Theme in a Literary Text:
In works of literature, most writers focus on communicating a central idea or insight about a subject. This central idea is called the theme. As you look for the theme of a text, remember that it is different from the text's subject. A subject can be summed up with a couple of words, such as losing someone we love or dealing with change. A theme, however, is a complete idea that must be stated in a sentence—for example: Although change is painful and difficult for many people, it is necessary and often rewarding because change leads to growth and discovery.

Subject Versus Theme: In the left-hand column below, list the titles of two books or movies that you know well. In the middle column, write down a word or two that sums up its subject. In the final column, write a short sentence that states its theme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elf</td>
<td>Bad attitude</td>
<td>Although people often become pessimistic and have a negative attitude as they grow older, the magic of Christmas can make them joyful and optimistic.</td>
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Background: In ancient mythology, Ulysses (called Odysseus in Greek) is one of the Greek leaders who fought in the Trojan War, which lasted for ten years. Some of you may be familiar with the story of the Trojan War because of the movie Troy with Brad Pitt.
It then took ten years for Ulysses to make his way back home to Ithaca after the war ended. On his journey to his island home, Ulysses and his men experienced many adventures. In Tennyson’s poem, the king (Ulysses) now old and aged, is in Ithaca with his wife and son, Penelope and Telemachus. At home and at rest, though, Ulysses finds that he wants to leave yet again on a final voyage.

**Directions:** As you read the following poem which shares Ulysses’s thoughts and feelings now that he is back home, try to summarize each section of the poem to understand the theme.

**Ulysses by Alfred Tennyson**

It little profits that an idle king,

By this still hearth, among these barren crags,

Match’d with an aged wife, I mete and dole

Unequal laws unto a savage race,

That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.  

**Summary:** Ulysses says that he is tired of staying at home, where all he does is spend time with his wife and try to govern difficult people.

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink

Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy’d

**Think About:** Ulysses uses a metaphor here to compare his life to a bottle of beer with some sediment or left over pieces of grain at the bottom of the bottle. Ulysses says he wants to get every last drop out of the bottle to explain what he wants from life.

Greatly, have suffer’d greatly, both with those

That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when

Thro’ scudding drifts the rainy Hyades

Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;

For always roaming with a hungry heart

Much have I seen and known; cities of men

And manners, climates, councils, governments,

Myself not least, but honour’d of them all;

And drunk delight of battle with my peers,

Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.

**Summary:** Ulysses talks about his experiences in the Trojan war at the end of line 17. War is violent and brutal but Ulysses remembers the strong bonds he formed with other soldiers during the excitement of battles.

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades  20
For ever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life!

Think About: Ulysses says he will rust because he is no longer travelling and living an exciting life. He says there is more to life than just being alive and breathing.

Life piled on life were all too little, and of one to me  25
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,

Think About: Ulysses says that he has been stuck at his home for “three suns” or three years.

And this gray spirit yearning in desire  30
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

Summary: This is the end of stanza 1. Use the chart to explain how Ulysses wants to live his life after being stuck at home for three years.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,  
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—

Think About: A “Sceptre” is like a crown. So Ulysses wants to leave his role as king to his son.

Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil  35
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.

Think About: Ulysses says that being a king is difficult because he has to make sure everyone is doing what they should so that the kingdom doesn’t fall apart. Some of the people are difficult and don’t want to do their jobs.

Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere  40
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

Summary: In your chart explain the last line to summarize stanza 2. What work does Ulysses want? What work will his son, Telemachus, have?
There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark, broad seas.

Think About: At the beginning of stanza 3, Ulysses is about to get on his boat with the sailors that he went to war with in the past.

My mariners, souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
It is not too late to seek a newer world.

Think About: Ulysses says the day “wanes” or is ending just like his life, but there is still time to find something new.

Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Summary: In your chart, explain the last 2 lines. Is Ulysses as strong as he was in the past? Does he still have a strong will?

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<tr>
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<td>Lines 18-32</td>
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</table>
| **Stanza 2**  
Lines 33-43 |  |
| **Stanza 3**  
Lines 44-70 |  |

**Theme:** The subject of “Ulysses” is old age or pursuing your own desires. Review your summary of each section to explain what the poem shows about one of those two topics.