model Text
- Practice Text

#### After You Read



RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.6

[For the full wording of the standards, see the standards chart in the front of your textbook.]

# 1 Determining Themes

At the center of a literary work is its **theme**—the insight or message that its details combine to convey.

The **theme**, or central insight or message of a literary work, may be stated directly. For example, a fable ends with a statement of the moral of the story, such as “He who hesitates is lost.” Frequently, however, the theme of a work is **implied**, or suggested, by story details.

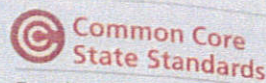
Readers can determine an implied theme by analyzing the way storytellers pattern details.

**Development of Themes** To introduce and develop a theme, writers create patterns of events and actions or of contrasts between characters and their fates. As the story unfolds, new events may reinforce these patterns or alter them, suggesting new ideas to readers.

By identifying such patterns as you read, you will gain clues to the implied theme. Restating the patterns in general terms will help you reach a conclusion about an implied theme, as shown in the following example:

<b>Title</b>	“Midas and the Golden Touch”
<b>Pattern</b>	Everything King Midas touches turns to gold, including his beloved daughter.
<b>Generalized Restatement</b>	Driven by greed, a person destroys what he loves.
<b>Theme</b>	Greed can destroy all that is good in a person’s life.

**Determining Universal Themes** In the oral tradition, universal themes—themes found in the literature of many cultures—are often



## Reading Literature

2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

6. Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States; drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

conveyed through the use of **archetypes**, or recurring elements common to many stories. Your ability to recognize these archetypes as the story develops and to interpret their meanings can help you determine a story’s universal themes, as in the following example:

<b>Story</b>	<b>The Tortoise and the Hare</b> A tortoise and a hare compete in a race. The hare assumes he will win and stops for a nap. The tortoise keeps going and wins.
<b>Archetypes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overconfident, boastful character (hare)</li> <li>• Quiet, confident character (tortoise)</li> <li>• Plot pattern: Competition in which a weaker character succeeds because of the pride of a stronger character</li> </ul>
<b>Universal Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slow and steady wins the race.</li> <li>• Too much pride can have bad results.</li> </ul>

**Culturally Specific Themes** Not all themes in the oral tradition are universal. Some are specific to the time and the culture in which the story originated. These themes reflect the specific social and cultural backgrounds of their authors. Generally, they do not apply to people in modern cultures. Still, they provide an interesting window into the values, beliefs, and customs of bygone eras.

## 2 Analyzing Point of View and Cultural Experience

Authors' cultural backgrounds influence their **points of view**.

**Point of View** An author's **point of view**, or perspective, consists of his or her attitudes toward, and beliefs about, a subject. Point of view determines how the writer approaches a subject. An author's point of view is influenced in part by his or her cultural experiences—the basic experiences, beliefs, and values that shape life in his or her society.

**NOTE**  
Literature in the oral tradition usually expresses a cultural—rather than an individual—point of view. By contrast, works of modern literature usually express an author's unique and individual point of view. This point of view may even be critical of the author's own culture. In both cases, it is important for readers to recognize the point of view and cultural experiences that shape a literary text.

### Examples

#### Author's Cultural Experiences

The history, beliefs, values, and behavior of a specific group

#### Author's Point of View, or Perspective

The author's attitude—feelings, opinions, and ideas—about a subject; the author's view of the world

**Cultural Experience and Purpose** The author's **purpose** is his or her main reason for writing. Writers usually write **to entertain, to inform or explain, or to persuade**. Although entertainment was a means for getting the attention of listeners, storytellers in the oral tradition also felt responsible for preserving the identity of their culture. Through stories and poems, they reminded people of their history; they communicated values to younger members of their group; and they shared religious beliefs.

Storytellers were more than just entertainers; they served as historians, teachers, and advisors.

Modern writers may also create literature with more than one purpose in mind. For example, an author might write a story that includes information about a serious problem in the world, and at the same time provide readers with a satisfying narrative that entertains.

**Changing Points of View** As stories were passed among generations and cultures, details changed to reflect different values and attitudes. Consider this example of a story that has been retold in numerous cultures.

#### Example: Cinderella

After Cinderella's mother dies, her father remarries and leaves Cinderella with his new wife and her two daughters. Cinderella is enslaved by the unreasonable demands of her cruel stepmother and stepsisters. She attends the King's ball and she meets the Prince. Eventually, Cinderella and the Prince marry and live happily ever after.

Culture/Version	Cultural Viewpoint	Specific Details
German tale retold by the Brothers Grimm in 1812	Medieval view: Cruelty and violence are part of the world.	At the end, birds peck out the eyes of the stepsisters.
American version, based on a retelling by the French writer Charles Perrault in 1697	Modern view: Violence and cruelty should be hidden from children's view.	At the end, Cinderella forgives her stepsisters and invites them to live in the castle.

## 2 Analyzing View and Experience

1. Introduce the point of view and using the indent page.
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