

Grades 11–12 Playlist: Development of Two Themes Over the Course of the Text

Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2:

- Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account.

Welcome

Works of literature frequently include more than one theme. Often, authors will structure the story so that two or more themes will build on one another. When this happens, each theme helps to further develop the other so that, when considered together, the reader can get a more complex understanding of how each theme functions in the text.

In this playlist, students will learn to think critically about how two themes build on one another. They will begin by identifying topics and using attention to the details of the passage to explore how these topics develop into themes. They will use their understanding of themes to analyze how two themes interact in the story to produce a more complex understanding of each theme.

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- identify topics and use attention to detail to analyze how topics develop into themes.
- identify and analyze two themes that build on one another.
- think critically about how two themes work together to produce a more complex understanding of the other theme.

Review

Key Terms

- A **topic** is a main idea in a text. A topic can be general like “friendship” or “having goals.”
- A **theme** is a message that develops throughout the duration of a work. A theme is what a text has to say about a particular topic. Often, two or more themes will build on one another. When this happens, the themes work together to produce a more in-depth picture of how each theme works throughout the text.

Exploring the Standard

Many works of literature deal with more than one theme. Some themes may be simple and develop very little throughout the duration of a work, but other themes are more complex, and it may take the entire length of the text for



their meanings to fully unfold. Complex themes often build on one another so that as a reader more fully understands one theme, he or she also begins to more fully understand another theme as well. Read the selection below taken from Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Babbitt*. Be prepared to think about topics and themes in this passage.

¹The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office-buildings.

...

²In one of the skyscrapers the wires of the Associated Press were closing down. The telegraph operators wearily raised their celluloid eye-shades after a night of talking with Paris and Peking. Through the building crawled the scrubwomen, yawning, their old shoes slapping. The dawn mist spun away. Cues of men with lunch-boxes clumped toward the immensity of new factories, sheets of glass and hollow tile, glittering shops where five thousand men worked beneath one roof, pouring out the honest wares that would be sold up the Euphrates and across the veldt. The whistles rolled out in greeting a chorus cheerful as the April dawn; the song of labor in a city built—it seemed—for giants.

³There was nothing of the giant in the aspect of the man who was beginning to awaken on the sleeping-porch of a Dutch Colonial house in that residential district of Zenith known as Floral Heights.

⁴His name was George F. Babbitt. He was forty-six years old now, in April, 1920, and he made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay.

⁵His large head was pink, his brown hair thin and dry. His face was babyish in slumber, despite his wrinkles and the red spectacle-dents on the slopes of his nose. He was not fat but he was exceedingly well fed; his cheeks were pads, and the unroughened hand which lay helpless upon the khaki-colored blanket was slightly puffy. He seemed prosperous, extremely married and unromantic; and altogether unromantic appeared this sleeping-porch, which looked on one sizable elm, two respectable grass-plots, a cement driveway, and a corrugated iron garage. Yet Babbitt was again dreaming of the fairy child, a dream more romantic than scarlet pagodas by a silver sea.

⁶For years the fairy child had come to him. Where others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth. She waited for him, in the darkness beyond mysterious groves. When at last he could slip away from the crowded house he darted to her. His wife, his clamoring friends, sought to follow, but he escaped, the girl fleet beside him, and they crouched together on a shadowy hillside. She was so slim, so white, so eager! She cried that he was gay and valiant, that she would wait for him, that they would sail—

⁷Rumble and bang of the milk-truck.

⁸Babbitt moaned; turned over; struggled back toward his dream. He could see only her face now, beyond misty waters. The furnace-man slammed the basement door. A dog barked in the next yard. As Babbitt sank blissfully into a dim warm tide, the paper-carrier went by whistling, and the rolled-up Advocate thumped the front door. [...]



Teaching Notes: Development of Two Themes Over the Course of the Text

The goal of RL.11.12.2 is for students to understand and be able to explain how two or more themes are developed and how they interact and build on one another. The following information contains ideas that teachers can incorporate into their classroom as well as additional resources to peruse and integrate into instruction as appropriate.

Exploring the Standard

Practice: Discussion Starter

In this playlist, students are asked to identify two interrelated themes in a passage and analyze how those themes build on one another to give the reader a more complex understanding of each theme. At this point in the playlist, students are invited to think about one topic in the passage: the relationship between society and the individual. After being given one instance of the topic in the text, they are asked to identify other instances of the topic. It may be helpful to encourage students to create a concept map with the topic in the middle and ideas related to the topic listed around the edges of this main idea. This will give students a visual representation of the ways in which this topic works in the passage, and it will help them visualize how a topic becomes a theme.

Writing Prompt

1. Direct students to analyze the theme of the city as a place of beauty by answering the following question in an essay: How do the details develop this theme? Students should focus on the imagery surrounding the depiction of the city, such as describing the skyscrapers as beautiful towers that rise above the mist: “sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods.”
2. Assign students a grade-appropriate excerpt from a fictional text with two themes and direct students to answer the following question in an essay: What themes are developed in this passage, and how do the themes intersect throughout?

Applying the Standard

This section of the playlist is meant to give students the opportunity to practice identifying topics and themes. They are also asked to practice analyzing how two different themes build on one another in ways that add to an understanding of how each theme works in the text. For this purpose, a passage from Anzia Yezierska’s *Hungry Hearts* is included in this section. Encourage students to first make a list of topics and then choose one to develop into a theme. They may find it helpful to use the discussion starter prompts and concept maps to do this.

Because this exercise is meant to allow students the chance to practice newly acquired skills, it is best if students have the opportunity to complete this activity with as little guidance as possible. If students have trouble identifying topics, suggest looking at the relationships between the characters in the story. What does the reader know about each character? What can a reader glean from the relationships between these characters? Ask questions to help students further explore topics like economic classes, the importance of money, the importance of community, and self-preservation.

