

Theme vs. Thematic Statements

English 10 Honors

Theme is defined as the overall message an author conveys about human nature/experience. Themes are UNIVERSAL, there are several in a single story, and they defy different genres. Hence, many different pieces of literature, music, poetry, movies, etc... may share the same theme. Themes are more abstract and apply to everyone; they are bigger than simply the characters in the literary work you are analyzing.

Oftentimes, you will see themes listed as **abstract nouns** (e.g. family, friendship, love, suffering, etc...). When you reference a study guide from a source such as Shmoop or Spark Notes, themes are listed as topics (abstract nouns): love, friendship, loyalty, etc... Theme topics are incomplete as they are not yet **thematic statements**. A thematic statement reflects the message or insight about human nature regarding that topic; it transcends time and setting. It is the understanding the reader comes away with after reading and examining the text. It is almost never directly stated but implied.

For the purposes of **literary analysis** and **writing** in this course, when we discuss the “themes” of a particular novel, we will all be under the assumption that this means a thematic statement. What do I mean by that? If you tell me that one of the themes of *The Book Thief* is intolerance, I will ask you what about intolerance? What message is the author, Marcus Zusak, sending the reader about intolerance? (There are many, many ways you can answer this question.) It’s simply an opinion (your opinion) about a theme topic. Ask yourself what the literary work is saying about a particular topic/subject and give an **opinion**. For example, in *Lion King*, a possible theme topic is *responsibility*; however, this is not a thematic statement. In other words, it is not a statement about the human experience, yet. Think about the message the movie is depicting through its characters, setting and conflicts, and you may get something like this: *Living up to responsibility is instrumental to the honor and survival of family*. Because this is a universal theme now, you can apply it to other movies or literary works of varying genres and times as well.

The beauty of themes is that you can take one from one story and apply it to another—many others in fact. This is why themes are never specific or detailed and do not contain character names, titles or authors - - this makes them UNIVERSAL. Themes reflect all aspects of the human experience, which is why the theme of a story, movie or song can depict positive and/or negative messages about the human experience.

Note: Stay away from sappy or saccharine statements (i.e. "Love is blind") and moral lessons ("The early bird gets the worm"). These are not opinions but prodigious generalizations. Let's leave these talents to Hallmark and old folks.

How to Search for Theme

- 1) Think about the main character (protagonist) and his conflicts, struggles, lessons, etc... How has he changed from the beginning of the book?
- 2) Look for actual statements of theme at the end of the book (A rare occurrence, but it does happen occasionally)
- 3) Examine the title for clues
- 4) Consider the various conflicts

Example #1

Movie: *Super Bad*

Summary: A story about two best friends, Seth and Evan, who try to juggle trying to make their senior year a memorable one, while having to deal with the pressure of going their separate ways once they graduate.

Possible Themes:

- 1) The painful experience of **change** is instrumental to maturity.
- 2) **Peer pressure** is a necessary experience in the process of making responsible choices.
- 3) Strong bonds of **friendship** are precursors to painful realizations about life and oneself.

Example #2

Movie: *Pretty in Pink*

Summary: Andy, a high achieving, poor high school student must prove herself worthy amongst her wealthy and privileged peers.

Possible Themes:

- 1) The painful experience of **change** is instrumental to maturity.
- 2) **Peer pressure** is a necessary experience in the process of making responsible choices.
- 3) Strong bonds of **friendship** are precursors to painful realizations about life and oneself.

Note: Notice that the above themes for *Pretty in Pink* are the same as the themes for *Super Bad*. There are several more possible themes for both movies that reflect the human experience.

Your assignment:

With a partner or group (no more than 4 people in a group), choose 3 movies. Using the format above, list the movie title, a short summary and three possible themes.