

THEME**NCTE/IRA Standards:**

Objective: Understand the literary element of theme; identify theme in movies and other literary forms

Procedure: Display and distribute the Student Resource Pages of the module one at a time. The Student Resource Pages include:

- An overview of Theme
- A list of common themes
- Examples of themes from *Bandslam* and other movies
- Keys to creating movie themes

Allow the students a few minutes to skim each component before reading the text aloud. Reading the text aloud increases the likelihood that all students will be able to understand and participate. Pause appropriately to explain concepts contained in the instructional text, especially concepts that may be unfamiliar. Solicit comments from the students and ask questions to promote their thinking or evaluate their understanding. Elaborate on the instructional text according to the needs of the class.

Mention to the students that “big” films, the ones that are expected to do well in a theater, have universal themes that will appeal to many people. The themes are obvious and easy to understand. Movies that are intended for smaller audiences have more subtle themes that might depend on special knowledge or interest.

Introductory Activity: As a group, ask students to think of some familiar movies. Ask them to identify the major themes in the movies. They can use the themes on the list or introduce new theme. Discuss with the students what makes these themes “universal” and would be understood by a lot of people. If the students seem to understand the theme concept well, expand the discussion and ask them to identify minor themes in some of the movies.

Arrange students in small groups of 3 or 4. Have each group choose five movies. Ask the groups to identify two or more important themes in the movies. One person in the group should be responsible for writing the theme descriptions. Give each group an opportunity to name their movies and share their themes with the class.

Extended Activity: As a whole class or small groups, have the students identify the themes for movies members of the group developed for other units like TREATMENT or PLOT. As an alternative, the students can think of one or more new movie ideas. Ask the groups to think of at least two events in each movie that would support the theme.

Internet Search Suggestion: Have the students search for information about the themes of movies they enjoy and add them to their worksheets.

Theme

Almost all movies have *themes*. A theme is an underlying or central idea that people anywhere can understand. It is the “big idea” in the movie, sometimes called a universal theme. A movie will have one or more major themes and several minor themes.

The theme is not the same as the plot or story line of a movie. A theme is a general idea that the movie represents. The most common theme is good versus evil. This is probably the oldest human theme for stories told in any way, including movies. Some other common themes are overcoming great difficulties or the importance of friendship. The next section has a list of some other themes. The section after that lists some movies and two of their major themes. All of the movies have other themes.

The major theme does not explain the whole story, and the story never explains all aspects of the theme. The movie will get the audience members thinking about the themes in their own ways.

The screenwriter must communicate the themes to the audience in a way that is understandable, enjoyable, and moving. The best movies stir emotions associated with the themes. That is because themes are about ideas that are important to all people, like love, friendship, and overcoming evil.

Understanding themes usually depends on the experiences of the audience members. Not all people have the same experiences. That is why it is so important to choose themes that can be understood and felt by all people. The theme has to be portrayed by the action of the movie and the words of the characters.

Screenwriters don't spend much time thinking about major themes. When a screenwriter comes up with a great idea, the theme becomes easy to understand. When they write the movie, screenwriters might play with minor themes. These are stories within a story and make a movie enjoyable. The screenwriter knows that the major themes will be obvious to the audience, but the minor themes add depth to a movie.

Keys to Creating Themes in a Screenplay

- Major themes will become clear as you *develop* the idea for the screenplay. Don't focus on the themes, just try to create a strong screenplay.
- Minor themes will become clear as you *write* the screenplay.
- Keep in mind that themes reflect feelings as well as actions. Be sure the events and characters in the story have feelings that are consistent with the themes.
- Make a list of the major and minor themes in the screenplay. Periodically as you write, review the list to be sure your story is consistent with the themes.
- Not every event in the story has to reflect the major themes.
- The major themes should be supported by events throughout the story.
- Minor themes should be supported by events less often than major themes.
- Remember that movies show better than they tell. Be sure that the themes are supported by actions as well as the characters' words.
- The major themes should be introduced in Act I of the screenplay. The minor themes can be introduced in Act I or early in Act II.
- Include the major themes in the climax of the movie.

Common Themes

A great mystery
A journey toward self-understanding
Abuse of power
Accepting responsibility
Bringing about justice
Coming of age
Death and renewal
Different aspects of love (marriage, romance, friendship, altruism, love of country, admiration, possessiveness, dependency, self-love, unrequited love, spiritual love, family, infatuation, jealousy)
Falling from grace
Family relationships
Fear of failure
Feeling lost and hopeless
Great fear or horror
How the past controls lives
Individuals versus social institutions
Loss of innocence
Love overcoming difficulties
Making choices
Overcoming great odds
Peer pressure, both good and bad
Seeking freedom
Seeking peace
Seizing the day
Surviving against great odds
Taking action or doing nothing
Taking revenge
The advantages and disadvantages of heritage
The artist and society
The big trick
The effect of hate
The future
The great journey or quest
The heroic figure
The importance of friendship
The importance of honesty
The importance of loyalty
The importance of perseverance
The individual's role in society, including expectations, responsibilities, and obligations
The negative effects of prejudice
The noble sacrifice
The price of progress
The relationship between people and the natural world
The results of greed
The search for immortality
The struggle between good and evil
The tragic effects of excess pride
The triumph of friendship
The triumph of justice

Themes in *Bandslam*

Listed below are a few of the themes in *Bandslam*. There are other themes in the film.

Major theme: Will is struggling to overcome an event in his background. Changing schools is an opportunity for him to be reborn, which is the “death and renewal” theme. The vehicle for his rebirth is the band he helped bring together, “I Can’t Go On, I’ll Go On.”

Major Theme: The struggle between good and evil is represented by the competition between the two bands from the high school. This theme is also reflected in the conflict between Will and his band, who are outsiders in the school, and the in group, symbolized by the Glory Dogs. Although Ben and the Glory Dogs are not overtly evil, they stand for the repression that is present in so many organizations.

Minor Theme: Will and Sam are both making a journey toward self-understanding in the script. They come of age in a sense through their determination. Sam’s understanding of herself is more obvious because it is prompted by Will’s efforts to repair their friendship. Will’s self-understanding comes about subtly over time, but may be precipitated by Charlotte.

Minor Theme: The importance of perseverance is a theme that runs throughout the movie. It is nowhere more obvious than in Will’s obsession with David Bowie. Perseverance is also represented by Karen’s willingness to take a new job and the band’s response to adversity at the *Bandslam* competition.

Major Themes of Other Movies

Ratatouille: The big trick; the triumph of friendship

The Incredible Hulk: The fall from grace, a journey toward self-understanding

Hairspray: The battle between good and evil; the importance of friendship

Enchanted: Love overcomes difficulties; the great journey or quest

Invincible: Overcoming great odds; feeling lost and hopeless

King Kong: The relationship between people and the natural world; the noble sacrifice

Pride and Prejudice: Love overcomes difficulties; the individual’s role in society

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe: The battle between good and evil; death and renewal

Napoleon Dynamite: The individual’s role in society; the heroic figure

Bridge to Terabithia: Coming of age; the importance of friendship

