

THE ESSENCE OF THEME Or Is Your Screenplay Trying To Say Something?

By *Barry Pearson*

Back in the so-called Golden Days of the movie industry when moguls like Louis B. Mayer and Harry Cohn ruled the roost, "theme" was, well, kind of a dirty word.

When they thought about theme at all, those moguls-of-old often thought of it as being a moral lesson, a political platform, a "thou shalt" or "thou shalt not."

No wonder they snarled at their writers, "If you want to deliver a message, send a telegram, don't put it in your screenplay."

They said it, but the writers didn't always obey. They just got smarter about putting messages in.

Today, things are tougher for screenplay writers. Audiences have a lot more savvy than they did in the heyday of MGM or Columbia. Producers and stars are just as demanding as they ever were. And box-office cash is still king, so screenwriters have to deliver more entertainment per script.

But one thing hasn't changed. There is still an abiding hunger for something deeper in our movies. Something thematic.

Is this a good thing?

Yes and no.

Yes, because most writers have a yen to dig down to deeper understandings. To deliver ideas that constitute food for the soul. To enlighten. To inspire.

No, because the idea of "theme" has the capacity to provoke writers into a downright irked and peevish mood.

Witness this correspondence sent to me from such a writer:

"Is THEME foremost in the scriptwriter's mind when he embarks on a new screenplay? Does he sit down and think "I must write a screenplay examining how, in the face of adversity, hope and courage will always win through" or does he just think, "I've got a great idea for a war movie!"

Screenwriting books I have read always ask the question "What is your movie trying to say?" The trouble is, I have no idea what any of my script ideas are trying to say, I just think they'd make good movies."

Well, that's one writer's frustration.

What about you?

Is your screenplay trying to say something?

I'd give my old Pentium 1 for a ten-minute standup from Robin Williams on that theme!

But, hold on. That's a legitimate question, isn't it?

No. Because it's not the *screenplay* that needs to have something to say, it's you.

The writer.

Does that mean you have to hew to some "controlling idea" like, *In the face of adversity, hope and courage will always win through?*

Not necessarily. First of all, the idea above, expressed simplistically and abstractly, rings hollow. If you're a complex human being like most writers, you deal in complex, specific ideas-and you're likely to have a truckload of them. Asking you, "What's the theme of the movie you're writing?" which is like asking, "What color is the rainbow?" or "What's the taste of this wine?"

Your movie can have many themes. Sometimes one idea will be dominant, but isn't it liberating to realize that we are not bound to try to deliver *one* thematic idea?

When writers write, they undergo a process. Mental, emotional, practical, tactical, physical, spatial, sensory, and creative.

I believe that theme may be the most significant single aspect of our process of creating a screenplay.

Why?

Because theme is our opportunity to dramatize our deepest beliefs and our deepest understandings about human beings and their lives.

And it's these deep beliefs and understandings that strike a chord with audiences.

Put more simply, **theme is our sincere belief about what is the best way to live in the world.**

Let's see how this works in one of my favorite movies-*Witness*, which was written by William Kelley, Earl Wallace, and Pamela Wallace, and collected a shelf full of Academy Awards.

At the beginning of the movie John Book (Harrison Ford) is a human being who is "dead" inside. He has no larger community, only one family member, and one friend. But he grows to care so deeply for Rachel (Kelly McGillis) and her son that he risks his life to save them. By the end of the movie, his connection with the Amish community, and with Rachel and her son, have changed him deeply. We get the feeling that he has found the wisdom and understanding to live his own life better than he did before.

That's dramatization of theme.

Question: What belief about "the best way to live in the world" are the writers expressing?

Well, we can never know for sure, but you can put it in words for yourself. It comes out something like, "*The best way to live life is to belong to a family and community and to care for them and let them care for you.*"

You can go through the film and find many examples of this theme being expressed through the action. For example, it's dramatized in other parts of the movie like the barn building scene. This is the longest scene in the film (in almost *any* film), and it's textured beautifully by the director, Peter Weir.

We see the fun the community is having. We see the satisfaction that John Book derives from working at a common task with other members of his temporarily adopted community, and we see the happiness of the young newlyweds at the end of the scene as they benefit from the collective effort of their neighbors.

These scenes demonstrate how dramatization can effectively deliver thematic ideas in movies. Sometimes, though, a character can become an advocate for thematic ideas.

Jan Rubes plays the Elder, Eli. In one powerful eloquent scene he expresses the tenets of non-violence through dialogue. It's a memorable moment.

But the power of theme is best served through dramatic action and images. To illustrate, see how one of the layers of theme in *Witness* plays out in action.

The theme: *The strength of a loving, caring community promotes individual happiness and can defeat individual evil.*

In the film, the urban world of violent human beings intersects with the rural, Amish world of non-violent human beings.

The final sequence in the film is a powerful dramatic proof of the strength of the community to defeat individual evil.

John Book eliminates two of his pursuers by using violence, but he fails to conquer the main villain, Schaeffer, who forces John Book to drop his weapon by taking Rachel hostage.

Book puts down his weapon, but when we fear that Schaeffer will kill him, or will escape, the Amish neighbors arrive in answer to the bell that Rachel's son has been ringing. The neighbors become a throng of witnesses to the scene, thus forcing Schaeffer to surrender.

Other films deal with different themes. One of my favorites is *My Best Friend's Wedding* in which the writers cleverly develop and express the following theme:

The way to be happiest in life is to take the risk of making a commitment to a loved one, even though he or she may be imperfect.

In a karaoke bar, Jules (Julia Roberts) manipulates Kim (Cameron Diaz) into singing in order to humiliate her in front of Michael, Kim's fiancé (and Jules' "best friend").

Reluctantly, Kim starts to sing. She is *atrocious!* But Michael doesn't care. He's committed to her, he loves her, and when she sees this, she gets so spunky and so game that she sings with energy and feeling in spite of her terrible voice; consequently, all the patrons begin to root for her and applaud, turning her potential disaster into a triumph.

Probably the most highly acclaimed movie classic is the Orson Wells masterpiece, *Citizen Kane*. My wording of a central theme in the movie is that *caring more for material things than for other people will destroy your happiness and make your life meaningless.*

Wells was able to express this theme so eloquently that film buffs analyze the specifics of the scene even today, sixty years after the film was released.

At the end of the movie, Kane lies dying in his opulent mansion, friendless, unloved and alone. As he dies, a snow-scene paperweight falls from his hand and he whispers the name, "Rosebud," the name of his childhood toy, a boy's sled.

In spite of his acquisitions, true happiness, human company, and love have eluded him, and all he has left is the memory of a boyhood material possession, long since consigned to the flames.

Your themes are your expressions of how best to live in the world.

At their worst, themes deliver opinions about what's good and what's bad. At their best they produce fresh insights and demonstrate deeply held beliefs about right living.

And it isn't as if you can *avoid* expressing themes. You're a human being and because of the way the human mind works you cannot help but express themes in your story.

It's a natural human function, and you will do it in spite of yourself.

But you will do it with greater clarity, depth and power if you consciously strive to create and develop thematic ideas throughout your work.

As you can see from the examples above, the writers of *Witness* expressed their themes with exquisite clarity, drama, and richness.

Oftentimes, theme will be intrinsic in the action you invent. Then it's up to you to ask yourself, "What beliefs am I expressing through the action of my characters and my story?"

From there on, you will find yourself in a process of developing your themes as part of developing the story and characters and action.

Working on your themes can be the most productive and rewarding part of the whole process, because it drives toward the ultimate goal of every writer-satisfying the audience.

Thematic inspiration creates vital responses in members of the audience. They experience deeper involvement in the story, greater empathy for the characters, and a more profound sense of the value that the story brings to themselves and their lives.

And when that happens, they come back to see your *next* movie.

What could be better?

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