



CONFLICT & THEME:

Read the following stories:

- [“The Tell-Tale Heart”](#) by Edgar Allan Poe
- [“The Gift of the Magi”](#) by O. Henry

After reading them, reflect on these questions yourself, or discuss them with someone who might be interested in listening to your thoughts / reading the story with you!

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. Evaluating a story, just like evaluating any other type of art, is subjective, so your answers to these questions will definitely vary. The important thing to remember is that you’re answering these questions critically – referencing the stories you read, not simply making up answers. If you want to be a better writer, you’ve got to read like a writer!

1. Think about the conflict/s that appear in “The Tell-Tale Heart”. How were they expressed? What did the narrator do, say, think, or feel to make this conflict more obvious?
2. Would you say that the conflict that the narrator experiences in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is solved by the end of the story? If you feel that it isn’t, what does this create or make you feel?
3. What virtue or trait do you feel best encapsulates “The Gift of the Magi”? Are there any actions that the characters did, or words they spoke, that pointed you towards the theme?
4. If the writer of “The Gift of the Magi” had decided to make selfishness or hatred the core theme of the story, how do you think the story would differ?

To summarize:

Conflict is a struggle that characters in a story deal with. They can rise up from external forces (the people around this character, the system the character’s world operates with, etc.) or internal forces (the character’s own mind, trauma, and pursuits). Without conflict, a story will encounter no hitches or bumps – which will make it boring, and give you no reason to continue reading.

Theme is the central message of a story. It is the belief that the author is trying to share to their readers, or at least, make them subtly feel. The themes of most stories can be summed up in an abstract virtue or trait, or a common concept that the story seems to revolve around – and would not be the same without.