Exploring and Identifying Theme

Theme: the meaning of the story; central or dominating idea

What a theme is not:
- It is not the “moral” of the story. A moral is a piece of practical advice that can be gained from the novel to apply to our own lives.
- It is not the subject of the story.
- It is not a “hidden meaning” that needs to be pulled out of the story.

What theme is:
- Theme is the meaning released by the work when we take all aspects of the work in its entirety into account.
- It is an aspect of human experience that the author wishes to express.

Discovering theme
Theme can be discovered only by becoming aware of the relations among the parts of a story and of the relations of the parts to a whole:

Characters: What kind of people does the story deal with?

Plot: What do the characters do? Are they in control of their lives, or are they controlled by fate?

Motivation: Why do the characters behave as they do, and what motives dominate them?

Style: How does the author perceive reality?

Tone: What is the author’s attitude towards his subject?

Values: What are the values of the characters in the story? What values does the author seem to promote?

The importance of theme in literature can be overestimated; the work of fiction is more than just the theme. However, the theme allows the author to control or give order to his perceptions about life.
32 Master Themes

Alienation - creating emotional isolation
Betrayal - fading bonds of love
Birth - life after loss, life sustains tragedy
Coming of age - boy becomes a man
Conformity - industrialization and the conformity of man
Death - death as mystery, death as a new beginning
Deception - appearance versus reality
Discovery - conquering unknown, discovering strength
Duty - the ethics of killing for duty
Escape - escape from family pressures, escaping social constraints
Family - destruction of family
Fortune - a fall from grace and fortune
Generation gap - experience versus youthful strength
God and spirituality - inner struggle of faith
Good and evil - the coexistence of good and evil on earth
Heroism - false heroism, heroism and conflicting values
Home - security of a homestead
Hope - hope rebounds
Hopelessness - finding hope after tragedy
Individualism - choosing between security and individualism
Isolation - the isolation of a soul
Journey - most journeys lead back to home
Judgment - balance between justice and judgment
Loss - loss of innocence, loss of individualism
Love - love sustains/fades with a challenge
Patriotism - inner conflicts stemming from patriotism
Peace and war - war is tragic, peace is fleeting
Power - lust for power
Race relations - learned racism
Sense of self - finding strength from within
Suffering - suffering as a natural part of human experience
Survival - man against nature

Definition of Theme: Marysville (TN) High School Composition Guide
http://www.ci.maryville.tn.us/mhs/studyskills/compguide/LitAnaTheme.htm

Theme List: M. Wood, Patriot High School, Riverside, CA
https://sites.google.com/a/patriothighschool.com/english-10-2011-12/assignments/themes