

Thematic Values

What are They and How to Use Them when
Writing, Editing and Marketing your work

Michael Gillett

Shawn Coyne (editor / agent for over thirty years) wrote the Story Grid, a blueprint on how to write better stories based on his experiences as editor in the industry. Thematic values are referenced in the story grid as one of the steps you can use to refine your work.

Susan Forest, well know novelist, has studied Shawn Coyne's work and tried to show me the concepts around Thematic Values (which has helped me a TON).

With luck, she will add detail to any discussion that follows.

Thematic values are very interesting, as they can give the writer a good chance to explore the rise and fall of dramatic tension or emotion in a scene at the paragraph level, the scene level, the chapter level and the story level.

More importantly, perhaps, understanding your thematic values – and by implication your Theme, you can better describe the story to you audience.

A useful goal for a writer (when talking about your work) is to

Capture your Audience's Attention

This means

- Do not bore them, do not overwhelm them.
- Try and get them to ask for more before you volunteer excessive information.

The following is one of many ideas for what Theme is – and there are a few.

None of the various accepted definitions are wrong, but you ought to pick a good one and try and stick with it.

Theme can be considered the controlling idea of the story.

Every unit of story can be guided by this controlling idea/theme.

Crisis of character can revolve around this controlling idea/theme.

Before finding yourself stuck while in the middle of constructing or editing a story, it's often a good idea to conceptualize your story in a single controlling thought. Often, the sooner the better.

Note : There may be more than one of these controlling thoughts/ideas/themes in a novel.

A short story is often best served by limiting the story to a single theme, while a novel can support many themes.

One theme ought to be the driving message of the entire work, where supporting themes do just that, support the overall theme.

Thematic Values then : Exploring theme to give yourself options on plot and character development, and better control the emotional and plot cycles of the work.

Thematic Values may be external/setting driven, or may be internal, or character driven

my understanding of thematic values :

Thematic Value – Central idea (internal or external)

Thematic Contrary – What opposes the central idea

Thematic Contradiction - what the character might have to face to come to terms with the contrary (internal or external)

Worst Case – What cannot be accepted, and will drive change in a character or plot

Note – I believe Coyne uses Negation of Negation, but I find Worst Case more intuitive for me.

Examples :

external – character must navigate the arena of changing or foreign external influences

<u>Thematic Value</u>	<u>Thematic Contrary</u>	<u>Contradiction</u>	<u>Worst Case</u>
Acknowledged Ideology	Opposing ideology	Negotiation	Annihilation
Status Quo	Change of Status Quo	War	Annihilation
Stable Climate	Climate Change	Modified Society	Annihilation

internal – character driven values (morals/ethics/standards) that may change through various plot devices.

<u>Thematic Value</u>	<u>Thematic Contrary</u>	<u>Contradiction</u>	<u>Worst Case</u>
Saving	Destroying	Choices	Malice
Loyalty	Betrayal	Split Allegiance	Self Betrayal
Love	Hate	Indifference	Self Loathing

Start your story analysis with one of the most useful things you can own relating to your story.

The *logline* - A one line description you will give to your audience to sell your story. More often used in movie and television, the *logline* is also very useful in writing your novel.

To be clear

A *tagline* is used to attract attention.
a *logline* is used to describe the story.

A *tagline* is provocative.
A *logline* is descriptive.

If you can construct a *logline* for your story, and it works, then you have pegged the story in your own mind, and with that you know you've done some due diligence in making the story as sharply focused as it needs to be.

You can relate the story to your audience quickly and without confusing or boring them.

Note – a good logline implies you have some control of the Theme of your story.

Building a logline:

Who? Does/Experiences What? (Premise - proposes content)
to expose the Hidden Truth? (Theme - summarizes a hidden
truth)

I'll use the novel I'm current working on as an example, as Thematic Values are helping me a lot to focus the story, and reduce unneeded verbiage.

The Collection of Jacqueline Melrose : Redemption

I constructed two loglines using different plot and character points that focus on different thematic values.

Example of some taglines for the novel (something to attract attention)

- What if George R.R. Martin wrote Marry Poppins
- Killers are people too
- Just around the corner of Somewhere lies NoWhere

LOGLINES :

- Can a man relive the horrors of his past to save the soul of a stranger.
- A man must save the world, but kills everyone he loves to do it, and in retreating from these horrors becomes lost and presumably evil.

A Man relives horrors (premise : what the story is about)
Saving Others (theme : what the story is really about)

Becoming a Saviour (Thematic Value).
Becoming a Destroyer (Thematic Contrary).
Withdrawal (Thematic Contradiction)
Malevolence (worst case)

If your character is to become a Saviour (Thematic Value) –
what's the opposite ... a Destroyer (Thematic Contrary).

The character acts in ways leading them to potentially become
one or the other.

For example, the character may use Withdrawal (Thematic
Contradiction) from an unsavoury course of action that may
lead them astray... or not ...

The worst case scenario, the character become Malevolent –
the bottom of the emotional pit, not what they wanted at all.

The character must make a decision and act on it.

LOGLINES:

- What happens when sisters no longer believe in each other.
- A girl searches for her lost sister, discovers her sister has become monstrous, has to give up trying to save her and has to live with herself for doing it.

Sisters lost and frightened (premise : what the story is about)

Acceptance – Theme (what the story is really about)

Theme : Acceptance (against all odds)

Loving your sister (Thematic Value)

Fearing your sister (Thematic Contrary)

Distrusting your sister (contradiction)

Hating/Distrusting Yourself (worst case)

In the process of discovery, she learns to Fear her sister, and cannot live with herself with that knowledge.

Here are some more recognisable ideas to grasp...

Jurassic Park

Tagline *An adventure 65 million years in the making*

Logline *Can a family escape a remote island park teeming with genetically restored dinosaurs set loose by a power failure.*

A mother, father and two children all experience these thematic values :

Family Unity – Thematic value

- Take care of each other

Family Fragmented – Thematic Contrary

- Family torn apart and lost

Fight for Survival – Contradiction

- Find each other and protect each other

Family Dead – worst case

- What would you do to prevent that.

Jaws

Tagline: Don't go in the water.

Logline : When a killer shark unleashes terror on a beach community, the local sheriff, a marine biologist, and a navy vet risk their lives to hunt the beast down.

Protect the community - Thematic Value

- Protect others, even if you don't really know them

Abandon the community – Thematic Contrary

- Protect yourself first

Fight for the community – Contradiction

- Take action, even if it's against your better nature.

Die for the community and Monster survives – Worst Case

- The last thing you want to happen

OK –

Lets talk about it.

What are you working on?

Pick a theme from your work and from that derive Thematic Values your character can weather multiple times in the story.