Theme

Different people will tell you different things about theme. The truth is that even for professionals, this is a hard thing to define and to add to your writing. So, anything I share with you about theme may be directly disagreed with by other teachers and writers. Just know that I’m right because I am me, and I am great. End of discussion. Here’s what you need to know:

1. **Theme is everywhere**: If you look back on the guide to plot, you will see that the theme should cover everything in the story. The whole narrative arc is building toward a theme.

2. **Theme = Truth**: This is where people might disagree with me. Those people are wrong. Theme is the universal truth you, the writer, are trying to present in your writing. It does not have to be a lesson, a moral, or anything else so dramatic. It is a truth that you have noticed about the world that you would like other people to also notice.

3. **When your theme starts lecturing, you’ve done it wrong**: Your theme should not lecture you about the safety of crossing the road without looking. If you are suddenly writing things like, “And that’s when Judy learned that she should not ignore the left side of the road when crossing the street on her PowerWheels,” then you are DOING IT WRONG. That is lame and boring and sort of like those old after school specials from the 80s. Those went away for a reason. BO-ORING.

4. **Sometimes a character can hint to it**: One reason I like Gandalf so much (aside from the fact that he is a wizard, is super cool, and can kill old and dangerous demons lurking in the dark places of the world) is that he is always given the best lines. He’s never trying to teach the other characters openly (he’s way too smart for that), he just says wise stuff pretty much all the time. As you watch LOTR (this is how really nerdy people like myself write Lord of the Rings), you realize that he is always saying the theme. Always. He says the theme like a blatant fact, inarguable. It just is. No lessons, no nagging. That’s just the way it is. Characters can do that, but only really cool ones like Gandalf.

5. **It needs to be kinda complicated, but not like indecipherable**: Your theme should be more than just *Friends are great*. That theme is lame. No one cares. Make your theme interesting and complicated, but not so complicated that everyone thinks you are insane when they read your work. An easy way to do this is to take to conflicting ideas and explore them in your writing. Here’s an example: Individual rights vs. the collective good, OR Justice for ALL vs. justice for the majority, OR Popular bullies vs. Doing the right thing and be looked at as lame.

You get it. Theme is important. It is interesting and makes the people who read your work actually think a little, which can be painful for some. Thinking is important. Without teachers who force you to think, you’d still be acting like a seven year-old, and nobody wants that. Trust me.