

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. [...]



In this selection from Chapter I, there are two themes that build on one another. The first theme is that societal powers can be challenging for an individual to overcome, and the second theme is fantasy is also a powerful force that can momentarily allow the individual to escape from the forces of society. Both of these themes grow from the topic—the relationship between society and the individual.

Take a look at how this topic and themes are developed throughout the selection.

A Closer Look: Theme 1

This selection includes a transition from one descriptive focus to another—from the city to a particular man. This shift is the point at which the reader meets the main character, George Babbitt. The transition serves to introduce the idea of the relationship between society and the individual. To get an idea of what the theme is, readers should pay attention to the way in which the topic is treated. For example, one of the key terms is “giant.” The city, the reader is told, seems as if it were made for giants. George Babbitt, however, is no giant. This contrast invites the reader to think about other contrasts between the city and the individual or, more broadly, between society and the individual. It also helps to show that society seems to tower over the individual, powerful and at times even invasive. That sense of invasiveness is shown through the sounds of society interrupting Babbitt’s dream:

“She cried that he was gay and valiant, that she would wait for him, that they would sail—

Rumble and bang of the milk-truck.

Babbitt moaned; turned over; struggled back toward his dream.”

The above examples are a couple illustrations of the topic of the relationship between the individual and society and the theme that societal powers can be challenging for the individual to overcome.

Practice!

Discussion Starter

Think about how the theme is developed. In the example above, George Babbitt is the individual and the city represents society, but this is only *one* way this theme functions in the passage. Using this example as a starting point, look for other comparisons and contrasts between the individual and society.

Read!

For more information about how to find the theme or themes of a text, read:

<http://www.bucks.edu/media/bcccmecialibrary/tutoring/documents/writing/Identifying%20themes.pdf>

A Closer Look: Theme 2

The theme of fantasy being a powerful force that can momentarily allow the individual to escape from the forces of society is developed toward the end of the selection.



Babbitt retreats into dreams where he gets to be with a fairy who thinks he is wonderful: “For years the fairy child had come to him. Where others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth.” This description sharply contrasts with the description of Babbitt’s appearance earlier in the selection, for he is not described as young or handsome. Paragraphs 4 and 5 depict him as a middle-aged, puffy man. The sharp contrast between reality and fantasy help to show how fantasy can provide an escape from an unwelcoming world.

Listen!

To listen to *Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis, visit: <https://librivox.org/babbitt-by-sinclair-lewis/>

A Closer Look: Development of Complex Themes

An indication that the two themes mentioned above build on one another appears in the transition between the second and third paragraphs. The term “giant” appears twice in this section. Giants are supernatural figures and so are related to fantasy, but they are also used as a reference point for how big the city is compared to the nongiant, George Babbitt. Another instance in which these themes interact with one another is in the scene where George Babbitt is dreaming. The sounds that represent society continually invade his sleep as he struggles to hold onto his dream or fantasy. He attempts to block out the sounds of the external world and escape into his own, but he is unsuccessful. If readers know that one of the themes of the passage is that societal powers can be challenging for the individual to overcome, he or she can see in this scene that George is attempting to overcome these powers through fantasy. Understanding that, in turn, allows the reader to understand that in this story, fantasy is also a powerful and important force that can momentarily allow the individual to escape from the forces of society.

Practice!

Look for other instances where these two themes intersect. Think about how each theme adds to the way a reader understands the other theme and how together they help to create an interesting and intricate story.

Also, watch this video on how to analyze a work of literature. This video demonstrates how complex themes can build on one another, each adding deeper meaning to the other.

<http://ed.ted.com/lessons/mining-literature-for-deeper-meanings-amy-e-harter>.

Applying the Standard

Read this selection from the chapter “The Lost ‘Beautifulness’” from *Hungry Hearts*, by Anzia Yezierska. Identify **two** themes that build on one another and analyze how each theme helps to further develop the other.



¹Hanneh Hayyeh walked home, her thoughts in a whirl with the glad anticipation of Mrs. Preston's promised visit. She wondered how she might share the joy of Mrs. Preston's presence with the butcher and all the neighbors. "I'll bake up a shtrudel cake," she thought to herself. "They will all want to come to get a taste of the cake and then they'll give a look on Mrs. Preston."

²Thus smiling and talking to herself she went about her work. As she bent over the wash-tub rubbing the clothes, she visualized the hot, steaming shtrudel just out of the oven and the exclamations of pleasure as Mrs. Preston and the neighbors tasted it. All at once there was a knock at the door. Wiping her soapy hands on the corner of her apron, she hastened to open it.

³"Oi! Mr. Landlord! Come only inside," she urged. "I got the rent for you, but I want you to give a look around how I shined up my flat."

⁴The Prince Albert that bound the protruding stomach of Mr. Benjamin Rosenblatt was no tighter than the skin that encased the smooth-shaven face. His mouth was tight. Even the small, popping eyes held a tight gleam.

⁵"I got no time. The minutes is money," he said, extending a claw-like hand for the rent.

⁶"But I only want you for a half a minute." And Hanneh Hayyeh dragged the owner of her palace across the threshold. "Nu? Ain't I a good painter? And all this I done while other people were sleeping themselves, after I'd come home from my day's work."

⁷"Very nice," condescended Mr. Benjamin Rosenblatt, with a hasty glance around the room. "You certainly done a good job. But I got to go. Here's your receipt." And the fingers that seized Hanneh Hayyeh's rent-money seemed like pincers for grasping molars.

⁸Two weeks later Jake Safransky and his wife Hanneh Hayyeh sat eating their dinner, when the janitor came in with a note.

⁹"From the landlord," he said, handing it to Hanneh Hayyeh, and walked out.

¹⁰"The landlord?" she cried, excitedly. "What for can it be?" With trembling fingers she tore open the note. The slip dropped from her hand. Her face grew livid, her eyes bulged with terror. "Oi weh!" she exclaimed, as she fell back against the wall.

¹¹"Gewalt!" cried her husband, seizing her limp hand, "you look like struck dead."

¹²"Oi-i-i! The murderer! He raised me the rent five dollars a month."

¹³"Good for you! I told you to listen to me. Maybe he thinks we got money laying in the bank when you got so many dollars to give out on paint."

¹⁴She turned savagely on her husband. "What are you tearing yet my flesh? Such a money-grabber! How could I imagine for myself that so he would thank me for laying in my money to painting up his house?"



¹⁵She seized her shawl, threw it over her head, and rushed to the landlord's office.

¹⁶"Oi weh! Mr. Landlord! Where is your heart? How could you raise me my rent when you know my son is yet in France? And even with the extra washing I take in I don't get enough when the eating is so dear?"

¹⁷"The flat is worth five dollars more," answered Mr. Rosenblatt, impatiently. "I can get another tenant any minute."

¹⁸"Have pity on me! I beg you! From where I can squeeze out the five dollars more for you?"

¹⁹"That don't concern me. If you can't pay, somebody else will. I got to look out for myself. In America everybody looks out for himself."



Self-Check: RL.11–12.2

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

Excerpt from Chapter 7 of “The Awakening”

Kate Chopin

- 1 The two women went away one morning to the beach together, arm in arm, under the huge white sunshade. Edna had prevailed upon Madame Ratignolle to leave the children behind, though she could not induce her to relinquish a diminutive roll of needlework, which Adele begged to be allowed to slip into the depths of her pocket. In some unaccountable way they had escaped from Robert.

...
- 2 Edna Pontellier, casting her eyes about, had finally kept them at rest upon the sea. The day was clear and carried the gaze out as far as the blue sky went; there were a few white clouds suspended idly over the horizon. A lateen sail was visible in the direction of Cat Island, and others to the south seemed almost motionless in the far distance.
- 3 “Of whom—of what are you thinking?” asked Adele of her companion, whose countenance she had been watching with a little amused attention, arrested by the absorbed expression which seemed to have seized and fixed every feature into a statuesque repose.
- 4 “Nothing,” returned Mrs. Pontellier, with a start, adding at once: “How stupid! But it seems to me it is the reply we make instinctively to such a question. Let me see,” she went on, throwing back her head and narrowing her fine eyes till they shone like two vivid points of light. “Let me see. I was really not conscious of thinking of anything; but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts.”
- 5 “Oh! never mind!” laughed Madame Ratignolle. “I am not quite so exacting. I will let you off this time. It is really too hot to think, especially to think about thinking.”
- 6 “But for the fun of it,” persisted Edna. “First of all, the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made a delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at. The hot wind beating in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. Oh, I see the connection now!”
- 7 “Where were you going that day in Kentucky, walking through the grass?”



- 8 “I don’t remember now. I was just walking diagonally across a big field. My sun-bonnet obstructed the view. I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it. I don’t remember whether I was frightened or pleased. I must have been entertained.
- 9 “Likely as not it was Sunday,” she laughed; “and I was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of.”
- 10 “And have you been running away from prayers ever since, ma chere?” asked Madame Ratignolle, amused.
- 11 “No! oh, no!” Edna hastened to say. “I was a little unthinking child in those days, just following a misleading impulse without question. On the contrary, during one period of my life religion took a firm hold upon me; after I was twelve and until-until—why, I suppose until now, though I never thought much about it—just driven along by habit. But do you know,” she broke off, turning her quick eyes upon Madame Ratignolle and leaning forward a little so as to bring her face quite close to that of her companion, “sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided.”
- 12 Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier, which was near her. Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, “Pauvre cherie.”

1. Which of the following themes is suggested in paragraph 6?
 - A. beauty
 - B. regret
 - C. isolation
 - D. silence
2. Which of the following details would be most important to include in a summary of the passage?
 - A. Madame Ratignolle and Mrs. Pontellier stroll on the beach together.
 - B. Madame Ratignolle notices that Mrs. Pontellier seems distracted by distant thoughts.
 - C. Mrs. Pontellier remembers the sermons that her father used to give at church services.
 - D. Mrs. Pontellier remembers the meadows of Kentucky when she looks across the water.



Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

“The Raven”

Edgar Allan Poe

- Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
5 “’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door:
Only this and nothing more.”
- Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow
10 From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore,
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore:
Nameless here for evermore.
- And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
15 So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
“’Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door,
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door:
This it is and nothing more.”
- Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
20 “Sir,” said I, “or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you”—here I opened wide the door:—
Darkness there and nothing more.
- 25 Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, “Lenore?”
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, “Lenore”:
30 Merely this and nothing more.



Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.
“Surely,” said I, “surely that is something at my window lattice;
Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore;
35 Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore:
‘Tis the wind and nothing more.”

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
40 But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door,
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door:
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,—
45 “Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,” I said, “art sure no craven,
Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore:
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

Much I marveled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
50 Though its answer little meaning--little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door,
Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
With such name as “Nevermore.”

55 But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour,
Nothing further then he uttered, not a feather then he fluttered,
Till I scarcely more than muttered,—“Other friends have flown before;
On the morrow he will leave me, as my Hopes have flown before.”
60 Then the bird said, “Nevermore.”

3. Which of the following statements would be the most important to include in a summary of the poem?
- A. The speaker is reading and falls asleep.
 - B. The speaker thinks the raven looks dignified.
 - C. The speaker is trying to get over his lost love.
 - D. The speaker asks the raven what its name is.



4. Which line from “The Raven” **best** shows how the themes of darkness and sadness are intertwined in the poem?
- A. “Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,”
 - B. “Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,—”
 - C. “While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,”
 - D. “As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.”

Read the passage. Then answer the question.

Excerpt from *The Scarlet Letter*

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Hester Prynne, a woman living in a small town, is forced to live shame for adultery. Despite this, Hester remains dignified and refuses to name the man she had an affair with. In the following excerpt, she is speaking with the minister of the town’s church, Arthur Dimmesdale. Their thoughts and feelings are expressed.

- 1 Arthur Dimmesdale gazed into Hester’s face with a look in which hope and joy shone out, indeed, but with fear betwixt them, and a kind of horror at her boldness, who had spoken what he vaguely hinted at, but dared not speak.
- 2 But Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness, as vast, as intricate, and shadowy as the untamed forest, amid the gloom of which they were now holding a colloquy that was to decide their fate. Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticising all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers—stern and wild ones—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.
- 3 The minister, on the other hand, had never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws; although, in a single instance, he had so fearfully transgressed one of the most sacred of them. But this had been a sin of passion, not of principle, nor even purpose. Since that wretched epoch, he had watched with morbid zeal and minuteness, not his acts—for those it was easy to arrange—but each breath of emotion, and his every thought. At the head of the social system, as the clergymen of that day stood, he was only the more trammelled by its regulations, its principles, and even its prejudices. As a priest, the framework of his order inevitably hemmed him in. As a man who had once sinned, but who kept his conscience all alive and painfully sensitive by the fretting of an unhealed wound, he might have been supposed safer within the line of virtue than if he had never sinned at all.



- 4 Thus we seem to see that, as regarded Hester Prynne, the whole seven years of outlaw and ignominy had been little other than a preparation for this very hour. But Arthur Dimmesdale! Were such a man once more to fall, what plea could be urged in extenuation of his crime? None; unless it avail him somewhat that he was broken down by long and exquisite suffering; that his mind was darkened and confused by the very remorse which harrowed it; that, between fleeing as an avowed criminal, and remaining as a hypocrite, conscience might find it hard to strike the balance; that it was human to avoid the peril of death and infamy, and the inscrutable machinations of an enemy; that, finally, to this poor pilgrim, on his dreary and desert path, faint, sick, miserable, there appeared a glimpse of human affection and sympathy, a new life, and a true one, in exchange for the heavy doom which he was now expiating. And be the stern and sad truth spoken, that the breach which guilt has once made into the human soul is never, in this mortal state, repaired. It may be watched and guarded, so that the enemy shall not force his way again into the citadel, and might even in his subsequent assaults, select some other avenue, in preference to that where he had formerly succeeded. But there is still the ruined wall, and near it the stealthy tread of the foe that would win over again his unforgotten triumph.
- 5 The struggle, if there were one, need not be described. Let it suffice that the clergyman resolved to flee, and not alone.
- 6 “If in all these past seven years,” thought he, “I could recall one instant of peace or hope, I would yet endure, for the sake of that earnest of Heaven’s mercy. But now—since I am irrevocably doomed—wherefore should I not snatch the solace allowed to the condemned culprit before his execution? Or, if this be the path to a better life, as Hester would persuade me, I surely give up no fairer prospect by pursuing it! Neither can I any longer live without her companionship; so powerful is she to sustain—so tender to soothe! O Thou to whom I dare not lift mine eyes, wilt Thou yet pardon me?”
5. Which of the following are themes of the story? Select the **two** correct answers.
- A. music
 - B. guilt
 - C. love
 - D. war
 - E. heat

