Common Themes in Literature

These are just a few of the many possible literary subjects and themes. The point to remember is that a subject is not a theme: a subject is some dimension of the human condition examined by the work; a theme is a statement, direct or implied, about the subject. The themes about the subjects on the list are still fairly general. As a critical writer discussing a particular literary work, you'll need to bring your observations about theme closer to the work.

1. The Individual in Nature
   a. Nature is at war with each of us and proves our vulnerability.
   b. People are out of place in Nature and need technology to survive.
   c. People are destroying nature and themselves with uncontrolled technology.

2. The Individual in Society
   a. Society and a person's inner nature are always at war.
   b. Social influences determine a person's final destiny.
   c. Social influences can only complete inclinations formed by Nature.
   d. A person's identity is determined by place in society.
   e. In spite of the pressure to be among people, an individual is essentially alone and frightened.

3. An individual's Relation to the gods.
   a. The god(s) are benevolent and will reward human beings for overcoming evil and temptation.
   b. The gods mock the individual and torture him or her for presuming to be great.
   c. The gods are jealous of and constantly thwarts human aspiration to power and knowledge.
   d. The gods are indifferent toward human beings and let them run their undetermined course.
   e. There are no gods in whom people can place their faith or yearning for meaning in the universe.
4. Human Relations

a. Marriage is a perpetual comedy bound to fail.
b. Marriage is a relationship in which each partner is supported and enabled to grow.
c. An old man marrying a young woman is destined to be a cuckold.
d. Parents should not sacrifice all for a better life for their children.
e. There are few friends who will make extreme sacrifices.

5. Growth and Initiation

a. A boy and a girl must go through a special trial or series of trials before maturing.
b. Manhood or womanhood is often established by an abrupt, random crisis, sometimes at an unusually early age.
c. Aspects of childhood are retained in all of us, sometimes hindering growth, sometimes
d. A person grows only in so far as he or she must face a crisis of confidence or identity.

6. Time

a. Enjoy life now, for the present moment, because we all die too soon.
b. By the time we understand life, there is too little left to live.

7. Death

a. Death is part of living, giving life its final meaning.
b. Death is the ultimate absurd joke on life.
c. There is no death, only a different plane or mode of life without physical decay.
d. Without love, death often appears to be the only alternative to life.

8. Alienation

a. An individual is isolated from fellow human beings and foolishly tries to bridge the gaps.
b. Through alienation comes self-knowledge.
c. Modern culture is defective because it doesn't provide group ties which in primitive cultures make alienation virtually impossible.