



Overview: This lesson is intended to be a kind of “plug and play” support for teachers seeking ways to implement the Common Core Reading Standards for Literature, specifically standard 2, which asks about the interrelationships between central ideas within a literary work and the work’s major message or point. (Lesson Duration: 2 hours)

Standards:

- **RL.11-12.1:** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- **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; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **RL.11-12.4:** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.

Objectives

- Students will learn that all literary works have a message.
- Students will learn that there is a direct relationship between the central ideas (the motifs) of a literary text and the theme (the work’s point).
- Students will learn to compare two central ideas and determine the message the author is conveying about both of them in order to understand more fully the complex issues raised by the work.

Materials: Classroom copies of the William Shakespeare play [*Romeo and Juliet*](#).

Procedure:

Before the Lesson

Students should have received copies of the play for individual perusal.



Activity 1: The Theme is Not (Just) “Love” Lecture

One realization many students struggle with is the idea that all texts have a message¹ -- an argument, a point of view, a belief, or an outlook on humanity and its many foibles -- and the author is using the text specifically to convey that message. Sometimes this message can be conveyed obviously and didactically in the manner of a Very Special Episode Of (one outstanding reason to avoid any teen “issue novel” ever written), but the best ones convey their messages more subtly -- and often with a twist.

A good, crunchy, complex, and interesting text – like the ones students are reading in English – has more than one major idea and more than one major point to make. How do you find that major point, though? How do you know what the author’s argument happens to be?

Definition Time

At this point, students need to understand or review the meanings of two crucial ideas: *motif* and *theme*.

Motif: A central idea or set of related ideas repeated throughout a literary work. A motif can be expressed in one or two words (e.g. “appearance vs. reality”) and is generally not a complete thought.

Theme: Though sometimes the words theme and motif are used interchangeably, it is more helpful to distinguish them in this way: A theme is the author’s point, message, or belief as expressed through the action and characters of a literary work. It is a more complex and developed version of the “moral of the story” idea expressed directly or indirectly in fables. Sometimes, an author will have a character articulate a thematic statement, but this is not always the case. Often, the theme must be inferred from the actions of the characters, particularly from the fate of the protagonist. A theme IS a complete thought. Often, the theme is the author’s opinion ABOUT the motif.

Group Practice

Present the following ideas to students by writing them on the board. Students should be asked, “Which one is a theme? Which is a motif? How can you tell?”

1. Love

¹ For the purposes of this lesson, I am going to distinguish between motif (a central idea or concern repeated throughout a text) versus theme (a message or point the author is making, usually a message about the motif). Sometimes the word “theme” is used interchangeably with “motif,” as in “the theme of *Romeo and Juliet* is love,” but the words more accurate and precise use is defined as “the author’s primary claim, argument, or message within a literary work.” In other words, the *motif* of *Romeo and Juliet* is “love,” and the *theme* might be expressed as, “Shakespeare argues in *Romeo and Juliet* that love and violence are not opposites, but two interchangeable faces of the same phenomenon.”



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| 2. Love between two people who really care about each other |
| 3. The individual vs. the state |
| 4. Appearance and reality |
| 5. Appearances cannot be trusted. |
| 6. The impact of war |
| 7. War is sometimes a necessary evil. |
| 8. Love stinks. |

Note: Only 5, 7, and 8 are themes. The rest are motifs. Point out to students how the other choices do not express an opinion, an argument, a belief, or a “moral.” They may set out important concerns, but until students say, “Okay, what is the author saying ABOUT appearance? ABOUT reality?” they will not really have a theme in the sense of “point” or “argument.”

Activity 2: A Blast from the Past

Pairs/Small Group Discussion

In small groups or pairs, have students consider one of the Big Frequent Fliers of the English classroom, *Romeo and Juliet*. If they wish, they may refer to one of the [online copies of the play](#), but it is not super-necessary. Have students answer the question below:

Question

What are some of the Big Major Ideas of *Romeo and Juliet*? Name at least three concerns or issues or problems that continually came up throughout the play. Yes, you can start with “love.” Please do not end there!

A Brief Note About Small-Group Discussion

Even though the whole-class discussion would just seem to rehash the small-group discussion, the small-group discussion is crucial. Especially for more reticent students, the opportunity to “test-drive” their initial impressions with their peers and compare impressions of the text before taking the larger risk of sharing in front of the whole class can be invaluable.

Small-group discussion also helps negate or eliminate those “Mount Rushmore moments” in which the teacher asks a question about the text, and the class looks back at her with apparently uncomprehending blankness. A helpful response here is often, “Okay, talk about this amongst yourselves for the next few minutes, and then we’ll reconvene



as a class and see what you think.” This decision buys students time and allows them to compose fruitful answers – and allows them to understand that in textual interpretation, the onus has to be on them to be active, engaged readers in conversation with the text.

Whole-Class Discussion

Once students have had the opportunity to discuss possible motifs about *Romeo and Juliet*, put them up on the board, reinforcing the distinction between a repeated idea within the text and an author’s message or point.

A Brief Note About Whole-Class Discussion

The role of the teacher in class discussion is primarily to keep students *focused on the words*. In discussion, require students to explain what element or elements within the words led them to their conclusion. Four questions are absolutely essential to ask students during discussion – and to encourage students to ask of themselves and each other.

WHY?

- Why do you think so?
- Why does your line/your word/your evidence prove your point?
- Why did the author use this particular word and not another, similar word?

WHERE?

- Where in the story/play/poem did you find your information?
- Can you literally put your finger on the place in the text that proves your point?

WHAT?

- What do you mean when you say "___"?
- What does this quote you chose mean? Can you rephrase it?
- What else could the author have said here?
- What "work" is this word doing that a similar one would not do?

For some teachers, this role may represent a change from the usual classroom discussion. **The goal of the teacher is not to lead the students to a predetermined insight, but to communicate the crucial idea that although there may not be one “right answer,” there are better and worse ones – and the better ones are better because they are supported by the words of the author.**



Practice: Making Meaning from Motif
Individual Work

Distribute copies of the chart below to students. On the chart is a list of more “frequent flier” texts often taught in 9-12th-grade English classes along with their more prominent motifs? Students should be encouraged to choose works they have read and remember with decent clarity. (If they have not read any of the works on the list, they should be encouraged to identify works they have read recently.)

Students should choose 2-3 works on the chart, and for each work, choose at least two motifs. For each motif, students should ask themselves, “What was [the author’s name] saying ABOUT [the motif I chose]?”

For example, if a student selected William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* and the motif of evil, she would ask herself, “Okay, so what was William Golding saying is true ABOUT evil?”

Texts	Motifs	Message
Shakespeare, <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Love Violence Family Death Obedience	
Homer, <i>The Odyssey</i>	Journey Heroism Deception Piety Cleverness Hospitality Fidelity	



	Honor	
Steinbeck, <i>Of Mice and Men</i>	Isolation Friendship Alienation Hope Mercy	
Shakespeare, <i>Julius Caesar</i>	Power Corruption Betrayal Friendship Government Duty Honor	
Golding, <i>Lord of the Flies</i>	Civilization Savagery Innocence Alienation Evil War Isolation	



	Religion Groupthink	
Jefferson, <i>The Declaration of Independence</i>	Independence Rights Power Government Justice	
Hawthorne, <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	Redemption Sin Morality Isolation Alienation Rebellion	
Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i>	Reality Identity Deception Duty Manliness	



	Insanity Scapegoating Indecision	
Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est"	War Death Sacrifice Patriotism Heroism Reality Lies	

Small-group Discussion

After they have identified the themes to at least 2-3 works, students should be encouraged to discuss their themes with others around them, particularly those who selected the same books. **Discussion can address the following issues:**

- If you and another person in your group chose the same work (and the same motif), did both of you come up with the same theme? Did the themes differ?
- Could both of those themes be valid messages of the text? (Authors can have more than one message in a work!)
- Why do you think your theme is valid? Can you think of a specific moment or scene from your work that really highlights or dramatizes the author’s message most effectively?

For example, if a student has chosen “evil” as a motif for *Lord of the Flies*, her motif might be “Golding argues that evil is inherent in human nature.” What scene or moment from the book really hits that message home?



Whole-Class Discussion

Compare students' answers for at least 2-3 texts, discussing what scenes or moments from the story genuinely emphasized the story's theme. Patterns will tend to emerge in discussion -- the motifs will start relating not only to the theme, but also to each other. The following exercise can be used in case this does not happen.

Activity 3: Motifs in Conversation

The Core Curriculum is asking students to go even one-step beyond identifying the relationship between motif and theme. The standards encourage the students to take at least two ideas from the same work and ask, "What is the author saying ABOUT both [motif A] and [motif B] together? What is the relationship between A and B? What is the ultimate message about the relationship between these two ideas?"

Practice

Students should be asked to look back at the work they did for the motifs of *Romeo and Juliet* and to consider two of the most prominent ideas in the play: love and violence. At first individually and then in small groups, students should be asked to consider the following questions:

- What is Shakespeare saying ABOUT love in this play?
- What is Shakespeare saying ABOUT violence?
- What is the relationship in this play between love and violence? How are they connected?
- Are they truly opposites?
- What is Shakespeare saying about both of them together? What ultimate message is Shakespeare sending us about the relationship between love and violence?

Students should be invited to share their paired motifs and discuss the ways in which both of those central ideas operate together in the text. Some possible answers might be that love and violence, like Romeo and Juliet themselves, only seem like opposites. Instead, like Romeo and Juliet they, love, and violence are only two halves of the same phenomenon: the extreme emotions that dominate the citizens of Verona. Friar Lawrence advises the couple that "these violent delights have violent ends," and urges them to "love moderately." In this, he is possibly acting as Shakespeare's mouthpiece, for in this play, love does not kill violence, but amplifies it - and violence amplifies love. In the end, both the lovers and the play's most violent members are dead, "punished" for their passions.



Closure

Students should be urged to seek out those “conversations” of motifs within the texts they read. Referring to their work with *Romeo and Juliet*, the teacher should single out the complexity of the theme their “motif conversation” was able to give them versus the interesting-but-less-complex theme lent by their exploration of one motif alone.

Assessment

There are a variety of ways in which these activities may be assessed. Simple class participation points for relevant, engaged contributions to the conversation would be one method, or the insights gained during class discussion may be used as prompts for a shorter or longer writing assignment in which students substantiate their insights about two or more motifs in a work already read for the class or for a previous class in English, exploring how the relationship between two motifs or more can result in a much more richly complex and rewarding understanding of the author’s theme.