

4.4 | Theme

Theme works in two ways. First, as a high-level, one- or two-word summary of the story (e.g., love, war, forgiveness, treachery, nostalgia, unchecked ambition, encroaching technology). This understanding is called a *thematic concept* and some genres take to them better than others. When someone asks you to give a one-word summary of your story, they're asking for the thematic concept, not a hyphenated-summary-of-your-plot-that-you-speed-read-in-one-deep-breath word. Thematic concepts are descriptive, not didactic; they define your story, they don't summarize a book-length argument.

A second understanding is that the theme offers an exploration of some sort of ethical or cultural question that's implied more than stated — for example, "the price of victory" or the attributes of a "better life." If asserted directly, the answer to the question or the moral directive is presented as a *thematic statement*. Think of it like the essence of your story's core conflict, distilled into a bumper-sticker slogan.

For example, a story with a thematic concept of *love* might drill that concept to one of several potentially competing thematic statements, including "love conquers all" or "love makes people do stupid, tragic things."

TIP

In advertising and scriptwriting, a brief, one-sentence summary of the thematic statement is called a *logline*. They're as useful for novels as they are for scripts. But develop them poorly, and they're guaranteed to earn you a rejection. Loglines for novels tie into elevator pitches, which we'll review in greater detail in Chapter 9.

The important thing about theme is that it permeates the narrative. It's not a one-and-done plot twist or the result of a discussion on Page 72. The things that happen — the plot, as informed by conflict — transpire within the bumper guards of the theme.

Strategic Assertions of Theme

Themes present in several ways. Perhaps the most obvious is through the prism of the plot-conflict alignment. A story with a "war is unnecessary hell" thematic statement, for example, presents a plot-conflict combination quite unlike a story with a "war is a terrible but necessary crucible for a man's ennoblement" approach.

Similarly, themes arise in the *why* for whatever kick-starts the initial core conflict or fuels the evolution of the conflict over the course of the plot. Consider, for example, a novel about two brothers feuding over a woman. What starts the conflict? What perpetuates it? What draws it to a close? In theory, the answers are nearly infinite, but in practice, the theme significantly circumscribes the directionality of the story. A theme of "blood is thicker than water" will see rising hostility between the brothers until they realize that their relationship is more valuable than any romantic interest so they reconcile at the end. A theme of "sibling rivalry sometimes leads to tragedy" might start similarly but end with one brother savagely triumphing over the other, then latter regretting it.

A third approach to theme is to very clearly make the point known. Sometimes the whole point of the story is a specific message — think, for example, of *1984* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Didacticism, in general, isn't well-received by most readers, but in some genres (literary fiction, science fiction) didactic themes sometimes work well. In fact, allegories are basically didactic works writ large, wherein the thematic statement isn't just the logline but rather the whole point of the story.

Tactical Assertions of Theme

Themes sometimes arise gently and in more targeted fashion, through occasional bouts of author intrusion. This kind of theming often proves problematic, because ancillary moral messages not core to the conflict usually present as author intrusion — which, within an otherwise unrelated narrative, may alienate readers who aren't receptive to that message. For example, an ordinary murder-mystery story that features a character who routinely berates other characters for some ideological slight will annoy readers who are on the opposite ideological pole.

Sometimes, though, the subtle assertion of occasional sociocultural points can work if those points don't contradict the story's overarching theme. You could deliberately introduce structural elements that may or may not serve a purpose to the story but clearly serve as a message to the reader. Possibilities include the writing-in of under-represented characters (aligned to race, LGBT status, disability) in main-character slots without belaboring the point, or in a character behaving in a way that touches on a social hot topic without descending into stereotype — as with the nice-guy protector who carries a concealed pistol but never has to use it and is never forced to apologize for it. These moral messages, tricky as they are, aren't necessarily verboten, but when they're too on-the-nose, readers notice in a meta-narrative sort of way.

Repetitions of Theme

The best use of theming follows from the not-too-obvious but frequent-enough recurrence of that theme throughout the story. One solid approach inserts patterns that illustrate a recurring motif within the story — usually a phrase (*Leitwortstil*) or an image or an idea that periodically surfaces in the text and is obvious enough to catch the readers' attention, even if it doesn't catch the characters'. Motifs can be as basic as a color (e.g., *The Great Gatsby* and the use of green) or as complex as allusions to Medieval poetry.

Similarly, characters' exploration of "big why" questions in a scene-and-sequel format offer fodder for theme-dropping, provided that these conversations don't merely rehash the same idea over and over.

Problems with Theme

Theme, properly understood, ought to be lightly applied, but applied nonetheless: It's an idea that touches the story in several places, but it's not the story itself. The heavier the thematic touch, the more obvious the point is and the more readers notice it. And the more they notice it, the more they tend to disapprove except in a narrow range of archetypal, didactic stories.

Conversely, a story with no discernable theme becomes a Rorschach test: Different readers walk away with different interpretations of the book's scope and meaning. The most frequent place for this type of epistemic fluidity is literary fiction, which is the genre where theme often becomes a critical element of a story's success. In fact, many lit-fic stories go unpublished because they're "*Seinfeld* stories" — slice-of-life vignettes with no real purpose or meaning behind them.

Readers expect a payoff for their investment in your story. Part of that benefit accrues from their commitment to your story and your characters, but part of it comes from the satisfaction that they've wrestled with some idea bigger than just a story. They don't necessarily like having that idea beat over their head, but they do like to infer it, particularly when that theme dovetails into the core conflict of the story and the decision-making processes of the main characters.

4.5 | Conflict, Motivation & Choice

A few years ago, I attended an intimate writers' retreat in beautiful Kalamazoo, Michigan. I submitted a short story for critique. The editors of the organization hosting the event — a speculative-fiction press based in Holland, Michigan — kept pressing my story on one key point. I remember Sue Ann's voice echoing through the room: "What does your main character want, and what's stopping him from getting it?" And I remember not having a good answer.

That question, in a nutshell, is *conflict*. And even though I understood in an academic sense the centrality of conflict to great storytelling, I'm ashamed to admit that it took her and Tim and Matt (superlative editors, each of them) to hammer the point home in their typical affirming yet straightforward manner: Without conflict, you probably don't have enough fuel for the plot to yield a meaningful story.

As Sue Ann often says to me during critique sessions: "You know what I'm going to say. There's no gas in the tank."

The Nature of Conflict

Conflict, properly understood, is no more and no less than the frustration or misalignment of goals arising within and around the story's protagonist. Conflict is the "gas in the tank" of the car called *plot*. Without conflict, a story's plot is just one damned thing after another, tied together by nothing intrinsic to the main character's journey.

NOTE

Boasting to an editor within your cover letter that you've written a "plot-driven story" brings you about 85 percent of the way toward a rejection letter without the editor having read a single word of your work. Authors who advertise their stories as being *plot-driven* usually mean, intentionally or not, that they've de-prioritized conflict development in favor of a mad jumble of stuff happening at a frenetic pace.

Admittedly, some genres — like adventure tales — aren't all that keen on exquisitely developed conflicts. But in general, without a consciously developed conflict, your story is likely doomed. *Doomed, I say!*

I also say this: As a late convert to the value of well-developed conflict, I approach the subject with the zeal of 10,000 martyrs. So buckle up, for I'm about to spend the next few thousand words thrashing this steed into soft, supple leather.

The idea of conflict is remarkably malleable. The main character's conflict can be external — save the prince, thwart the bad girl, please the feline overlord, survive the trial, find the thing — but it can also be internal. Conflicts include grieving a loss and growing into adulthood. The concept distills to a simple rule: The main character must experience some sort of unmet need or face an unaddressed challenge. The story that unfolds must satisfy that need or overcome that challenge, even if doing so is purely psychological.

It sounds so easy, right? Yet the devil, as ever, slithers amidst the details.

Types of Conflict

Conflict's classifications don't have a name, but they appear in several forms, as exemplified in some amazing stories:

- Against people (*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*)
- Against nature (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Into the Wild*)
- Against self (*The Power of One*, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*)
- Against society (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Fahrenheit 451*)
- Against God (*A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *the Book of Job*)
- Against fate (*Slaughterhouse Five*, *the Aeneid*)

Georges Polti developed a book-length list, in *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*, of every conflict-causing scenario that he believed might occur in a story. This list is an expansion, heavily informed by ancient Greek plays, of archetypal conflicts. Several of his items are maddeningly precise and no longer commonly encountered, but many of them have real value.

Subjects include: Appeals to authority, deliverance from evil, crime and vengeance, eye-for-eye retribution, pursuit, disaster, victim of cruelty or misfortune, revolt against oppression, a daring enterprise, abductions, kin rivalry, murderous adultery, descent into madness, fatal imprudence, self-sacrifice, correcting dishonor, conflict with God, forbidden love, reckless ambition, bad judgment, mistaken jealousy, forbidden fruit, remorse, homecomings and loss of loved ones.

The Plausibility of Conflict

Conflicts must make intuitive sense to most readers. One way of looking at conflict is to understand that it tends to develop over time, in stages, wherein some choices either increase or diminish the force of the conflict. It's rare that a single event, in itself, is sufficient to generate meaningful conflict; instead, the botched reaction to that event, or the conditions leading up to it, is usually what seals the deal.

All conflicts start somewhere. Even if your story doesn't begin with the beginning of the conflict, you as the author must know the conflict's point of origin. Because from there, patterns of communication and the personal attributes of characters (including emotional maturity) either escalate or de-escalate the conflict. Eventually, the conflict's point of origin metastasizes to the point of no return, which generally is where your story begins in earnest. If conflict is real and isn't immediately resolved, then patterns of behavior result that either help or hinder some intended outcome.

All that notwithstanding, each point on a conflict's lifecycle, from origin to escalation to de-escalation to resolution, must make intuitive sense. Real people should react in realistic, sympathetic fashion to the situations governing each pivot point in the conflict cycle. The motivations and the behaviors of each party to the conflict must ring true. To the extent that characters act "out of character," the reader must understand what's afoot and agree that the deviation supports the story.

A good conflict, if distilled to its essence, should make most people nod and say, "Yup, sounds legit — too legit to quit." The more removed from everyday reasonableness a conflict becomes, the less amenable you'll find readers to be. People think and act in complex yet predictable ways. Deviate from human nature at your peril.

Multivariate Conflict

One important point: Almost no one does something for just one reason, so genuine literary conflict almost always ought to spring from more than one source. The more important the decision or the underlying subject-matter, the more likely it is that a character will latch onto more than one rationale for acting. And sometimes, those rationales may engender tension or even outright conflict even after the die has been cast.

Consider a person whose father left him when he was in Kindergarten, but 40 years later, the old man reaches out on Facebook eager to reconnect. Most people will experience several different, contradictory emotional responses to that Facebook message. Even if the person chooses to meet his father, he will likely still harbor resentment or doubt.

Life is messy. Life for your characters must also be messy. That means, in particular, that no one should do things for One Big Reason™, and even if a decision is made, a person's motivation and ethical perspective, considered broadly, still operate in partial tension with that decision.

Motivation Shapes Conflict

Conflict draws life from two sources. The first of these, *motivation*, speaks to the reason why a person does or doesn't elect to act. Much modern thinking about motivation boils down to the leading insights from a variety of academic disciplines. Economists might stress the principles of behavioral economics, whereas classically trained psychologists might seek inspiration from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The concepts of evolutionary psychology appeal to modern sociologists. Philosophers, however, might look to Aristotle's theory of causation for inspiration.

The point is: The impulse that impels a person to act vs. not-act is part of a larger theoretical superstructure that seeks to understand why people do what they do. You, as an author, need not be an expert on the academic theories of human motivation, but you'll probably find value in at least becoming acquainted with some of them, and situating your story's core conflict within one of these theories. Don't obsess about which (if any!) are intrinsically true. What matters is that the impulse that prompts your main character to resolve his or her core conflict is consistent with a generally recognized theory of human motivation.

Put differently: "Well, because that thing had to happen to advance the plot" isn't a compelling reason to act in the literary space, just as it's not compelling in the physical one.

Theories of Motivation

The following list of theories isn't exhaustive, and the theories may compliment or contradict each other. They're presented to seed your thinking about motivation, not to serve as a checklist, and the list is in alphabetical order so as to not imply that one approach is more valid than any other. You'll find real value in looking into these theories in a bit more detail.

People are motivated to act by:

- *Conditioning Theory*: Patterns of positive and negative reinforcement elicit action without conscious thought. Often linked to neurobiology, but post-traumatic stress disorder is also a form of conditioning in some situations. Remember Pavlov's dogs? Same concept.
- *Drive Theory*: The basic human drives (respiration, thirst, hunger, sex, etc.) increase in potency until satiated. If left unaddressed too long, they overwhelm rational thought processes.

- *Evolutionary Biology*: Because humans are hard-wired to live in small tribal groups, we're motivated to identify with and protect the people closest to us, even if doing so proves tactically or strategically counterproductive.
- *Expectancy Theory*: A person's motivation to act is a function of *expectancy* (anticipated effort), *instrumentality* (sense that the effort will pay off) and *valence* (perceived value or amount of a reward or punishment).
- Herzberg's *Two-Factor Theory*: People act when they're motivated to achieve some positive sense of satisfaction. However, their motivation declines in the absence of "hygiene factors" — conditions that don't positively motivate, but will de-motivate if they're absent. Hygiene factors include peer-group status and a sense of job security.
- *Incentive Theory*: People act for intrinsic reasons (to learn, to discover, to satisfy curiosity) or extrinsic reasons (promise of reward, fear of punishment). These reasons, in themselves, supply the motivation to act, but only if the person believes there's a positive or negative consequence to acting.
- McGregor's *Theory Y* and Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*: People seek to satisfy core needs in order of precedence, starting with physiological concerns (food, water), then safety (protection against long-term threats and deprivation), then social (peer acceptance, in-group placement), then ego (self-esteem, status, reputation), then fulfillment (achieving full natural potential).
- *Neurobiology*: A pre-rational response to a stimulus, generally leading to a fight-flight-compromise-freeze reaction. Positive stimuli are reinforced by a hit of dopamine, which partially explains both the phenomenon of addiction and the inadequacy of risk assessment among adrenaline junkies and teenaged boys.
- *Psychological or emotional impairment*: Sometimes people's motivations follow from a psychological disorder or some emotional trauma or developmental disability. These impairments often present internal logics of their own that prove compelling to the character but may not be prudent in the eyes of the reader.
- *Reiss's 16 Basic Desires Theory*: Reiss outlined 16 different needs that impel people to act — acceptance, curiosity, eating, family, honor (loyalty to the in-group's traditional values), idealism (social justice), independence, order, physical activity, power (influence), romance, savings (collecting things), social contact, social status, tranquility (safety) and vengeance (retaliation and competition).

What matters, as an author, isn't that you explicitly write one of these motivational factors into your work. Rather, it's to understand that the more complex and abstract a decision may be, the more likely it is that several — sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating — motivational impulses feed into the go/no-go decision. You don't need to make all those factors clear to the reader, but you do need to know them in your own mind. If a critique partner asks: "Why did this character choose to act?" it's not okay to respond with, "I don't know" or "Because it was the only way I could reposition the character to the other side of town to keep the plot moving."

A word of caution, though: Motivation is exclusively about the "do, or don't do" question. It's not about *what to do*. For that, we must turn to moral philosophy and behavioral economics.

Ethical Paradigms: Values Shaping Actions

The other wellspring for a story's conflict draws deeply from the aquifer of moral philosophy. The "motivation question" addresses *whether* a character acts; ethics addresses *why* that character acts in a particular way.

Ask a hundred different philosophers for a list of authoritative ethical paradigms and you're likely to get 473,581.3 different responses. But it's probably safe to distill these to seven major approaches:

1. **Egoism.** An egoist's only real question is, "What's in it for me?" Despite being ridiculed as "obviously" grotesque, egoist logic presents the only truly internally coherent approach to ethics. Be careful with egoism. It's too easy to write an egoist off as a solipsistic blowhard. Most aren't. They use sophisticated thought processes to assess self-benefit. Very few egoists are actually moral monsters like Hannibal Lecter, so don't cast them as the self-indulgent, wicked stereotype.
2. **Deontology.** Deontologists are all about their duty. They ask, "What am I obligated to do?" They interrogate the requirements they've freely adopted to ensure that they're meeting contractual requirements. Deontologists prize the meeting of social or legal obligations.
3. **Consequentialism.** Someone who cares most about the outcome of his or her behavior — i.e., whether it serves the need of the greatest good for the greatest number — is a Utilitarian. The theory of Utilitarianism admits to many sub-disciplines, but they all subsume under the *consequentialist* umbrella, for they focus most strongly on the immediate effects of their choices.
4. **Natural Law.** Most prevalent in Catholic moral teaching, a natural-law theorist thinks about what an ordinary person would do in similar circumstances. Those behaviors most conducive to human flourishing, performed by an average person in a specific setting, serve as the lodestar for Natural Law ethicists. In some ways, it's an appeal to "common sense" or "common decency."
5. **Care Ethics.** An innovation dating to the late 20th Century, care ethics prioritizes the relationships among the stakeholders to a dispute, with extra concern associated with the least privileged stakeholder. Care Ethics is firmly entrenched in some industries, including nurses in the United States and Canada. The core question of a care-ethics devotee is, "What solution gets the best win-win proposition for the folks at the table?" It's tightly focused on the preservation of relationships, but at the price of ignoring stakeholders who aren't at the table.
6. **Virtue Ethics.** Virtue ethics, properly understood, died with the ancient Greeks, but virtue-ethics theory has enjoyed a bit of a renaissance starting in the late 20th Century. A virtue-ethics adherent posits a simple question: "What solution is most aligned with a 'good' person's conduct?" Most people can rattle off the traditional virtues; a virtue-ethics student focuses on the conduct that someone already adjudged to be virtuous would perform. This perspective is strongly associated with questions of good character.
7. **Divine Command.** A divine-command theorist asks only one question: "What does God will?" A determination of ethical vs. non-ethical follows from this one, basic question.

One important point about ethical paradigms: As with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, we all tend to identify naturally with one or two paradigms fairly strongly, another one or two weakly, and a couple not-so-much. Nevertheless, a paradigm isn't a prison sentence: Even someone highly typed to a given paradigm can still draw from the others, and the other paradigms can introduce doubt about the propriety of a given choice. In other words, no one's straitjacketed into a single paradigm.

Rationality: Perspectives on Outcomes

If people are motivated to act for many different reasons, the content of that action is shaped first by a value system (ethics) and second by an assessment of the logical portfolio of outcomes that might arise depending on which specific action is undertaken.

One class of outcomes quantification goes by several different names: Behavioral economics, the Kahneman & Tversky Prospect Theory, reciprocal altruism, game theory. They all distill to a few common principles:

1. People generally seek to maximize their gain and minimize their loss in a rational, predictable manner.

2. People judge gain and loss relative to a specific baseline (a phenomenon called *reference dependence*).
3. People tend to fear potential loss more than they value upside gain (a phenomenon called *non-linear probability weighting*).
4. People tend to be more averse to risk in the face of unknown conditions — the "unknown unknowns."
5. People's sensitivity to incremental gain and loss decreases the farther from the baseline you go (*diminishing marginal utility*).
6. People often expect *reciprocal altruism* — the "if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" approach to collaboration.

These principles shape a person's understanding of the list of options that follow from the question, "So now what?"

Usually, ordinary people work under an informal form of behavioral game theory, wherein they seek optimal outcomes from a rational perspective, informed, however, by insight into the likely behavior of other people. In other words, we all try to find the solution that brings the most benefit or the least loss, and we expect that everyone else will do the same. Our specific choices, however, are colored by our sense of how others will act.

This is, in a sense, intrastate diplomacy writ small. If I am impelled to act, and my choices are A, B and C, and I know that my adversary is also impelled to pick from A, B and C, then I'll structure my choice to maximize my outcome knowing that my adversary is likely to engage in an underhanded way. I'd likely act differently if the other person making choices were a close ally.

Regardless of your ethical approach, you'll likely engage in this quantitative math. Your value system determines a relative rank-ordering of priorities; your economic rationality determines a relative rank-ordering of possibilities. Then, a person joins the priorities to the possibilities to arrive at a specific action.

The only problem? A material defect in your thought process or even of your underlying rationality.

Departures from Rationality

A rich source of plot and conflict inflection points arises from a misfire in the decision-making process. Most defects follow from four, unrelated problems.

First, from defects in reasoning. This problem can strike anyone, anytime. Sometimes, it's the result of an invalid argument (i.e., the structure of the argument is broken). Sometimes it's the product of an unsound argument, wherein the formal validity is fine but some of the argument's premises aren't true, like when someone makes a superficially good choice but because the facts were wrong, the choice leads to bad results. Sometimes it follows from a lack of essential information necessary to make a more-optimal choice. And sometimes it's the problem of a formal or informal fallacy that leads to a weak outcome. In all cases the net result is a less-than-perfect choice.

Second, from psychological pressures. These include, but are not limited to, considerations like cognitive dissonance, addiction, depression, phobias and various psychosocial impairments.

Third, from ethical maximization. Some people constrain their universe of action by imposing a handful of ironclad ethical rules. For example, the Quakers abhor violence, so a violent response is off the table no matter how conducive to self-defense it might be. Likewise, the samurai of feudal Japan valued honor above all else; they'd

rather lose their heads than lose their integrity. Ultimately, what matters is that a person's principles demand that certain actions become obligatory or prohibited, even if honoring these principles contradicts the purely economic instrumentality of a theoretically preferable alternative.

Fourth, from denying the psychology of the moment. Many a story has faltered when a character engages in some sort of extended mental dialogue or higher-order thought process during a fight-or-flight situation where nothing but the reptilian brain would be firing. As such, readers are treated to a lot of hypothetical mental speech or narrative direction that would never plausibly occur if the scene were a real-world situation.

Common Problems with Plot-Conflict Alignment

In the plot-conflict context of many stories from emerging authors, the problem isn't so much a misfire of conflict as that the conflict doesn't exist at all. These stories are often driven by plot such that the story consists of one thing after another after another after another. In these works, the narrative emphasis is on moving characters around like chess pieces without any real exploration about why the pieces moved as they did — as long as Character A gets to Town B by Event C, it's *mission accomplished* from a plot perspective. Yet without knowing Character A's motivation for acting, and his combination of values and cost-benefit analysis that translated that motivation into a single course of action, and the potential countervailing values and calculations that weaken his resolve, it's tough for readers to give a damn about any of it.

Sometimes the conflict is there but it's too on-the-nose, too predictable. Consider a story about a young woman who, having determined that she's transgender, seeks medical therapy to reconfigure her anatomy to conform to male norms while exploring future social and legal transitions. Her father objects; chaos ensues. It's super easy — and, perhaps, super lazy as well as super ideological — to fashion the core conflict as "traditional parent doesn't believe in transgender identity, thereby hurting the child." How much more intriguing would it be if the conflict derived not from bigotry but from the father's own fear of mortality in the face of his only child electing voluntary sterilization? It's been said that the ultimate genetic success isn't children, but grandchildren, and in this context, this man now knows he will never have grandkids. He knows his line will grow extinct when his only child dies. How do the two of them reconcile *that* challenge?

Similarly, watch for characters who only seem to have one meaningful goal; Captain Ahab has already been written, after all. Even in quest-type stories, people act for more than one reason, and proliferating reasons and proliferating goals lead to proliferating subplots, which usually enliven a story.

Remember, too, that conflict's effectiveness depends on the stability of its scaffolding. Without a plausible motivation to act — coupled with a well-defined logic model for choosing among competing actions and consideration of the value of each of those competing actions — then you don't have much upon which a compelling plot may be hung.

Conflict is messy. It can't be so self-contained and unidirectional that it's a thin veneer over a plot-heavy story. And it always has to advance with the end in mind. To repeat Sue Ann: "What does your main character want, and what's stopping him from getting it?" Conflict is the tale about how the main character achieves his desire.