

EPISODE 023

Finding Topics to Write about by Looking at Universal Human Values

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[00:00:00] Hey, this is Melanie Naumann, and Herzlich Willkommen - welcome to the Stories in Songs Podcast.

Let's continue with our third bite-sized episode to talk about another interesting aspect of using the power of storytelling in writing lyrics.

Let me ask you this:

Have you ever wondered if there's anything other than writing a love song?

It seems every second song seems to be about love. So there's a huge demand for love stories.

But still, can't we write about something else for once?

But what else is there?

How can we define some other options of things to write about?

Where do we start? How can we come up with interesting ideas that really interest people?

Are there some overall possibilities we could use, like some overall categories that can inspire us to know what to write about?

Today's bite-sized episode will give you the answer, and I'll include song examples that help you see each of those different topic versions applied.

TEASER



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Recap

[00:01:28] In the last episode, we talked about one crucial component of storytelling. We talked about change. Specifically, we said that stories are about change. Something has to happen that changes the character's situation or their worldview for better or worse.

We also know that change is not only defined by reaching a goal state but also depends on all the other crucial components of storytelling. That means, in the story, we also need

1. the main character
2. who wants something
3. and has to overcome obstacles
4. because there's something important at stake for him
5. And they'll have to make a sacrifice to get what they want
6. And the story must end in a different way than how it's started
7. And in the best-case-scenario, even the character changed from the beginning to the ending
8. And through that external and internal change – which refers to the character's situation and his internal values – the story delivers a meaningful message that helps the audience to survive, thrive, or derive meaning for their own lives.

In today's episode, we want to look at universal human values. That means we'll find out how we can further identify the change that happens. This way, we'll be able to express WHAT changes specifically and find out how we can use that to find interesting topics to write about.

Universal Human Values in Stories

[00:03:00] As we know, the change of a character's situation or their transformation is found in every working story. Change is a crucial component.

But we can get more specific about what exactly needs to change.

And we call the WHAT of what has to change: Universal human values.

Let's go back to our coffee example:



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If I just tell you a detailed description of how I made my coffee this morning, you'll probably fall asleep.

Because that's boring. No one cares how I got my coffee because it makes absolutely no difference. I had some coffee this morning, so what?

Everything worked out. I got my coffee. Every step worked so that I could get my coffee.

But let's say something unexpected happened:

So because I was too lazy to change the lightbulb in the hallway, I couldn't turn on the light in the morning as I was on my way to the kitchen. So I stepped onto my acupressure mat. Have you ever touched one of those? Those plastic spikes can hurt a lot! So I stepped onto those spikes, jumped up, tried to hold on to the flower vase on the chest, and although I grabbed the chest and steadied myself, the flower vase fell onto the cat.

Now the cat didn't move anymore. So I had to call my husband, and he said we had to get to the vet.

Is that version more interesting to you?

Was this more exciting?

Now you're wondering, "What's going to happen to the cat? What's going to happen to me? How are my kids going to react to this?"

This has nothing to do with my initial state of going to get a coffee. The tide turned the moment I pushed the flower vase, and it fell onto the cat. Her name's Pinky, by the way, because our daughter loved the character of My Little Pony, just so you know.

So when we talk about change happening in stories, we are talking about universal human values = the things that most people would say are necessary to survive and thrive in the world - or the things that keep us from doing so. That's how we at the Story Grid define universal human values.

Positive universal human values are food, shelter, safety, justice, love, respect, knowledge, and self-actualization.

The corresponding negative values are hunger, exposure, danger, injustice, hatred, disrespect, ignorance, and self-denial.



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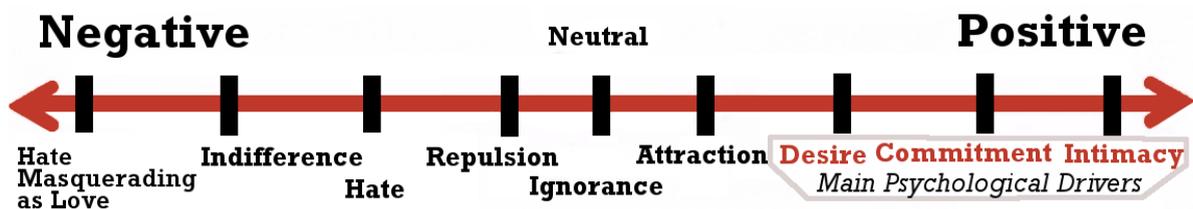
If we place these positive human values on one end of a spectrum and their negative counterparts on the other end, we can think of all the variations in between as gradations of human experience.

So let's look at an example to understand better how we can put values on a spectrum.

Love Spectrum

[00:06:08] So let's take love as an example.

Love sits on a spectrum on one side and hate, as its counterpart, on the other side. Between those two opposites are the steps that lead from one to another.



So let's quickly go through them from the very worst to the very best value of love.

The negation of the negation is Hate masquerading as love. That's quite interesting when you want to write a song about a story where one only pretends to love the other to turn their life to hell secretly.

The next values, again, from negative to neutral, are Indifference, Hate, Repulsion, and Ignorance.

From Ignorance, you move into the positive. After that, you move on the spectrum to Attraction, Desire, Commitment, and finally to Intimacy.

Life and Death Spectrum

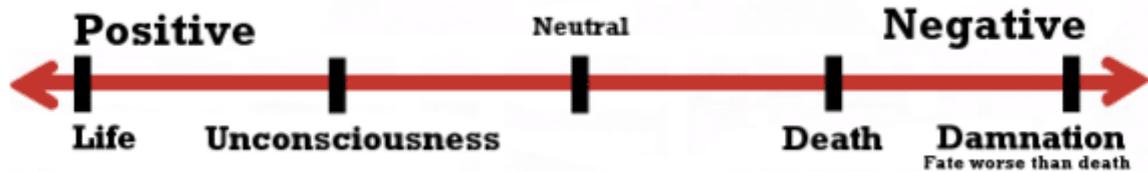
[00:07:18] Let's look at another scale of universal human values.

Let's take the spectrum of life and death.



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You move from Damnation (which is actually a fate worse than death) to death to unconsciousness and up to life.

And even here, you can put many more steps between those values - like having an illness, having a serious illness, being deadly ill or badly wounded... you see, there are endless shades of grey between two black and white opposites.

In general, stories consider a wide range of human values.

But one thing is very important and please keep in mind the following:

Even though stories you read or watch might be about different value spectrums – that means about different universal human values – every working story is made out of one value spectrum that is the most dominant and defining for that kind of story.

So in love stories, most of the scenes of the story will be on the spectrum of love and hate, and the value will move up and down on that scale depending on what's happening in the different scenes.

BUT since we talk about writing lyrics, you shouldn't include more than two value spectrums – more precisely, you should only use one that defines the character's external situation and only one that describes his internal state even though that one can be a little confusing since it's always about the character's worldview.

I know it's a little difficult to understand, but let's look at it this way:

If you play the guitar, how many different guitars can you use to perform one song?

Do you think you could play the song well if you had to change guitars all the time?

It's best to stick with one, right?

So just think about the character's external values – values like love, life, justice, freedom, honor, victory, respect, and their counterparts as sitting on different guitars. But you can only pick one to play.



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If you'd pick up a different guitar for every verse or chorus, your audience would be completely confused.

And if you create confusion, you lose.

The same is true if you don't stick to one value spectrum of one universal human value.

For this reason, the story in your song revolves around a single universal human value.

For example, when we look at an action story, we know there will be changes on the spectrum between death and life. A character might be conscious at the beginning of a scene and unconscious at the end of the scene. This is a change in a universal human value.

Story Example: Gladiator

[00:11:13] Let's look at a story example of a movie before we talk about universal human values in songs.

I hope you know the movie Gladiator with Russel Crowe. It's one of my favorites.

Many think that Gladiator is an action story because there are so many fights in it and it's always about life and death. After all, the movie is called Gladiator. But the story also shows how Maximus stays true to his values, and that's how he wins the love of the common people, while Commodus, the guy who actually rules over everyone, wants to get that love by demonstrating his power. He wants to force the people to love him.

By the end of Gladiator, both the value of life and status has shifted. But ultimately, we have the sense that the story was more about staying true to your values and not selling out. It was a status story. And it's shown so beautifully in the last scene: Maximus is lifted aloft by the people, while Commodus is left for dead in the sand. Maximum rose while Commodus fell.

And what we need to know when we think about stories this way is that we evaluate important changes that occur in a scene or global story by focusing on the universal human values at stake.

If none of those values change, the story or the specific part of that story doesn't work.



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And here we go back to our little coffee example.

Even if there is a change from no coffee to coffee, it requires something that is at stake. No coffee to coffee is without stakes.

And what is at stake are the universal human values we were just talking about.

In the example with the coffee and my cat Pinky, we were on the scale between life and death because the cat was okay at the beginning of my story but badly hurt at the end of it.

So you can see how those crucial components of storytelling are tied together. The change we see in a story is based on universal human values. And those universal human values are also the things we define when we say something needs to be at stake.

Crucial Components in a Love Story

[00:13:56] So let's go through our crucial storytelling components again and use a Lovesong as an example.

1. We have a main character
2. who wants something
 - and that something is probably to be loved or love someone
3. and the character has to overcome obstacles
 - that can be a rival, secrets, people who are against the relationship, or other opposing forces – internally or externally
4. because there's something important at stake for him
 - love is our universal human value in love stories, so love is at stake
5. And they'll have to make a sacrifice to get what they want
 - maybe they need to sacrifice their old worldview and grow up
 - maybe they need to let the other one go to prove how much they truly love them
6. And the story must end in a different way than how it's started
 - that means on the value spectrum of love and hate, the value must have changed along that spectrum – either to a place more positive or to a place more negative
7. And in the best-case-scenario, even the character changed from the beginning to the ending



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- how the character changes is on another value spectrum. We'll talk about those internal values another time. For now, just remember that their worldview has to shift
- 8. And through that external and internal change – which refers to the character's situation and his internal values – the story delivers a meaningful message that helps the audience to survive, thrive, or derive meaning for their own lives.
 - And the message ties back to the Love Story – either Love triumphs or Love fails – depending on how the value has changed.

And that's how universal human values affect our crucial components of storytelling.

Lyric topic ideas by looking at different Story Content Genres

[00:16:47] So when we want to actually write about something other than love, what else is there?

Well, we look at the universal human values that help us thrive or survive in this world – or the ones that keep us from surviving and thriving.

We at Story Grid have defined nine different external content genres. Each of those external content genres is about one specific universal human value.

External content genre describes what kind of story we can expect. Every content genre raises a different set of expectations. There's a lot more we can say about the genre in storytelling, but for now, let's stick with the connection between content genre and value.

Let's go through those external content genres and find song examples that fit onto their value spectrums.

Action

[00:18:03] The first external content genre is Action.

Action Stories revolve around the values of life and death.

So what are some songs that can be put on that value spectrum?

- “Welcome to the Black Parade” by My Chemical Romance
- “Haemoglobin” by Placebo
- “In the Air of the Night” by Phil Collins
- “Hammer to Fall” by Queen



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Crime

[00:18:35] Crime stories revolve around the values of justice and injustice.

So what are some songs that can be put on that value spectrum?

- “Folsom Prison Blues” by Johnny Cash
- “Masters of War” by Bob Dylan
- “Annie Christian” by Prince
- “Killer’s Eyes” by The Kinks
- “Send Me To The Electric Chair” by Bessie Smith

Horror

[00:19:20] Horror Stories also revolve around the values of life and death, but in those stories, the threat of literal damnation is what scares the hell out of those characters.

So what are some songs that can be put on that value spectrum?

- “He’s Back (The Man Behind the Mask)” by Alice Cooper
- “Bark at the Moon” by Ozzy Osbourne
- “Thriller” by Michael Jackson
- “Pet Sematary” by The Ramones
- “Creature of the Wheel” by White Zombie

War

[00:19:51] War stories revolve around the values of honor and dishonor as well as justified war and unjustified war.

So what are some songs that can be put on that value spectrum?

- “Hero of War” by Rage Against which is a great song for studying storytelling in general
- “Bloody Sunday” by U2
- “Zombie” by The Cranberries
- “Paschendale” by Iron Maiden
- “Disposable Heroes” by Metallica

Thriller

[00:20:24] Thriller stories also revolve around the values of life and death. They are actually a combination of horror, crime, and action elements where the situation gets personal for the main character.



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So what are some songs that can be put on that value spectrum?

- “Pulling Teeth” by Green Day – it’s like the song to Stephen King’s Annie Wilkes from his novel “Misery.”
- “Stan” by Eminem
- “Midnight Show” by The Killers
- “No Body, No Crime” by Taylor Swift

Western

[00:20:57]Western stories are about freedom and subjugation.

So what are some songs that can be put on that value spectrum?

- “Holiday” by Green Day
- “Bankrobber” by The Clash

Society

[00:21:07]Society Stories are about the universal human values of impotence and power.

So what are some songs that can be put on that value spectrum?

- “American Idiot” or “Minority” by Green Day – Green Day, by the way, has many songs that fit on that value spectrum of impotence vs. power.
- “Slave to the Wage” or “Too Many Friends” by Placebo

Performance

[00:21:30]Performance stories are about shame and respect.

- “Eye of the Tiger” by Survivor
- “Lose Yourself” by Eminem
- “We are the Champions” by Queen
- “Flag” by Sunrise Avenue
- “Good Riddance” by Green Day



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Summary of what we've learned about external content genres and universal human values

[00:21:56] Now we have defined all nine external content genres. Remember, each story has one primary external content genre. And especially your song's lyrics should only revolve around one of those external content genres. Not more, or you confuse your listeners.

Of course, there's much more to know about those content genres. We can put them on a hierarchy. We could dive into each of them to talk about their subgenres, conventions, and obligatory moments. We could also talk about internal content genres that concern the character.

But we'll talk about all of those things in future episodes.

For now, it's great that you know that you have more options at your disposal of things to write about than just about love. Write a song about someone's life being threatened, or about a committed crime, about wanting success, or fighting for honor—so many opportunities. Start exploring, for example, by watching movies and trying to write a song about that story. Just try to find out: What's the primary value at stake? And how does it change from the beginning of the story to its ending?

Have fun exploring.

Tune in next time for our second lyric study of a love song about the first kiss. Then, we will talk about the song "Rumour" by the American singer-songwriter Lee Brice.

Machs gut und bis dahin, bye bye Melanie



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