Theme and Message

OBJECTIVES
Students will use textual evidence to determine the central theme of a song.

Students will use textual evidence to determine the artist’s message about the central theme.

STANDARDS
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.3

VOCABULARY
Message, point of view, theme (review)

PREPARATION
• Make copies of “Man in Black,” “Jolene,” and “You Ain’t Woman Enough” Lyric Sheets.

• Locate audio or video versions of “Man in Black” performed by Johnny Cash, “Jolene” performed by Dolly Parton, and “You Ain’t Woman Enough” performed by Loretta Lynn.

(Note: Johnny Cash’s first televised performance of “Man in Black” may be found via an Internet search. For a rock version of “Jolene,” locate The White Stripes’ cover version.)

• For advanced students, make copies of “Spotlight on Point of View” (in the Appendix).

FREE WRITE (5 minutes)

DISCUSS HOMEWORK (4 minutes)
Divide students into pairs to spend one minute sharing their favorite titles. Next ask students to pick one of their favorite titles and share it with the whole group. Students may wish to include where they heard the title.

BRAINSTORM (1 minute)

Prompt: In your journal, write down the titles of as many popular songs as you can think of in one minute. A popular song is one heard by millions of people on the radio, stereo, Internet, and television. Titles should be appropriate for school use.

Dolly Parton was singing on radio and TV shows in Knoxville, Tennessee, by the time she was ten. She has received the National Medal of Arts, the Kennedy Center Honors, and a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award for her work and contributions to the arts.
ACTIVITY (35 minutes)

1. Students will do a deep reading of song lyrics to explore the concept of message. A song’s message is the underlying meaning the songwriter is trying to communicate about the theme, which is the song’s main subject. Distribute the “Man in Black” Lyric Sheet, and then play a recording by Johnny Cash. Note that this song does not have a chorus, reminding students that not all songs follow a traditional structure. Students may wish to briefly discuss this fact. Ask students to discuss each of the following questions with a partner, then open up the discussion to the whole group:

   - In “Man in Black,” what is Johnny Cash trying to say about the theme—what is the song’s message? (Students may have different answers to this question, which could lead to a lively class discussion. Opinions about the message will probably settle around the idea of standing up for the underdog.)
   - What evidence from the song supports your position about the message?
   - What can you infer from the lyrics about Johnny Cash’s views toward helping the poor and needy?
   - What evidence from the song makes you think so?
   - Is what Johnny Cash expresses a personal or political viewpoint—or is there a difference between the two? Why or why not?
   - Is Johnny Cash contrasting his own choices with those of other people in society? Who?
   - What evidence from the song makes you think so?
   - How is this song like or unlike other songs you have studied up to this point?
   - Which popular songs today have a strong social message?
   - Should songwriters think about the messages of their songs? Why or why not?
   - What opinions do you have about the kinds of messages that are popular in the music you listen to?

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTION OPPORTUNITY

Though “Man in Black” has become a timeless classic, it touches on a variety of social and political issues prevalent when the song was written in 1971. You may wish to seek out a history colleague to help supplement or continue the discussion. Or students with an interest in history may want to consider writing a song about a historical event or from the viewpoint of someone in history.

2. Distribute the “Jolene” and “You Ain’t Woman Enough” Lyric Sheets. Play both songs for the class. Ask students to respond in pairs to the following prompts and write their answers in their journals:

   - What is the theme of “Jolene”? What is your evidence?
   - What is the theme of “You Ain’t Woman Enough”? What is your evidence?
   - What is the message of “Jolene”?
   - What is the message of “You Ain’t Woman Enough”?
   - Underline or highlight evidence in the lyrics of both songs to support your conclusions about the songs’ messages.
3. Students will notice that “Jolene” and “You Ain’t Woman Enough” are different songwriters’ responses to similar situations. This will give you the opportunity to introduce the concept of **point of view**. Share this information with students:

In a song, the perspective of the singer is called the point of view, which can greatly influence the way listeners connect with the lyrics. Both “Jolene” and “You Ain’t Woman Enough” fall in the category of second-person point of view because they are statements addressed to someone else. “Man in Black” falls in the category of first-person point of view, because its lyrics express personal sentiments in a state of inward reflection. Songwriters also can write from a third-person point of view, which is a narrator telling listeners a story.

4. If time allows, give students the following prompt to write a reflection in their journals:

Think about the songs that you like to listen to. What are the common themes? What are the common messages? What kinds of messages would you like to include in your songwriting? In which point of view would you want to express them?

*For advanced work on point of view, see “Spotlight on Point of View” in the Appendix.*

**HOMEWORK**

Ask students to complete the following tasks. They may write in their journals or type their response and print it out.

1. Choose one of your favorite songs and listen to it. Write one to three sentences about how the songwriter communicates the theme.

2. Pick one of these two prompts:
   
   - Review your previous writings and select a theme to write more about. The writing does not have to be in the form of a song; it could be in the form of a story, a poem, a thoughtfully done comic strip, a song, or an essay. Just focus on getting your ideas onto paper. Include a title that reflects the theme of whatever you write.
   
   - Pick a song that has a strong message and write a song with an opposing message — just as “Jolene” and “You Ain’t Woman Enough” express opposing messages.

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Johnny Cash became known as the ‘Man in Black’ because of his distinctive stage wear. That nickname inspired Cash to write a song to express his viewpoint on social issues.