

# **Breaking the Code**

# **Understanding Themes and**

# **Structure in Film and**

# **Literature**

**For English Courses Of All Levels**

**Original Concept and Material**

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## What is a Theme?

1. The **theme** expresses the writer's perspective on some aspect of the human experience.
2. This theme usually can be expressed effectively in one or two sentences.
3. It is meant to be true of people "outside" the story.
4. Typically, it is different from the moral of the story, in that it does not tell us what life should be but rather what life is (according to the writer).

**Following this definition the first three statements are not thematic for obvious reasons, whereas the fourth statement is thematic.**

1. The story was pretty good.
2. It's about how poor they are and the terrible things that happen to them.
3. Poverty
4. **Poverty destroys the life of the individual.**

This statement expresses a truth about life according to one writer.  
Possible moral: We should do something to help the needy.

## Which of the following are thematic statements and which are not?

1. War is glorious.
2. Fate is the determining factor in human life.
3. The main character in *Weep Not, Child* learned many important lessons in the novel.
4. Romeo and Juliet's deaths are tragic.
5. *E.T.* is about a space alien who comes to earth and discovers the love of a little boy.
6. *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* all tell us that a woman is not complete until a man finds and saves her from the possibility of growing up alone and unloved (i.e. becoming a witch or wicked stepmother).
7. *The Wizard of Oz* tells us that within each of us is found the answers to life's most difficult questions. It may also tell us that there is no god, which is fine because we don't need him anyway. (Maybe that's why some religious groups in America have asked that it be taken out of school libraries.)
8. It's about this lion that runs away and gets into trouble after his dad dies because he feels guilty about the death.
9. Romantic love is nearly always painful in the end. The changes the main character goes through are very powerful. I could certainly relate.

### **Why are themes important?**

Themes are very important because they transmit values (see attached list of values) and ideas about life sometimes without our being aware of it. In fact, the mark of a clever author is the degree to which he can make us accept a set of values without our noticing or challenging it. (ex. Most Disney productions.)

### **This is how it works**

Each person in her mind builds up a view of the way the world is. That view is partially based on reality, but it is more composed of bits and pieces that are built up by exposure to many, many stories, statements and images that a person hears and sees in the course of life. Eventually we stop questioning the total construction of this view, (my country is the greatest) even if there is a great deal of evidence to the contrary (poverty, violent crime, corruption, racism, sexism). We simply accept it as reality. At that time we are no longer thinking persons, but simply prisoners of the stories, statements and images we've heard and seen. Believe it or not, we may start to adjust our behavior to make these stories come true (anyone who suffers has only herself to blame).

This is why in most countries it has sometimes been against the law for an author or film maker to show themes which are not acceptable to the government or to powerful interests of the country (usually business), particularly if the theme is very persuasively presented. Movies and television provide important examples of this process and have been rigorously controlled at various times. Today, this limiting function (censorship) is furthered by the enormous costs involved in entertainment and the need to create scripts that will be acceptable both to television advertisers who need an undisturbed, passive public to sell their products to, as well as by the audience of teenagers who provide the bulk of the ticket buying public. Sometimes the effect of the limits placed on literature and film by these interests, (political, religious, commercial,) often simply means most of the public will have cheese pizza minds. Comic book brains. Soft and mushy. Easy to sell stuff to. Easy to convince.

### **Consider**

Why are minorities, women, certain religious groups, as well as, many other interest groups so concerned about how they are portrayed in film, television, and print? After all, they're just stories; nobody believes they're real. (How do you explain all the recent controversy about *The DaVinci Code*, Mel Gibson's *The Passion*?)

## Quick Way To Find A theme

Just ask yourself three important questions.

### 1. The main character is part of what group or groups?

Here you might consider some or all of the following: Gender, Age, Race, Ethnicity/Nationality, Religion, Social/Economic position, Work, Time Period. When you have figured out what group or groups he or she belongs to then make a statement about the protagonist as though it were true of everyone in that particular situation.

**Example:** The main character is a kind hearted, but troubled boy taken in by a well-intentioned rich caring family who hopes to rescue him from his poor alcoholic mother and hardened older brother.

Possible Theme: All teens are basically good and will make the right choices if they are given the love and financial security they need.

*The OC* (The Outcast?)

Similar themes can be found in nearly all shows featuring teenagers in America (*Life As We Know It*, *One Tree Hill* are just recent manifestations of this sentimental theme.)

There is often another theme in these pieces that says something like: The abused and unloved child possesses a certain wisdom that rich spoiled teens can never hope to understand.

**Example:** The main character is a scientifically minded and trained, extremely intelligent and rational, force of moral justice and righteousness.

Possible Theme: Science and technology when combined with the appropriate moral agent can solve many if not all of our most perplexing and troubling problems.

*CSI* (All three of them), *24*, *Medical Investigation*, *Yes*, and even, *House*

**Example:** The main character is a young, beautiful woman who wants a man to love her.

Possible Theme: Every woman wants and needs a man to complete her life.

One can find this theme in practically any romance made or written in America.

An important variation of this theme:

The main character is an insensitive, ignorant, self-obsessed male who is concerned for nothing but his needs and the immediate gratification of them, until the love and wisdom of a good woman makes him realize what is missing from his life.

Theme: Every man secretly wants and desperately needs the love and moral guidance of a good woman.

## **Consider**

What is the effect on a young woman planning to go into the business or professional world when she has seen literally hundreds of movies and television programs, or read many books which all show that the prime goal of a woman is to make a man love her or attract a man to her with her beauty?

### **2. The opponent is part of what group or groups? (See list above)**

Make a statement about the antagonist as though it were true of all of those kinds of people.

### **3. The setting is part of what kind of area?**

If the setting seems relevant to the ideas in the story make a general statement about the setting and what can occur there.

For example: War is glorious or War is unjust.

The future: Technology will save us, will destroy us.

The Forest, or Old House or Dark Cave: Much of what we do, think, and feel is determined by our unconscious passions, drives or fears.

The Inner City, or Barrio, or Projects: We are products (victims?) of our environment, our prejudices, of social injustice.

## **Remember:**

Themes are not necessarily true just because they are themes of the stories we read or see. In fact, many themes are not true, but we like them and believe them anyway because we want to believe them or we have been conditioned to believe them.

## **A Note on Short Stories**

Don't be disappointed if using this method with short stories in assigned textbooks keeps uncovering the same kinds of themes. You will find that this method works better for longer works and works created for adults. Also, short stories often are more like poetry in that they are designed to simply create a mood. Stories like this are in high school textbooks because they are short and thus easy to assign for a night or discuss in an hour. Moreover, they have been censored to eliminate themes that might upset somebody. This doesn't leave much of great seriousness or importance.

## **Five Checkpoints to Determine Theme of a of Film or a Long Work of Fiction**

These checkpoints may not automatically determine theme but they should help to establish a pattern for the main idea of the story.

### **1. Goal of the main character**

**Physical Goal:** The person, thing or situation that the main character desires. The physical goal is determined by the abstract (unseen) goal. Often the character will not choose his goal or even be aware that he or she is heading toward a goal. Examples of physical goals are the boy or girl, money, children, the win, the job, the career (actor, rock star, doctor, surfer, writer, sports star) the treasure, the dream house, the horse, the red sports car, or any other number of objects, a place (America, California, the home of my youth, my ancestors, the mountain peak, the border)

**Abstract Goal:** The unseen, usually unknown reason behind the physical goal.

Some examples of abstract goals are power, love, recognition, confidence, revenge, loyalty, freedom, authenticity (I gotta be real), affirmation (I gotta know you respect and admire who I am).

Here's what I mean:

Physical Goal: to kill the king

Abstract Goal

Power - he has always felt small and unimportant

Love - he does this to impress the woman he loves

Recognition - he wants the public to notice him

Confidence - he wants to impress himself

Revenge - the king may have harmed his family

Loyalty - to the revolution

Freedom - he wants to free himself from the tyrant's unjust rule

Authenticity - to prove to himself that he is capable of committing an act outside the normal conventions of approved behavior

Affirmation - to gain the approval of his father and fellow rebels

### **2. Obstacle of the main character**

**Physical Obstacle:** a physical obstacle like a physical goal is concrete and can usually be seen. Some examples of physical obstacles are the police, the army, the enemy, the boy, the girl, the parents, the teacher, the coach, the preacher, the scientist, the grandfather, the boss, the other, the broken machine, the stubborn horse, the little sister, the mountain, the cold, the heat, the ocean, the storm, the disease, etc.

**Abstract Obstacle:** an Abstract Obstacle like the Abstract Goal cannot be seen but is usually the group, idea or issue in society that the Physical Obstacle represents. Some examples of Abstract Obstacles are the government, society in general, or a segment of

society (the rich, the poor, men, women, minorities, majorities,) racism or discrimination of any kind, poverty, lack of education or ignorance, evil, insanity, depression, nature, god, fate, or religion.

### **3. Turning Point and/or Climax**

**Discovery:** The discovery is that point in the story when the main character discovers something important about his goal (racism is all wrong, how could I have been so ignorant?) This discovery may also show the theme. The discovery may be expressed in a speech at the turning point or at the end of the novel when the conflict reaches its climax and is resolved.

**Reversal:** Sometimes as a result of this important discovery the main character will change his or her goal.

### **4. "Last Words"**

This is the author's last chance to get the point across. These words are usually stated toward the end of the story but not always in the last lines of the story. In a long book you may find the last statement of theme in the chapter before the last. The last word takes the form of a direct statement of theme or a symbol that stands for theme.

**Direct Statement:** "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." *The Great Gatsby*

A Symbol may come in the form of an action: a bird flying across the sky (*Wonderful Fool*) or a reference to a symbol previously seen in the novel or film (at the end of *The Scarlet Letter* Hester Prynne puts the scarlet letter back on.)

### **5. Title**

This is the least reliable checkpoint because often to attract attention books or films will have flashy titles that have very little to do with the themes of the story. There are three types of title. A title can fall into more than one category.

#### **1. Symbol**

*Lord of the Flies*

Possible Theme: Mankind is savage.

*The Scarlet Letter*

Possible Theme: Mankind's moral and religious convictions are cruel and unethical.

*Catcher in the Rye*

Possible Themes: Remaining in childhood will cause pain. Adults are phony.

*To Kill a Mockingbird*

Possible Theme: Racism harms innocent African-Americans.

#### **2. Main Character Who Stands for Theme**

*Romeo and Juliet*

Possible Theme: Hate destroys all good things, including and especially love.

*Huckleberry Finn*

Possible Theme: Society is bad; uncorrupted human nature is good.

### 3. Direct Statement of the Theme - often a few words are left out

When European society occupies non-industrialized traditional African society, *Things Fall Apart*.

The Old South is *Gone With the Wind*.

*It's a Wonderful Life*

When you finally get your chance, *Stand and Deliver*.

Children are *The Outsiders*.

### Principles of Structure

These techniques or principles of structure are common to all forms of art (music, painting, sculpture, architecture, literature). The writer may use them consciously or unconsciously. One purpose of using these devices is to present and emphasize the theme clearly to the reader/viewer. These techniques focus the attention of the reader where the artist most wants it.

#### Progression

Change in intensity or severity of an element (see list of elements)

#### Contrast

One element is placed in direct opposition to another for emphasis. The farther apart two things are the more recognition there is.

#### Repetition

The same element is repeated over and over with minor variations to hide the repetition.

#### Parallelism

Parallel relationships exist within certain elements that can run in identical or opposite directions (Parallelism is in some ways like repetition. The difference is that the parallel pattern, unlike the repeated pattern, usually runs throughout the story. *Hamlet* and *King Lear* come to mind.)

### Elements of Literature

Plot, Character, Setting, Point of View, Tone, Language

#### Plot

The plot is simply a sequence of events ordered in some logical way. The typical structure of a plot follows this pattern. A basic situation is introduced by a technique called **Exposition**. These expository passages introduce the setting, characters, and usually, the major conflict of the story. Although most exposition happens at the beginning of a story, exposition can occur at any time throughout the story. The **Conflict** of the story can be either **external** or **internal**. External conflicts most often are between two physical or visible forces. They are between two people, or between one person and the group (society), one person and the sea, desert, storm, or disease (nature) or between one person and God, or many Gods, or some mysterious force in the universe called fate or personal destiny. An internal conflict, on the other hand, cannot be seen. Here the central character is torn between two or more choices, for example, between desire and responsibility, or between romantic love and family tradition. At some point in the story the conflict, whether external or internal, reaches a crisis point called the **Climax**. At the



climax of the story the conflict usually comes to an end. At the end of the plot some stories provide an explanation of some lingering unanswered questions. This point in the plot, if it's there, is called the **Denouement**, or if you prefer, the **Resolution**.

### **Character**

A character is an individual in the story or play. They can be **static** which means they don't change much throughout the story, or they can be **dynamic**, which, of course, means that they change a great deal throughout the story. In fact, the story usually gets its meaning from the changes the dynamic characters experience. Characters can also be called **flat** or **round**. The flat character is one dimensional. They have only one or two personality traits, whereas, the round character is more fully developed to act and respond like a real person. Typically, an author develops a character in one or more of the following ways: action, speech, physical description, thoughts, the opinions of other characters.

### **Setting**

The time and place of the story. The setting may change in a larger work.

**Tone** (see sheet on tone)

### **Point of View**

The perspective from which the author tells the story. There are three main points of view: **Omniscient**, the narrator, who is not a character in the story, tells the story and knows everything about all her characters; **First Person**, the story is told by one character within the story; **Limited Third Person**, the narrator, who is not in the story, tells the story, but from the point of view of one or two of its characters. There is also a technique called **Stream of Consciousness** in which the author attempts to recreate the inner thoughts, emotions, and memories of the main character, directly, as they occur, without interruption or commentary.

### **Language**

There are many different ways to use language. Here are only a few that we'll place in this category.

**Imagery**: Language that appeals to the senses. There are three types of imagery I'd like you to look for.

**Visual Imagery**: This is the most effective and expressive imagery. There are many things to consider if you are creating visual imagery. You must think about color, line, shape, size, etc.

**Sonic Imagery**: This is imagery produced by sounds and tone, not words. This is important in movies and plays because it can produce emotion.

**Literary Imagery**: Obviously this is imagery that is used in literature. Authors draw on their own private associations, as well as, common associations shared by most of us, and put them together as images in their work. This calls to mind similar associations in the reader. Often this is most effective with people from the same society and time period, however, many things are common to all of us. Some examples of images and their

associations: sunrises with new beginnings, mother and child with pure love and innocence, policemen and politicians with authority and power, expensive clothes and cars with power and wealth, young, beautiful girls and boys with youth, freedom, happiness and health. There are so many powerful images in literature and cinema, not to mention, advertising. Can you think of other images and what associations we might have with them? Glasses, ties, tattoos, needles, meat, the forest, a cave, the sea, a castle, a cross, etc. Often an image will lose its effectiveness if it is overused.

**Metaphor/Simile:** A comparison, sometimes direct, sometimes implied, of two seemingly unlike things. Similes use the words like or as to draw the comparison. An **Extended Metaphor** is a comparison that is drawn out over several lines of writing.

**Connotative Word:** These are words that have strong associations. Examples: God, Beverly Hills, Christmas, BMW, etc. Can you think of others?

**Symbol:** Objects that represent or recall a greater thing.

White House - government, power

Statue of Liberty - freedom

National Flags - patriotism

Cross, Star, Crescent-moon

### Some Final Bits and Pieces

The following chart is meant to help you be certain that you have explored all possible areas of interest regarding the principles and elements of literature.

	Plot	Character	Setting	Tone	Symbol	Pt. of View
Parallelism						
Repetition						
Contrast						
Progression						

### Tone

Tone is the author's attitude toward his subject. Tone is **not** a character's attitude or reaction to a situation or event.

Explanatory

Unbiased

Analytical

Ironic

Apathetic

Dogmatic

Argumentative

Impatient

Enthusiastic

Humorous

Sincere

Patronizing

Cynical

Sarcastic

Objective

Pedantic

Apologetic

Satirical

Indifferent

Derogatory

Indignant

Whimsical

Scholarly

Demanding

Authoritative

Mocking

Sadistic

Moral

Didactic

Defensive

Tragic

## Values

Values arise out of ideas (themes) about how the society is, or should be. While these ideas or values may not be true or even worthwhile in our eyes, they nevertheless constitute what the society considers to be of worth. Of course personal values may differ from the values held generally by the society. Values are nearly always abstractions.

Honesty	Freedom
Marriage	Compassion
Fidelity	Frugality
Ambition	Courtesy
Inquiry	Sex
Obedient	Security
Kindness	Power/authority
Strength	Humility
Conformity	Courage/bravery
Aggression	Order
Truthfulness	Purity
Love	Sincerity
Intelligence	Glory
Maturity	Popularity
Individualism	Reliability
Chastity	
Persistence	
Open-mindedness	
Wealth	

## **Book Interviews**

A typical book interview lasts between 10 and 15 minutes. Generally, we will proceed in the order of the items listed below.

1. What is the novel about? (Stay away from specific references to plot.)
2. Using the **Quick Way In**, tell me something about the main character, his or her principal opponent and the novel's setting. (Discuss the setting only if you believe it is relevant to your novel's themes.)
3. Take me through the **Five Checkpoints** (Keep your statements as brief and on point as you can.)
4. Point out what **Principles of Structure** you see operating in the novel. (Three examples should be enough here.)
5. What is the tone of your novel? (Be sure you use one or more adjectives here.)
6. What is the theme of your novel? (Be sure your statement of theme is a complete sentence.)