THEME

Short Stories – Ideas and Insights
The theme of a piece of fiction is its controlling (main) idea, or its central insight. It is the unifying generalization about life, stated or implied in the story.
The purpose of a story is not to state a theme. Any fool can do that. A story brings it to life and illustrates a theme by appealing to our intellect, emotions, senses, and imagination.

To determine the theme of a story, we must ask what insight into life it reveals... if any.
Theme exists in all interpretive fiction, but may not exist in all escape fiction. Theme exists when:

The author has attempted to record life accurately or reveal some truth about it. Often this would be about human nature or the role of the universe/fate/God towards mankind.
The author has introduced some concept or theory of life which he/she uses as a unifying generalization and which the story illustrates.

It may be simply a revelation about human character or it may have to do with the nature of humans, their relationship to one another or the world around them.
Finding Theme

The theme of a story may be explicit or implicit.

It may be stated obviously somewhere in the story by one or more characters.

(ie: “Someone else’s money you do not care about – that is cheap. But the money you earn by your own labour – ah, that you make a big fuss over.”)

- A Rupee Earned
More often the theme is left **implicit** in that the story brings alive some segment of human existence so that the reader may **pull out, discover, and state** the generalization for himself or herself.

Though it’s not really implied by the story, you could interpret A Rupee Earned as stating:

“**Young people are lazy**”
There is no set method for determining theme. Sometimes we may discover theme by examining the way the main character has changed, or by what he/she has learned, or by examining the nature of the central conflict.
A rich story may give us several complex insights into life, but in stating a theme in a sentence, we must pick the central insight or the one that gives the story its unity.
The words “Moral” and “Theme” are not interchangeable in regard to the short story.

Occasionally the theme of a story may be expressed as a moral principle, but usually the idea of a “moral” is too narrow to fit a good story.
The term “theme” is preferable for several reasons:

1. The story’s objective is to provide enjoyment, rather than preach a sermon.

(Christian Fiction)
2. In looking for “theme,” one does not look for the “lesson.”

3. The purpose of interpretive fiction is to give us a greater awareness of life, not to brainwash us with a set of moral rules or codes.

(1700’s & 1800’s Children’s Literature)
In determining the theme of a story, one should ask: “What does the story reveal?” rather than “What does the story teach?”
The theme of a story may be the revelation of something old or new. It may bring us some insight into life that we have not had before, or it may make us feel again some truth of which we were vaguely aware or only intellectually aware.

A story may give new insights or refresh and extend old ones.
Theme in Escape and Interpretive Literature

The themes of escape or commercial stories are usually widely accepted platitudes which confirm the reader’s prejudices, endorse the reader’s opinions, justify their feelings, and satisfy the reader’s wishes.
Interpretive fiction questions and often challenges those beliefs, and rather than presenting pretty little sentiments, it often provides rather sombre truths.
A reader need not accept the theme of a story or film if it is contrary to one’s own deepest beliefs.

However, one should recognize it as worthwhile in that it is someone’s view and worthy of consideration... or at least attention.

Perhaps it will do nothing towards convincing you, but even its opposite effect of reinforcing your opposing belief is a worthwhile experience.
Principles in Stating Theme

A theme must be expressed in the form of a statement.

Single words like “jealousy” and “ambition” are not adequate statements of theme, but only thematic ideas... even though the theme may involve those ideas.
Theme must be stated as a generalization about life.

The characters in the story are not mentioned by name.
Ie: (From Lord of the Rings)

“Lust for power corrupts Boromir” = Bad

“__________” = Good
The generalization about life must not be larger than is justified by the story.

Words like every, all, always should be avoided in favour of words such as some, sometimes, man, etc.
Theme is the central or unifying concept of the story.

Therefore, it must account for all major details, it must not be contradicted, and it must not rely on “supposed” facts.
There is more than one way of stating the theme of a story.

Several valid expressions or variants of theme are usually possible for any story.

What’s another theme that would work for “A Rupee Earned?”...

Think about the mother’s actions and motivations.
Theme should not be reduced to a cliché or a trite familiar saying.

When every new experience is forced into an old formula, fresh perception is lost.

So... No:

“Haste makes waste” or “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket”
“Gentlemen, Your Verdict....”