

Grade 7 Playlist: Analyze Themes in a Text

Aligns with *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2*:

- Analyze the development of a theme over the course of the text.

Welcome

One of the oldest forms of storytelling is drama, or plays. Plays are usually acted out on a stage, and today some plays are adapted into movies, TV shows, or even web series. One reason these stories stick around long enough for others to adapt them is that they have strong **themes**. A theme is the message or statement about life that an author wants the reader to know. Longer works such as plays, novels, and movies can have multiple themes. When reading a play or a novel, find a theme and see how it develops over the course of the story. What plot events reveal this theme? What do the characters do and say to build the theme?

Watch!

Watch this video to understand why theme is important:

- <https://www.opened.com/video/espark-learning-developing-theme-7-rl-quest-2/427308>

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn and practice how to:

- write a theme statement.
- explain how a theme develops over the course of a text.

Review

Key Term

- Theme:** the message or statement about life that the author wants the reader to know.

Pygmalion is about a language professor named Henry Higgins who makes a bet that he can teach a lower-class flower girl named Eliza Doolittle to be a proper lady by making her speak with a proper English accent. Although this starts off as just an experiment, Higgins grows to like Eliza and tries to control the rest of her life. At the end of the play, Eliza refuses him and keeps her independence.

The play is set in London during the Victorian Era, which lasted from the mid-1800s to around 1900. In this time period, there were many specific expectations about how people in different social classes should speak and behave.



Victorian Classes and Accents

There were three major social and economic classes in Victorian England. Working-class people were paid daily or weekly and did physical labor. In the middle class, only men worked and received monthly or yearly salaries. Their jobs involved mental or academic skills. Upper-class people did not work at all because they inherited land and money from their ancestors.

In Victorian society, only men in higher social classes received high-quality education. Poor people received little to no education. Accent was also a noticeable difference between rich and poor. The way people spoke in the higher, educated classes was considered proper English while the accents of lower class people were considered improper.

Major Characters in *Pygmalion*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliza Doolittle: A flower girl from a lower economic class who does not speak what is considered proper English. • Henry Higgins: A professor who studies languages and accents of people in different parts of the world. He teaches people how to speak proper English. • Colonel Pickering: A language scholar who wants to learn more about Higgins's work and persuades him to teach Eliza. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mrs. Higgins: Henry Higgins' mother • Freddy Eynsford Hill: Falls in love with Eliza, writes letters to her, and becomes a marriage option for her by the end of the play |
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Exploring the Standard

To discuss a theme of a story, it helps to create a theme statement. A theme statement is more detailed than simply saying, "The theme is justice." What does the story say *about* justice? A theme statement would say, "Justice can only be done when people care for others." This statement is more specific and gives others an idea of what one particular story says about justice.

Let's apply this to *Pygmalion*. One of the play's themes is that people can free themselves from depending on the expectations of social classes when they declare their own independence. Just saying that the theme is independence is not specific enough.

This is how the theme develops throughout the play:

1. Eliza unknowingly loses her independence when she asks Higgins for lessons.
2. Eliza then becomes dependent on Higgins so she can navigate the expectations of the upper class.
3. Eliza finally realizes that she has lost her independence and that Higgins was only using her for an experiment. She decides not to be dependent on Higgins anymore and decides that she will make a living teaching others exactly what he taught her.



Teaching Notes: Analyze Themes in a Text

The goal of RL.7.2 is for students to understand and be able to explain how **themes** develop over the course of a text. The following information contains ideas that teachers can incorporate into their classrooms as well as additional resources to peruse and integrate into instruction as appropriate.

Activities

1. Discuss another character from the play *Pygmalion* (such as Higgins) and how that character changes throughout the story. How does this character support the theme discussed in the playlist?
2. Divide the class into groups and assign each group a different theme from *Pygmalion* (see the resource below for a list of themes). Ask students to discuss how that theme develops throughout the play. Have each group share their ideas with the class using examples from the play.

Writing Prompts

1. Ask students to think about a story they like (a book, movie, cartoon, comic, TV show, or web series). Have them write an essay analyzing one theme from the story. Students should describe how it develops over the course of the story and how a character's changes reveal that theme.
2. Tell students that just like books, songs often have themes. Play a song for students and have them read along with the lyrics. Then ask students to write a paragraph analyzing the theme of the song. Students should identify specific phrases or lines that help to develop the theme of the song. Songs that would work well for this activity include "Big Yellow Taxi," "I Hope You Dance," or "Take Me Home, Country Roads."

Additional Resources

Consider these additional resources when teaching RL.7.2:

- This site discusses themes of *Pygmalion* and where they appear in the play:
<http://www.litcharts.com/lit/pygmalion/themes>
- Read the complete text of *Pygmalion*:
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3825/3825-h/3825-h.htm>
- Learn about the historical context of *Pygmalion* with these resources:
 - An image gallery of Victorian era photographs, including photos of flower sellers:
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturepicturegalleries/10425239/Victorian-street-life-in-London.html?frame=2722873>
 - An article on poverty and families in the Victorian Era:
<http://www.hiddenlives.org.uk/articles/poverty.html>

