



What is the Theme of the Movie – Resource

Beginning with the early part of the 20th century, we will go through the different decades into the 21st century, and we will briefly discuss the history of American society, in general, and how themes and, ultimately, movies changed during the century. This discussion will enable you to better understand how the actual construction of a movie changes in order to gain acceptance by the public. Let's take a quick run through the decades with Jack and Suzie to see how they and their stories changed as history and society changed.

The 1920's

The 1920s, before the Great Depression, was a period of great prosperity, where society changed quicker than people could keep up. However, it was also a period of rigid class structure, the fear of Communism, and attempts to limit the power of the unions. The period also gave society Prohibition, flappers, parties, and gangsters.

What type of theme would emerge from this decade? Even though there is a certain segment of society who wants to see the real society of the period, people usually do not want to be reminded of the ills of society, and they want to escape them. But, the question is, "How large a segment of the population wants to go to see escapist fare, to forget the reality of the world for a few brief hours?" The producer may attempt this type of theme in the belief that it would attract more people.

Like many times throughout history, producers have to take a risk on the possible movie-going taste of the public at that time in history, and they hope that the movie theme will make money. The producer may want to take a chance on a theme about the ills of a rigid class structure that does not allow true happiness—even though that is what people are trying to escape.

The premise for the theme could be shown by having Jack as a rich entrepreneur who falls in love with Suzie, a poor girl from the slums of New York City. However, he cannot have a lasting relationship with her because the rigid class structure of society at that time would not allow it. Because of society, they both become lost, defeated souls by the end of the movie. How would Jack and Suzie present a theme that would allow an escape from the harsh realities of society? Jack could be a swashbuckler from the sixteenth 16th century or an adventurer in the Middle East in a period long before the 1920s, or he could even be a handsome cowboy. These three character types are complete escapist fare.

In the 1920s, what type of character would Suzie play to Jack's dashing hero? A damsel in distress would be the perfect character. She could be the damsel who is kidnapped, and Jack runs to her rescue, fighting untold odds to obtain her release. The action would be far beyond any type of reality, but the audiences would not care because they would be highly entertained, and they would be escaping the reality of their society for a little while at the movie theatre. The 1920s was a period where the above characters could exist because of the rigid gender structure.



The 1930s

In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, people went to the movies to escape the harsh realities of poverty. Movies were one of the few, and possibly the only business, that showed a profit during the Depression, because people had such a strong desire to escape their lives for a while. So the theme in the 1930s could be emotional optimism—no matter how unrealistic it was.

Jack might be an unemployed artist, and Suzie a rich socialite who sees his paintings and likes them. After many humorous mishaps caused by Suzie, a relationship develops and builds until they finally live happily ever after.

The producer could have attempted this theme, even though it might be thin and unbelievable, to give people hope and the courage to return to reality. And with hope as the theme, the producer believes he could make money from the movie. However, before the strict enforcement of the moral guidelines of the Motion Picture Production Code, the Hays Code, in 1934, and the harsh realities of the Great Depression, how people actually lived and acted could have been shown. The producer, in this situation, could become a great reformer.

Jack could be a World War I war hero, who has a good job and a girlfriend, Suzie. The Great Depression strikes. Jack loses his job, having to leave town to find work in another locality. However, he doesn't have the money for a vehicle. So, he walks from town to town, looking for work. Suzie gets word from a stranger that Jack has been hurt because he had to take a dangerous job to make enough money to marry Suzie. Suzie gets together enough money to go and see Jack, but she is too late. Jack died. This would really strike an emotional chord of the audiences of the 1930s. The audience might believe that these people are worse off than they were.

What would be the theme for this movie? Could the theme be one of encouragement to the people of this decade? Could the theme of the story be that no matter what happens, you have to try to continue—even if, at the end, you die?

In July 1934, when the Hays Code began to be strictly enforced by Joseph Breen, would the theme change? What would it change to? The story would be greatly toned down. Jack and Suzie would be boyfriend and girlfriend. Jack would lose his job because of the Depression, but he would become successful for another company. Jack and Suzie would obtain happiness by the end of the movie.

Let's move to the 1940s to see what themes that decade had to offer. I hope you are seeing how the theme of a movie is developed.



The 1940s

In the 1940s, World War II interrupted the lives of people around the world. Families were torn apart with men fighting in the South Pacific, Africa, or Europe. The families remaining at home in the United States wondered what would happen to their loved ones and themselves if the Axis powers won the war. With families ripped apart, society, the economy, and the labor force had to make adjustments to continue to function during those difficult times. The producer had a wealth of choices to choose from and many locales around the world to consider. From all this material the producer would wonder what type of film would entice people to go to the movie theatres. The theme could possibly state that whatever needs to be done is done in order to bring the families together again or in hope of bringing families together again.

This theme could be demonstrated by Suzie going to work in a factory but keeping that special time of day when she writes her daily letter to her husband, Jack, who is in the infantry in Europe. This theme could be one of eternal love and never letting it die. This would be the type of theme that displayed the emotion that much of the American public was feeling, at the time, so this could be very popular.

Another theme that would have been popular during this period is one of action and winning the war in Europe and Japan. This type of movie would show Jack as an action soldier doing whatever it takes to obtain victory. Suzie would not be in this movie at all. It would be a “guy” movie with masculine themes.

The third theme could be dark and gloomy because the future was unclear, so everybody had to carve out his or her own existence in order to exist in the new world without families and the security of loved ones being close at hand. This theme could be demonstrated by Jack and Suzie working against one another to obtain something. Jack would be a loner thinking he is helping Suzie, while all the time she is working against him. Jack would not know this.

The movie with a theme of “do not trust anyone” might have been successful as a wake-up call to people at that time that hope and a happy ending were not always possible. This is a realistic theme that a producer might believe the public needed to understand. Once again, some people like this type of movie, so the producer could have believed this themed movie would be successful.

As society gets more complicated, movie themes become more numerous, and the earlier themes would have to be adjusted. As we move on, how would themes evolve? Would they become more numerous? How did or does society change?



The 1950s

The 1950s was a decade of huge change in the United States. In *United States v. Paramount Pictures*,⁴ a Hollywood antitrust case from 1948 broke up the Studio System, so movies became more competitive. This was also the period of McCarthyism, the Second Red Scare, and the Hollywood Blacklist, along with the Korean Conflict and the beginning of the Cold War.

At the same time, suburbia began, as everyone after World War II wanted to have their own homes. Within suburbia, the family unit was very strong. The popularity of drive-in movies and television provided activities that the whole family could be involved in, in order to keep the family unit strong.

People wanted more in their movies than in past decades. As competition for audiences grew, the themes had to become more sophisticated than before. The themes became more realistic with characters that had more depth and situations that were more adult. These realistic themes brought characters that had faults like the next door neighbor or somebody who the audience knew at work. The acting style changed, portraying the characters more three dimensionally and realistically. Themes from previous decades were no longer valid.

What type of theme would be reflective of the American society of the 1950s? What would be next for Jack and Suzie? How about a theme that simply states what is best for the family? If you were Jack or Suzie, what would you want that would encompass all the aforementioned occurrences of the 1950s?

Perhaps Suzie would want to get married and have a family, since this was an important part of the 1950s. Suzie, though, would have more individuality doing this than women during the decades of the 1930s or 1940s. Jack, as the male head of the household, would be instrumental in providing the theme. The theme would be “doing the right thing” because it is what was best for the family. How could this theme be exemplified? What type of person would Jack be?

Jack would be any man who lived in a large city, small town, or a new suburban location. He could have had a job working in a factory or a position with a corporation. The job would be nothing glamorous, but he would be responsible to his family and his employer. Jack would be involved in something or he would have witnessed something where he had to decide what action to take for the betterment of Suzie, their relationship, and maintaining their family unit.

Suzie would have supported him in any action he took. Jack would do what he believed to be the most truthful scenario to arrive at the best course of action. To Jack, he performed the correct action, even though nothing would be any longer the same, but the family unit and his relationship with Suzie would have survived the best way possible. This means family above the job, if necessary. The 1950s flourished with themes such as this one, and people continued to go to the movies.



The 1960s

The first half of the 1960s looked very much like the end of the 1950s. The theme, reflecting on Suzie or Jack as a tarnished person, could occur but within the acceptance of the morals of society. In addition, Jack would still be the dominate influence.

The theme, for instance, could be a social change that Suzie makes but Jack would orchestrate the change for his benefit. If Jack made the social change, then he ultimately succeeds on his own. Suzie could assist, but she would only be a supporting character.

However, a big difference in the liberality of the American society, or at least part of American society, occurred between the mid- and late 1960s. In the mid-1960s, society began a massive change in issues about fighting overseas and social norms, so a big change in movie themes should also be noticeable. This change was brought about by many factors. McCarthyism and the government, in general, became the enemy, along with corporate management. Animosity toward the Vietnam Conflict grew along with protesting the actions of the American government.

The role of women in movies was changing, caused by the second-wave feminism from the early 1960s. Women were becoming a controlling influence in the movies that were produced. Women were no longer defenseless and in need of male support. If you were part of the American public that experienced the change in the late 1960s, specifically from 1965 to the end of the decade, you wanted to watch and see the changed American public on the big screen.

In this type of changing thematic climate, we would begin discussing Suzie as the main character. She could be hard working and attempting to reach some degree of success. However, with this type of theme, Suzie would have a turning point where she discovers other people finding ways to circumvent getting ahead in a company or government by manipulating people to get the promotion rather than by working hard. In this type of atmosphere, Suzie would ultimately be found out by Jack. Jack would make sure, by the climax of the movie, that Suzie would receive her just rewards for the actions she took.

The 1970s

Let's jump to the 1970s, which was a decade of great social change that initially began being engineered in the second half of the 1960s. In this decade, the producer might have wanted a theme of accomplishment, especially for Suzie, because this was a period of enforcing gender equality. Title IX of the Education Amendments Act passed in 1972, providing educational equality for males and females.

"Never give up" may be Suzie's motto as she works hard at cutting through prejudice and bureaucracy to accomplish her goal. What type of theme would exhibit educational equality at the beginning? The theme could be growth and development to gain what you want because prejudice has stopped you in the past. Or, sometimes you had to get angry to get what you wanted.



Suzie could express the desire to achieve educational equality by portraying a college student. She could start off by being naïve when she first begins her college career. She is the college student that just goes because it is free for her, and people believed in the 1970s that high school graduates should go to college because it was part of growing up. So, Suzie would start college and begin to wander aimlessly through the first semester of courses with no specific purpose or outcome in mind.

Then Suzie meets someone, Jack. Jack would have a need to succeed because he has a sibling to support because his parents have died. Jack is older and has realized he has to make something of himself in order to survive. Suzie likes Jack and looks up to him. She even wants to mirror his desire for success. However, Suzie runs into a prejudicial roadblock at college. She fights to succeed and Jack assists her in her quest.

The theme would be very well expressed and quite pertinent in the 1970s, the decade of innovative themes, as women started to come into their own.

The 1980s

We have now progressed to the theme period of the 1980s. The notion of “searching” is often a central theme throughout history, but it seemed even more relevant in our rapidly changing society. What types of themes were predominant in the 1980s?

This decade contained the computer age, but also assassinations and act-alone crimes occurred. Was this the beginning of the age of negativity? Women became more prominent in space, movies, and politics. More women started to direct movies, but AIDS began in the 1980s too. With these thoughts in your mind, what one or two themes would be the most reflective and expressive of the 1980s?

Jack believes that the 1980s is his decade. Jack wants to become all that he can be even though he has started a relationship with a girl, Suzie, he met in college. He tells Suzie that he is going to make his mark in the world, making a million dollars or two while he is at it. He adds that she can come along for the ride if she wants to.

She is just something added to his list, but Suzie decides to go with Jack’s desired rise in power. Jack is slowly becoming successful, but through a mistake, while getting a physical to take an overseas trip, he contracts AIDS.

Suzie stays with Jack through the bad times with AIDS. She nurses him as best as she can. This was the beginning of an age where Suzie had the opportunity to follow her dreams. Nonetheless, she decides to keep a low profile and stay with Jack. Toward the end, Jack realizes what Suzie has sacrificed and done for him. He realizes what a jerk he has been for years and that the love of a person is more important than all the monetary rewards and accolades that one can achieve.

The theme is quite clear here.



The 1990s

The 1990s signified a new beginning. The old order of control and prejudice that had lasted for decades began to vanish. The Soviet Union was dissolved. Apartheid laws were repealed. The Cold War ended. And, wars, like Operation Desert Storm, occurred along with riots in Los Angeles, the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1995, and the Rwandan Genocide. And, the internet grew exponentially.

The 1990s was a foreshadowing of the 21st century violence and harsher conditions. What type of themes could be given to this decade? What type of people would Jack and Suzie be in this decade?

The theme that would predominate would be isolation in order to try to keep all of the negative changes away from Jack and Suzie. Being the 1990s Suzie would be doing the protecting this time. Suzie is a single mother raising her son, Jack, as best she can. One day, she takes Jack from their home in the suburbs in the United States and moves to an out-of-the-way island. They establish a home. Conditions are harsh, and the lifestyle is not the same as their hometown. They adapt, but the progress and gratification that they were used to is missing. They return to their original home, knowing they have to adapt to a changing society rather than running away from it.

Based on the above, what other theme is appropriate? No matter what the circumstance, people are resilient. No matter how bad the conditions, people have to have hope.

Certain curious individuals exist who will stop a negative future by researching, discovering, and trying to make the necessary changes so the potential future does not occur. In this example, Jack and Suzie are economic researchers exploring ideas and potential trends to identify latent disasters that could occur. They discover a potential shortage of oil, which is beginning to get bad in the 1990s and will only become worse in the 21st century. They try to convince people of the disastrous situations that will happen but no one wants to listen.

Knowing what the future brings, how would you continue this story? What would the ending be?

The 21st Century

The 1980s and the 1990s have blossomed to a crescendo of computer advances, hatred, and violence. The ultimate culmination of the hatred and violence occurred on September 11, 2001 with terrorists attacking the Pentagon in Washington, DC and destroying the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York City.

However, the progress that began in the 1980s with computers and electronics continued. This is a Brave New World where anything is possible. What theme can best express this era? How about trying to understand the actions of a few?



Jack and Suzie are a married, middle-aged couple living in a small town near a big city. They live alone because their children are married and have moved away out of necessity to find good jobs. They try to understand why all this violence occurs, but they cannot. So they decide to retire early and travel around the United States to find answers to their thoughts of why certain people act in a violent manner. Their conclusion becomes the same and is reflective of a 1990s theme. The ultimate conclusion is acceptance.

The notion of “searching” is often a central theme throughout history, but it seems even more relevant in our rapidly changing society. Themes also review the other side of the situation where, instead of searching, people dive into the current social ideals to see what they can get.

How could this theme be demonstrated? Let’s follow an example of this theme. Jack and Suzie are married and decide to join their friends in a competition to see how much money they can make. They are in it for “me” or themselves. They have been ego-centric for years as their friends disappear from their view. They ostracize themselves from their friends in an effort to bilk the public and make as much money as they can. Finally, they realize, once they have made a fortune that they do not know what they really have? What have they really made? Are they fulfilled, or are their lives emptier than before they began? They find that they are all alone because nobody in their circles has reached their level of wealth.

Further Viewing

The following movies are excellent examples of themes that have been produced throughout the different decade:

- Broken Blossoms, 1919, directed by D. W. Griffith, starring Lillian Gish, Richard Barthelmess, and Donald Crisp. This was a popular movie of the period. Does the theme reflect the decade?
- My Man Godfrey, 1936, directed by Gregory La Cava, starring William Powell and Carole Lombard. How reflective of the decade is the theme in this movie?
- The Maltese Falcon, 1941, directed by John Huston, starring Humphrey Bogart, Mary Astor, Peter Lorre, and Sydney Greenstreet. This is a good example of a new decade changing the type of movies filmed.
- A Streetcar Named Desire, 1951, directed by Elia Kazan, starring Vivien Leigh, Marlon Brando, and Kim Hunter. This movie shows how themes changed after World War II.
- Darling, 1965, directed by John Schlesinger, starring Julie Christie, Dirk Bogarde, and Laurence Harvey. This movie shows how themes changed after the second wave of feminism.