

## Grades 9–10 Playlist: Theme and Central Idea Development

*Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY RL.9-10.2:*

- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

### Welcome

In order to showcase a deep understanding of a literary text, it is helpful to focus on the details of the text. Understanding how details help to develop the overall story will allow a reader to identify the theme and/or central idea as well. In addition, understanding the details will help a reader see how the details shape and refine the theme and/or central idea throughout the text.

### Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- analyze how a theme or central idea develops over the course of the text (e.g., motif), including evidence from the text as support.
- explain how specific details from the text refine or create subtle distinctions that shape the theme using a range of textual evidence.

### Review

#### Key Terms

- While a **subject** refers to the topic at hand within a given text, the **theme** is an expressed opinion, analysis, or commentary, on that subject. A theme often is used to describe or represent the unifying or dominant idea within a work of art that goes beyond the mere subject or topic.

### Exploring the Standard

When analyzing literature, readers need to make decisions about what aspects and details of the text are most important and relevant in effort to explain the main theme and/or central idea. Posing and answering key questions can help readers identify the most important details by paying specific attention to the main character(s); the time and place of the story (setting); the main plot or action of the story (which usually consists of a conflict, goal, or journey to self-discovery/realization); why the situation is happening (or why the characters want to achieve their goal); and how the characters solve their problem or achieve their goal (the resolution or “ending” of the story).

### Watch!

Watch these quick videos to learn about how to identify theme or central ideas:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ng48Q5iqcA4>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9fvYNZZ8PI>



## Example 1

The following link provides the full text of Edith Wharton’s short story titled, “Mrs. Manstey’s View”:

- <http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/MrsMans.shtml>

When identifying the theme within short stories with the aim of analyzing in detail its development over the course of the text, readers should (1) identify the conflict; (2) analyze how the conflict causes the main character to change or affect other characters; and (3) determine the message the author develops over through the plot of the story. The conflict occurs when Mrs. Manstey and Mrs. Black dispute over the construction of an addition to Mrs. Black’s building that would obstruct Mrs. Manstey’s view of the beautiful yards. This affects Mrs. Manstey because this dispute drives her to set the addition on fire (the climax), and also leads to her death due to developing pneumonia while committing the arson (the resolution). However, Mrs. Manstey has no effect on Mrs. Black’s intention on finishing the addition to her building, as the construction resumes after Mrs. Manstey’s death. So what is the author’s message?

Literary works rarely have one sole theme. In fact, it is quite common for works to encompass many themes, and the same goes for this story. One theme could be that the upper and lower social classes have conflicting values, since Mrs. Manstey is of the lower and Mrs. Black the upper. Another theme could be how people often embody an illusion of control over life. This theme is shown through Mrs. Manstey’s actions, who thought the only way to achieve her goal was to commit arson, which is a drastic choice to make, given the stakes (the window view), but her actions were rendered useless. This last detail of the story also could point to another theme—how one person cannot make a difference. Although that theme would seem bleak, it does make sense in the context of the story, as Mrs. Manstey’s actions did not actually stop the construction and resulted in her death. All of these various details help to show the different themes that are being developed over the course of the text. Notice how the same detail can show two different themes.

Note how the above analysis relies only on key details from the text. It is through this process of close reading, identifying key aspects, and determining the theme of the story that could culminate into a deeper understanding of the text.

### Listen!

To get the full effect of this unique story, the following link provides an audio version of “Mrs. Manstey’s View”:

- [http://ia800308.us.archive.org/20/items/short\\_story\\_035\\_0812\\_librivox/shortstory035\\_mrsmansteysview\\_rt\\_64kb.mp3](http://ia800308.us.archive.org/20/items/short_story_035_0812_librivox/shortstory035_mrsmansteysview_rt_64kb.mp3)

### Practice!

Complete the following activity to practice identifying literary themes and means of support:

- <https://www.opened.com/homework/9-10-rl-2-determine-a-theme-or-central-idea-of-a-text-and/3712743>

## Example 2

The following is a poem written by Emily Dickinson. Readers may be familiar with her unique style of short and concise lines, interesting punctuation choices, and her stark imagery. But how can readers come to an understanding the poem, including its main idea?



## Teaching Notes: Theme and Central Idea Development

The goal of RL.9-10.2 is for students to determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; and provide an objective summary of the text. The following information contains ideas that teachers can incorporate into their classroom.

### Activities

1. Have students read Robert Frost’s poem, “Mending Wall” (or another poem of your choice). Then have them indicate line(s) they think contain important information, such as the theme or main idea of the poem. Then choose three to five students to share their line choices and/or reveal what they think is the theme or main idea of the poem. Take a poll of who agrees/disagrees to showcase that poems can have multiple themes. The following questions could be used as guidelines:
  - What parts of the poem support your idea of the main theme?
  - What does the author mean by “good fences make good neighbors”?
2. Set students into groups of three to five, and give them all the same story or poem to read. Then have the group choose a few lines or passage that points to the theme of the text. When students are finished, have each group present their findings, and compare the differences between the groups.

### Writing Prompts

1. Assign students a poignant short story or poem and task them with identifying the theme over the development of the text. For short stories, students can use the plot line (exposition, climax, resolution), and for poems, students can break the text up by stanzas or a specific number of lines.
2. Have students choose a poem of their interest, and ask them to answer the following question in an essay: How and/or why does the story affect the reader?

