

Connecting Classic and Contemporary Literature Through Thematic Research

Grades 9-12 | 2-3 class periods (plus research time outside class)

Introduction

In today's diverse literary landscape, students benefit from recognizing how timeless themes — such as identity, justice, power and resilience — resonate across eras and genres. This lesson invites high school students to explore these enduring ideas by pairing classic works with modern texts. Through guided analysis and scholarly research using EBSCO's Literary Reference Ultimate database, students will deepen their critical thinking and develop nuanced understandings of literature's role in reflecting and shaping culture over time. This lesson not only strengthens students' research and analytical writing skills, but also fosters meaningful connections between literature and students' own experiences.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify and analyze shared themes between classic and contemporary works of literature.
- Conduct scholarly research using Literary Reference Ultimate to support literary analysis.
- Evaluate how authors from different time periods approach similar themes through different cultural, historical, and stylistic lenses.
- Synthesize findings into a written or multimedia presentation that demonstrates thematic connections.

Standards

- NCTE 1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 11
- Common Core State Standards:
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 / RL.11-12.2
Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.9 / RL.11-12.9
Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work or compare how multiple texts treat similar themes or topics.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7 / W.11-12.7
Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question or solve a problem.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.8 / W.11-12.8

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, assessing the credibility and accuracy of each source.

Materials

- Access to EBSCO's Literary Reference Ultimate database
- Selected classic and contemporary texts (see pages 4-5 for suggestions)
- Research graphic organizer or digital note-taking tool
- Rubric for final presentation or essay
- Optional: Google Slides, Canva or other presentation tools

Procedure

Day 1: Introduction to Thematic Pairing & Literary Research

1. **Warm-up Discussion:**

Ask students to brainstorm themes they've encountered in literature (e.g., identity, power, justice, isolation, the American Dream).

2. **Mini-Lesson:**

Introduce the concept of thematic analysis and explain how authors from different time periods can explore similar themes in vastly different ways.

3. **Database Demonstration:**

Guide students through Literary Reference Ultimate. Show them how to:

- Search for specific titles, authors and themes
- Locate critical essays and topic overviews
- Use citation tools and save articles

4. **Partner Activity:**

In pairs, students select one classic and one contemporary work from a curated or teacher-approved list. Each pair identifies at least one shared theme and begins exploring how it is presented in both texts.

Day 2: Research and Analysis

1. **Thematic Research:**

Students use Literary Reference Ultimate to find:

- Critical interpretations of each work
- Scholarly commentary on the shared theme(s)
- Author backgrounds and historical context

2. Research Organizer Work:

Using organizer provided, students take notes on:

- How the theme appears in each work
- Differences and similarities in style, structure, tone, and context
- Quotations or evidence to support analysis

3. Conferencing:

Teacher meets briefly with each pair to review progress and suggest next steps.

Day 3: Synthesis and Presentation**1. Choice of Output:**

Students create one of the following to demonstrate their findings:

- A comparative essay
- A multimedia presentation
- A podcast-style audio recording
- A visual infographic (with annotated quotes and analysis)

2. Sharing Work:

Students share projects with the class (or in small groups), followed by short Q&A sessions to reinforce understanding and encourage discussion.

Assessment

Formative

- Research notes and organizer completion
- Active participation in class discussions and partner work
- Use of Literary Reference Ultimate for relevant, credible sources

Summative

Final product graded using a rubric (next page) that evaluates:

- Depth of thematic analysis
- Quality and integration of research
- Organization and clarity of ideas
- Engagement with both classic and contemporary texts
- Appropriate citations and use of Literary Reference Ultimate content

Sample Literature Pairings

Here is a list of classic titles paired with contemporary works, each sharing thematic connections that make them great for comparative literary analysis.

Theme: Identity and Self-Discovery

- **Classic:** *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger
Contemporary: *Looking for Alaska* by John Green
→ Adolescent confusion, grief, and the search for meaning and belonging.
- **Classic:** *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
Contemporary: *Piecing Me Together* by Renée Watson
→ Young Black women finding their voices within restrictive social and cultural frameworks.

Theme: Justice, Prejudice and Moral Courage

- **Classic:** *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
Contemporary: *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers
→ Racial injustice, bias in the legal system and the moral complexity of determining guilt or innocence.

Theme: Power, Control and Rebellion

- **Classic:** *1984* by George Orwell
Contemporary: *The Giver* by Lois Lowry
→ Dystopian societies, surveillance and resistance against oppressive systems.
- **Classic:** *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding
Contemporary: *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins
→ Moral collapse and survival instincts emerge under crisis and lack of authority.

Theme: Culture, Migration and Belonging

- **Classic:** *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros
Contemporary: *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez
→ Coming of age amid immigrant identity, cultural expectations, and new environments.
- **Classic:** *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe
Contemporary: *The Other Side of Truth* by Beverley Naidoo
→ Displacement, political upheaval, and cultural conflict from postcolonial perspectives.

Theme: Love, Loss and Memory

- **Classic:** *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë
Contemporary: *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart
→ Intense emotional bonds, generational secrets, and the unreliability of memory.

Theme: Coming of Age and Moral Complexity

- **Classic:** *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare
Contemporary: *If You Come Softly* by Jacqueline Woodson
→ Young love and tragedy set against the backdrop of racial tension and societal expectation.
- **Classic:** *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley
Contemporary: *Every Day* by David Levithan
→ Challenges ideas of identity, embodiment, and empathy through speculative fiction.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class Period: _____

Literature Pairing:

- Classic Text: _____
- Contemporary Text: _____
- Shared Theme: _____

Section 1: Theme in Each Work

Question	Classic Text	Contemporary Text
How is the theme introduced?		
Key events or scenes that develop the theme		
Characters most closely tied to the theme		
How is the theme resolved or left open?		
Memorable quote related to the theme		

Section 2: Literary Comparison

Literary Element	Classic Text	Contemporary Text
Setting & historical context		
Tone & style		
Narrative voice or structure		
Symbolism or motifs		
Genre or form		

Section 3: Research Findings from Literary Reference Ultimate**Critical Source #1:**

- Title/Author:
- Main point or insight:
- How it supports your analysis:

Critical Source #2:

- Title/Author:
- Main point or insight:
- How it supports your analysis:

Contextual Source #3 (optional):

- Title/Author:
- What historical, cultural or biographical information did you learn?
- How does this help you understand the theme?

Section 4: Big Takeaways

- What's similar about how the two authors explore this theme?

- What's different — and why might those differences exist (e.g., time period, audience, personal background)?

- What did you learn about this theme through your research and analysis?

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class Period: _____

Criteria	Exceeds Expectations (4)	Meets Expectations (3)	Approaching Expectations (2)	Below Expectations (1)
Thematic Analysis	Demonstrates insightful and nuanced understanding of shared themes; analysis is original and well-supported.	Clearly identifies shared themes and analyzes how they are developed in each text.	Identifies a theme but analysis is surface-level or inconsistently supported.	Theme is unclear or analysis is inaccurate or underdeveloped.
Cross-Text Comparison	Makes sophisticated and meaningful connections between texts; highlights differences in context, style, and interpretation.	Compares texts with attention to relevant similarities and differences.	Makes general or limited comparisons between texts.	Minimal or inaccurate comparison of texts.
Use of Scholarly Sources	Integrates multiple, high-quality sources from the database to enrich analysis; sources are seamlessly incorporated and cited.	Uses relevant sources from the database with appropriate citation.	Uses limited or only partially relevant sources; citation may be inconsistent.	Uses few or no scholarly sources; sources are irrelevant or uncited.
Research and Synthesis	Research is thorough and thoughtfully synthesized into the project; ideas are logically organized and well-developed.	Research supports analysis and is mostly well-organized and developed.	Research is basic or only partially connected to the analysis.	Project lacks evidence of meaningful research or synthesis.
Presentation / Writing Quality	Presentation or writing is polished, engaging and free of major errors; tone and structure enhance clarity.	Presentation or writing is clear, organized and mostly error-free.	Organization or clarity is inconsistent; some distracting errors.	Lacks organization or clarity; frequent errors hinder understanding.

Total Points: _____ / 20

Grading Scale:

18-20 = A

15-17 = B

12-14 = C

10-11 = D

9 or below = F