

4) Subject and Theme

OBJECTIVES

Students will use textual evidence to determine the subject of a song.

Students will use textual evidence to determine the theme about the subject.

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

point of view, subject, 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 online 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, online, 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 close reading of song lyrics to explore the concept of **theme**. A song's theme is the message the songwriter is trying to communicate about the **subject**, which is the song's main topic. 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 the subject and what is the theme? (Students may have different answers to this question, which could lead to a lively class discussion. Opinions about the theme will probably settle around the idea of standing up for the underdog.)
 - What evidence from the song supports your position about the theme?
 - 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 themes of their songs? Why or why not?
 - What opinions do you have about the kinds of themes 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 subject of "Jolene"?
 - What is the theme of "Jolene"? What is your evidence?
 - What is the subject of "You Ain't Woman Enough"?
 - What is the theme of "You Ain't Woman Enough"? What is your evidence?
 - Underline or highlight evidence in the lyrics of both songs to support your conclusions about the songs' themes.

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:

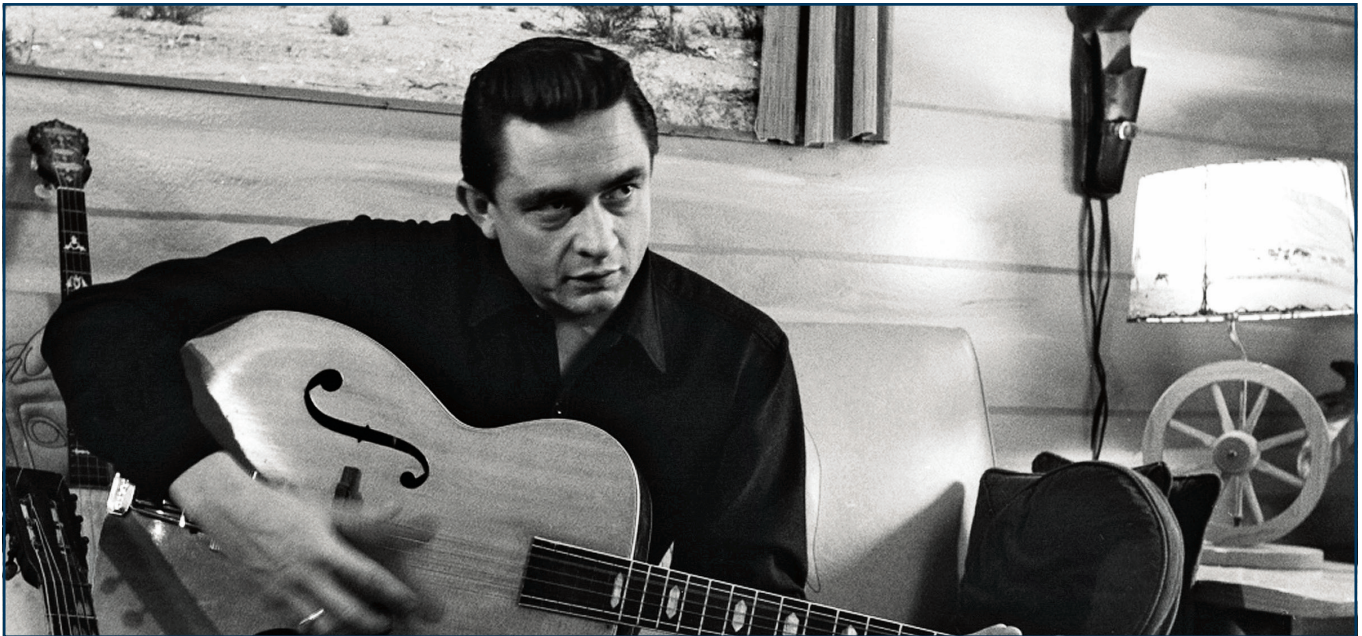
Think about the songs that you like to listen to. What are the common subjects? What are the common themes? What kinds of themes would you like to include in your songwriting? In which point of view would you want to express them?

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 subject.
2. Pick one of these two prompts:
 - Review your previous writings and select a subject 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 subject 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.



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.

LYRIC SHEET

Man in Black*Johnny Cash*

Well, you wonder why I always dress in black
Why you never see bright colors on my back
And why does my appearance seem to have a somber tone
Well, there's a reason for the things that I have on

I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town
I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime
But is there because he's a victim of the times

I wear the black for those who've never read
Or listened to the words that Jesus said
About the road to happiness through love and charity
Why, you'd think He's talking straight to you and me

Well, we're doin' mighty fine, I do suppose
In our streak of lightnin' cars and fancy clothes
But just so we're reminded of the ones who are held back
Up front there ought 'a be a Man in Black

I wear it for the sick and lonely old
For the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold
I wear the black in mournin' for the lives that could have been
Each week we lose a hundred fine young men

And, I wear it for the thousands who have died
Believin' that the Lord was on their side
I wear it for another hundred thousand who have died
Believin' that we all were on their side

Well, there's things that never will be right I know
And things need changin' everywhere you go
But 'til we start to make a move to make a few things right
You'll never see me wear a suit of white

Ah, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day
And tell the world that everything's okay
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back
'Til things are brighter, I'm the Man in Black.

LYRIC SHEET

Jolene*Dolly Parton*

Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene
I'm begging of you please don't take my man
Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene
Please don't take him just because you can

Your beauty is beyond compare, with flaming locks
of auburn hair
With ivory skin and eyes of emerald green
Your smile is like a breath of spring, your voice is
soft like summer rain
And I cannot compete with you, Jolene

He talks about you in his sleep and there's nothing
I can do to keep ...
From crying when he calls your name, Jolene
And I can easily understand how you could easily
take my man
But you don't know what he means to me, Jolene

Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene
I'm begging of you please don't take my man
Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene
Please don't take him just because you can

You could have your choice of men, but I could
never love again
He's the only one for me, Jolene
I had to have this talk with you, my happiness
depends on you
And whatever you decide to do, Jolene

Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene
I'm begging of you please don't take my man
Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene
Please don't take him even though you can
Jolene, Jolene



Dolly Parton addresses "Jolene" to a red-headed woman who is trying to steal her man. Instead of using anger in her lyrics, Parton begs the woman to leave her husband alone.

LYRIC SHEET

**You Ain't Woman Enough
(To Take My Man)***Loretta Lynn*

You've come to tell me something you say I ought to know
That he don't love me anymore and I'll have to let him go
You say you're gonna take him oh but I don't think you can
'Cause you ain't woman enough to take my man

Women like you they're a dime a dozen you can buy 'em anywhere
For you to get to him I'd have to move over and I'm gonna stand right here
It'll be over my dead body so get out while you can
'Cause you ain't woman enough to take my man

Sometimes a man's caught lookin' at things that he don't need
He took a second look at you but he's in love with me
Well I don't know where that leaves you oh but I know where I stand
And you ain't woman enough to take my man

Women like you they're a dime a dozen you can buy 'em anywhere
For you to get to him I'd have to move over and I'm gonna stand right here
It'll be over my dead body so get out while you can
'Cause you ain't woman enough to take my man
No you ain't woman enough to take my man



Loretta Lynn writes from a feisty, straightforward point of view. In "You Ain't Woman Enough," she tells a woman who's flirting with Lynn's husband, "You better get out while you can."