Applied Humanities

Themes in Visual Art
Caillebotte
By James Romaine
2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.1.2 Caillebotte
On this page: 7 of 8 attempted (87%)
Objective: Analyze a painting by Gustave Caillebotte to identify its theme.

The painting on this page exemplifies what many viewers think of as "art." The main subject seems immediately apparent. However, as with all great works of art, there are layers of significance that are revealed over time—through closer study, critical thinking, and research.

On this page, you will examine elements of an Impressionist painting by Gustave Caillebotte to determine its theme. Use the information and images provided to answer the questions below.

Paris Street; Rainy Day

This is an oil painting of a Parisian intersection in the late 1800s. It has overcast skies and is apparently raining. Almost all of the pedestrians are walking with umbrellas. The couple in the foreground are sharing an umbrella. She is dressed in a fur-trimmed skirt, jacket, and hat. There is an earring visible in her left ear. She is holding on to her companion's left arm with her right hand. He is dressed in pants, a buttoned vest, white shirt, bow tie, coat, and top hat. He is holding the umbrella. They are both looking to their right. A man with his back to the viewer is passing the couple on their left. He is wearing a top hat and coat and carrying an umbrella. The viewer sees only half of him. In the background are other pedestrians crossing the street and walking on the sidewalks. There is a triangular building in the background. The streets are paved with rectangular stones. There is a lamppost visible behind the couple sharing the umbrella. The painting is realistic and looks almost like a photograph.

Click to enlarge

Gustave Caillebotte. Paris Street; Rainy Day, 1877. Oil on canvas. 212.2 x 276.2 cm (83 1/2 x 108 3/4 in.). Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester Collection, 1964.336. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Gustave Caillebotte

Paris Street; Rainy Day, 1877

Era/Culture/Movement: Impressionism

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 6′ 11.5″ × 9′ 0.75″

Location: Art Institute of Chicago

Several figures navigate the streets of the modern city of Paris.

As you view this work for the first time, think about its theme. This painting explores how human experience and relationships are shaped by the environment of the modern city.

Short-Answer Question

After this first viewing, what do you see in this painting that explores how human experience and relationships are shaped by the environment of the modern city?

```
I'm not sure it looks like couple
walking in the rain.
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Submitted 8 days ago.
Reference Answer

Answers will vary, but a good response may note how the intersections of city streets bring strangers into contact with each other, creating unexpected encounters.

Gustave Caillebotte's *Paris Street; Rainy Day* is like a postcard from the past—albeit a very large one. At nearly seven feet by nine feet, this painting makes viewers feel as if they could walk right into the painting and be in Paris. Conversely, the figures in the painting seem like they could step into our world.

Working in late 19th-century France, Caillebotte was active in a movement that became known as Impressionism. The Impressionists were a loosely affiliated group of artists who showed their work together in self-organized exhibitions. Coming from a wealthy family, Caillebotte helped to financially support this movement. *Paris Street; Rainy Day* was included in the third Impressionist exhibition.

One feature of the Impressionist movement was an emphasis on subjects drawn from everyday life. Caillebotte's painting demonstrates that art based on observation, such as images of modern men and women, is no less creative than art based on invention, such as classical depictions of mythological gods and goddesses (a point that many art critics of the late 19th century would not have agreed with).

At a time when the art establishment favored works of art depicting historical, mythological, or biblical subjects, Caillebotte boldly turned his attention to a transitory moment. Employing a dramatic perspective that might have reminded viewers of Italian Renaissance paintings in the Louvre, *Paris Street; Rainy Day* was a celebration of the ordinary. Like Édouard Manet and Claude Monet, Caillebotte embraced the challenge put forward by the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire to be a "painter of modern life."

Paris Street; Rainy Day depicts a specific place in Paris (one that still exists today). The intersection of boulevards becomes the setting for a cross section of social classes. Caillebotte captures the energy of the city as figures stroll past each other, all of them on their way to some destination outside the frame of the painting. Some of the figures are in pairs; others are on their own.

The piece is unusual for a 19th-century painting in that it has no single fixed focal point. Depicting a seemingly random moment of figures in motion, this work evokes the recently developed medium of photography. Figures move to the right and left, toward the viewer and away from the viewer. Their movements are framed by the urban architecture's geometric order.

The seeming spontaneity of the moment depicted is supported by the painting's carefully organized construction. The off-center—but not off-balance—composition is oriented around a gaslight lamppost. This post, and its reflection on the wet pavement, divides the painting from top to bottom. Caillebotte has balanced larger figures at the right with an illusion of a greater depth of space at the left. The city and the people are actually balanced by

each other. The compositional and conceptual success of this painting lies in the subtle equilibrium that Caillebotte achieves, a harmony that holds the painting, and the city, together.

Paris Street; Rainy Day is also visually unified by light. The composition is replete with open umbrellas, each capturing a soft tone of light that comes from the upper left.

But the calm orderliness of the scene disguises some of the uncertainty present. The wide boulevards that meet in the middle of the picture had only recently been constructed as part of a large urban redesign. In the 1850s and 1860s, Paris experienced a transformation that was both beautiful and brutal. At the direction of Baron Georges Haussmann, the city's maze of dark streets was transformed into a system of wide boulevards filled with light. These long, straight avenues, which radiated out from city centers, were lined with Beaux-Arts architecture. To create these new plazas and parks, however, entire communities had to be forcibly evicted, and neighborhoods were demolished.

The aspirations and anxieties of the modern world form the undercurrent of *Paris Street; Rainy Day*. Certain details of Caillebotte's painting, such as scaffolding in the center background or the man in the middle ground carrying a ladder, suggest that the renovations to the city are never finished. Having a life of its own, the city keeps changing. The people that we see in the painting are still discovering how the urban redesign of Paris affects how they live their lives.

As stated above, *Paris Street; Rainy Day* explores how human experience and relationships are shaped by the environment of the modern city. The most obvious way in which Caillebotte carries out this exploration is in his use of architecture. The buildings not only divide the world depicted in the painting; they also organize the composition of the painting itself. This deliberate connection between the subject depicted and the means by which it is depicted is part of what keeps the painting fresh for the viewer and of interest to scholars.

There aren't very many paintings of rainy weather in the history of art, and so art historians have speculated about why Caillebotte chose this subject. Of course, the answer to this question may be that he simply liked rainy weather. Or perhaps the artist found that the wet surfaces of the cobblestone streets and umbrellas had a certain visual effect, a shimmer, that captured light in a particular way.

There is another possible motivation for painting people walking with umbrellas. The umbrella delineates a personal or private space. In Caillebotte's painting, everyone shares the public spaces of the streets and sidewalks. But their umbrellas visualize the fact that they all have to negotiate this public space while attempting to respect the space of others and maintain their own sense of personal space. If we look more closely at the painting, it seems as if the rain has perhaps stopped, and light has filled the space. The brightness of the sky (now even more evident after a recent restoration that removed old layers of yellowing varnish) suggests that the sunlight is beginning to break through. Yet all the umbrellas are still up, because they serve the artist's larger purpose.

Caillebotte's use of umbrellas is one of several devices in *Paris Street; Rainy Day* that help to visualize the tension between public and private space in a crowded city. In the lower right corner, for example, a man enters the frame of the painting. He is directly in the path of a man and woman who, looking to their right (our left), seem entirely unaware of him. Initially, the way in which the painting's composition stations the three figures side by side disguises their impending collision. But the longer we look at the painting, the more the undercurrent of urban tension rises to the surface.

Because it is more than merely an image of middle-class Parisians created for the viewer's delight and imagination, *Paris Street; Rainy Day* can still address the 21st-century viewer. As the world becomes increasingly urbanized and interconnected, perhaps our challenges are not so different from those of Caillebotte's figures. This painting demonstrates how a work of art can relate something about the human experience in the past to the viewer's experiences in the present.

Paris Street; Rainy Day

This is an oil painting of a Parisian intersection in the late 1800s. It has overcast skies and is apparently raining. Almost all of the pedestrians are walking with umbrellas. The couple in the foreground are sharing an umbrella. She is dressed in a fur-trimmed skirt, jacket, and hat. There is an earring visible in her left ear. She is holding on to her companion's left arm with her right hand. He is dressed in pants, a buttoned vest, white shirt, bow tie, coat, and top hat. He is holding the umbrella. They are both looking to their right. A man with his back to the viewer is passing the couple on their left. He is wearing a top hat and coat and carrying an umbrella. The viewer sees only half of him. In the background are other pedestrians crossing the street and walking on the sidewalks. There is a triangular building in the background. The streets are paved with rectangular stones. There is a lamppost visible behind the couple sharing the umbrella. The painting is realistic and looks almost like a photograph.

Click to enlarge

Gustave Caillebotte. Paris Street; Rainy Day, 1877. Oil on canvas. 212.2 x 276.2 cm (83 1/2 x 108 3/4 in.). Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester Collection, 1964.336. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Short-Answer Question

Count and describe the people in Caillebotte's *Paris Street; Rainy Day*.

```
16 people is what i see and the people
all look normal.
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Submitted 8 days ago.
Reference Answer

While it is not possible to count all the people, there appear to be more than 30 individuals in this painting. They are dressed in various types of clothing. Some figures are wearing very fancy clothes, while others seem to be dressed for work. In the background, a man carrying a ladder is dressed as a painter.

Short-Answer Question

Where are they going? What are they doing? Are they together or alone? Can we tell anything about how they are feeling or what they are thinking?

```
They are all walking somewhere. I
don't know where they are going or
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Submitted 8 days ago.
Reference Answer

Some of the figures, such as the painter with the ladder, seem to be going to or coming from work. Others seem to be out for a stroll in the city. Some are alone and others are together. At the left, two men walk side by side; perhaps they are together, or perhaps they are merely strangers who happen to be crossing the street at the same time. The artist seems to have set up the arrangement and dress of the figures in a way that invites the viewer to compose the narrative.

Short-Answer Question

How does the artist use the arrangement of the boulevards and the structure of the architecture to give organization to the image?

```
I'm not sure I don't like art and
don't know why I have to take this
```

Submitted 8 days ago.
Reference Answer

Several boulevards converge at a point that is at or near the center of the painting. The lamppost near the center divides the scene in half. The architectural elements, such as the balconies, also create sight lines moving toward the center of the painting. While the cobblestones in the lower left seem to move from the foreground toward the background, the most prominent building seems to be moving toward us. All of this compositional movement converges at the intersection.

Short-Answer Question

What does this work tell us about life in Paris in the late 19th century?

```
It looked boring in the 19th century.
```

Submitted 8 days ago.
Reference Answer

In 1877, the idea of the modern city was still new. The city was a place where people of various social classes, with different experiences and ambitions, converged. Whereas some of the figures are together, others seem to be in their own world. Caillebotte's depiction of Paris in the rain (or perhaps just as the rain is ending) suggests a cautious optimism about the prospects of the modern city.

Short-Answer Question

What can we learn from this painting about the human experience that can be applied to our own experience?

```
I'm not sure what I should learn from
people walking down the street minding
```

Submitted 8 days ago.
Reference Answer

In a large city, such as Paris or Boston, you encounter a variety of people who hail from all walks of life and who are on their way to different destinations. You can observe how different people try to engage with or avoid engaging with those they encounter.

- Response Board
  Imagine yourself in this painting. What sorts of sounds and smells might you experience?

  ```
  I don't know this is crazy questions.
  ```

  Last change saved 8 days ago.

Short-Answer Question

After reading the context and analysis above and looking more closely at the painting, what do you now see in this painting that explores how human experiences and relationships are shaped by the environment of the modern city?

```
I don't see anything different in this
painting at all.
```

Submitted 8 days ago.
Reference Answer

The layout of the city, such as the intersection of streets depicted here, organizes and directs the movement of the figures. In the modern city, individuals who might not otherwise meet must find a way to navigate this space together. For example, the couple at the right seem to be unaware that they are walking toward the man in the far-right corner who has his back to us. Will they run into each other? Navigating the streets of the modern city, like navigating the composition of the painting, requires close attention.

close

Applied Humanities

Themes in Visual Art
Kahlo
By James Romaine
2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.1.5 Kahlo
On this page: 0 of 10 attempted (0%)
Objective: Analyze a painting by Frida Kahlo to identify its theme.

Now we come to our most challenging example. Frida Kahlo's use of symbols that have multiple meanings, combined with the complex relationship between her life and art, makes the act of interpreting the painting particularly personal for the viewer.

On this page, you will examine elements of a modernist self-portrait by Frida Kahlo to determine its theme. Use the images and information provided to answer the questions below.

Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird

This is an oil painting the artist, Frida Kahlo, made of herself. The background has large green leaves and one yellow leaf behind the artist's head. There are two dragonflies, each on a leaf, almost symmetrically on each side of Frida's head. There is a black cat behind Frida's left shoulder. There is a monkey behind her right shoulder. Frida is looking directly out from the painting. She has dark hair, dark eyebrows almost joined in the middle, and a slight mustache. Her lips are red. She wears a solemn expression. Her hair is braided and wrapped around her head. She has a red ribbon woven through her hair. There are butterflies on the ribbon, one above each eyebrow. Frida is wearing a white top. She wears a necklace of thorns that reaches to her shoulders and trails in tendrils down her chest. The monkey is holding onto the necklace. The thorns are making Frida bleed. There is a hummingbird hanging from the middle of the necklace.

Click to enlarge

Frida Kahlo

Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, 1940

Era/Culture/Movement: Modernism

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 2′ × 1′ 6.5″

Location: Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin

By transforming Christ's crown of thorns into her own necklace, Kahlo explores a paradox between feminine beauty and suffering, between death (the dead hummingbird) and new life (the butterflies in her hair).

The genre of self-portraiture was central to Frida Kahlo's art: she painted at least 55 self-portraits, including some of the most memorable self-portraits of the 20th century. She said, "I paint myself because I am so often alone, because I am the subject I know best."

Kahlo herself is immediately recognizable by her distinctive black unibrow, which for her was a sign of her Mexican heritage and a statement of her independence from the expectations of others (in this case, expectations associated with a particular conception of feminine beauty). On her shoulders are a monkey and a cat. Although the subject of this painting is the artist herself, the image is much more than a visual representation of Kahlo's appearance. Demonstrating how a work of art is about more than creating a depiction of appearances, this self-portrait explores aspects of Kahlo's personality and sense of personhood that are not visible. For example, by transforming Christ's crown of thorns into her own necklace, Kahlo explores a paradox between feminine beauty and suffering, between death (the dead hummingbird) and new life (the butterflies in her hair). The interpretation of this work is complicated by the fact that Frida Kahlo employs symbols that are personal to her.

While there is, of course, always a connection between an artist's life and art, Kahlo made this connection central to her project. By 1940, the year that she painted *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, Kahlo had survived a near-fatal traffic accident and a tumultuous marriage to the artist Diego Rivera. (At the time she painted this particular work, Kahlo was divorced from Rivera. They would remarry in December 1940.)

Kahlo was born to a German father and Mexican mother; this mixed heritage was important both to her identity and to her art. In *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, Kahlo develops a visual language, combining elements of native Mexican art and European modernism, that is uniquely her own. When the French writer André Breton, founder of the Surrealist movement, wanted to include Kahlo in that group, she said, "They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality." Indeed, in her art (through her unique visual language), Kahlo created her own reality.

Throughout history, artists have created self-portraits using mirrors, because the act of painting a self-portrait requires artists to look at themselves. Kahlo, as a 20th-century artist, would also have had access to photographs of herself. This particular self-portrait of hers combines intimacy and confrontation. The thick vegetation in the background creates a shallow space that pushes Kahlo toward the viewer (there is only a bit of open space at the top of the composition to offer some visual relief).

The directness of the artist's gaze (at the viewer and at herself) seems to evoke the questions "Who am I?" or "Who do you think that I am?" Kahlo's work of art deliberately, and successfully, evades answering these questions.

Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird

This is an oil painting the artist, Frida Kahlo, made of herself. The background has large green leaves and one yellow leaf behind the artist's head. There are two dragonflies, each on a leaf, almost symmetrically on each side of Frida's head. There is a black cat behind Frida's left shoulder. There is a monkey behind her right shoulder. Frida is looking directly out from the painting. She has dark hair, dark eyebrows almost joined in the middle, and a slight mustache. Her lips are red. She wears a solemn expression. Her hair is braided and wrapped around her head. She has a red ribbon woven through her hair. There are butterflies on the ribbon, one above each eyebrow. Frida is wearing a white top. She wears a necklace of thorns that reaches to her shoulders and trails in tendrils down her chest. The monkey is holding onto the necklace. The thorns are making Frida bleed. There is a hummingbird hanging from the middle of the necklace.

Click to enlarge

Short-Answer Question

A painting is something that you look at; its appearance is everything. And yet, as a work of art, this image goes beyond mere depiction of Frida Kahlo. How does this work go beyond appearances?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

Self-portraiture, as a genre, treats the artist as the central motif of the work. Are there any events in Frida Kahlo's life that might be referenced in this painting?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

Kahlo's use of thorns makes an iconographic reference to what?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

The necklace is a symbol associated with beauty. This particular necklace, however, is made of thorns, which are piercing Kahlo's neck. What might a necklace of thorns say about the burden of beauty?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

Kahlo said, "They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality." What do you think she meant by "painting [her] own reality"?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

Kahlo was married to the artist Diego Rivera, and they knew each other's work very well. What are some similarities (in subjects and visual methods) between their art, and what are some differences?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

In art history, not only in Kahlo's art, butterflies are often symbols of rebirth or resurrection. Why might butterflies be used in this way?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

It has been suggested that the monkey, which in Mexican iconography can be a symbol of lust, is there to represent Diego Rivera. Note that the monkey is pulling on the thorns, causing Kahlo to bleed. Why might Kahlo use the monkey to symbolize her ex-husband?

No response saved yet.

Short-Answer Question

Notice how Kahlo stares straight ahead but does not make eye contact with the viewer. Does the painting suggest someone looking at herself in a mirror, or someone interacting with her viewer?

No response saved yet.

- Response Board
  Consider how this painting makes you feel. Does it encourage you to adopt the feelings of the artist?

  No response saved yet.

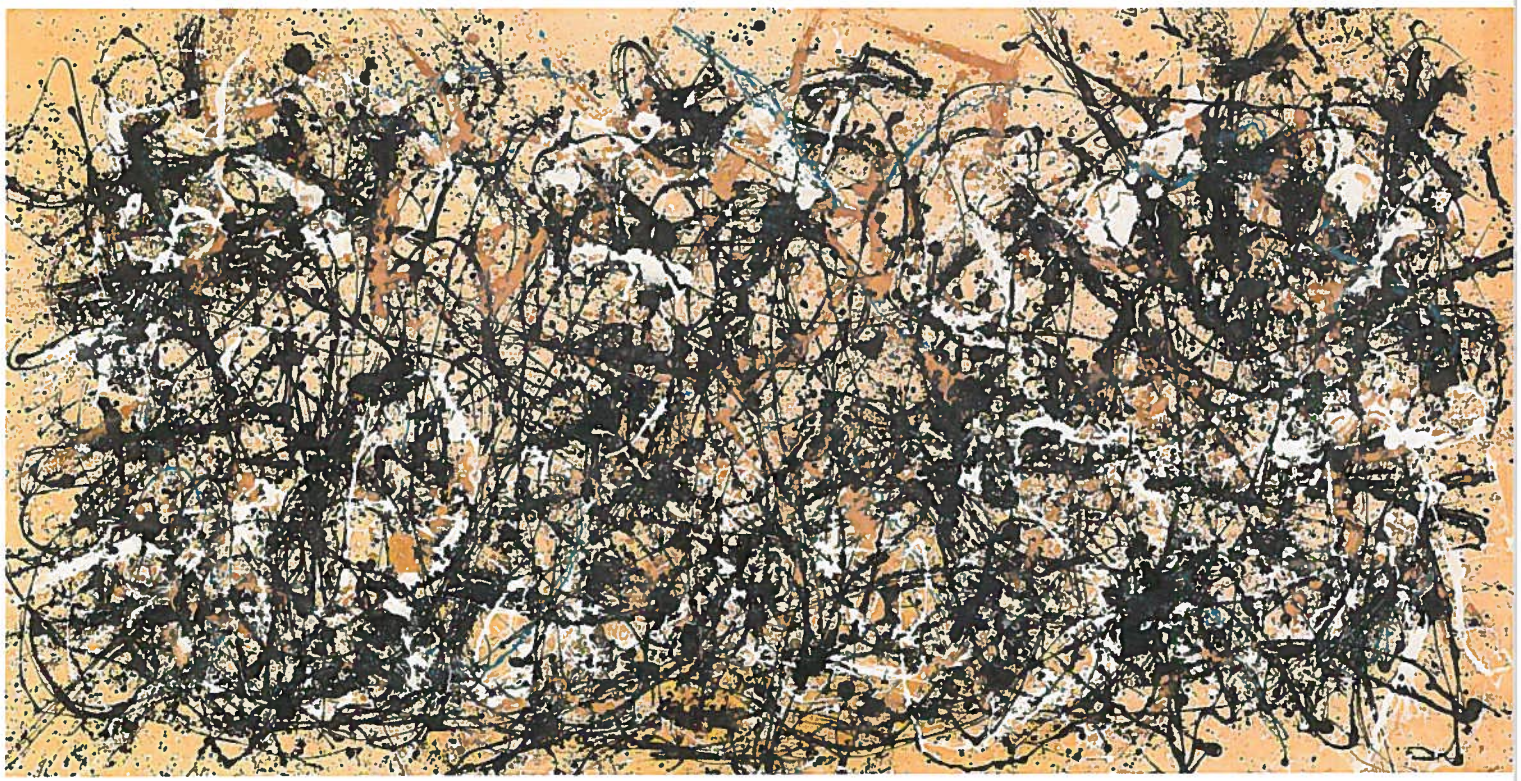
close

Applied Humanities

Themes in Visual Art
Seeing Connections
By James Romaine
2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.1.6 Seeing Connections
On this page: 1 of 5 attempted (20%) | 0 of 2 correct (0%)
Objective: Learn how to identify thematic and compositional connections both within and across works of art.

Jackson Pollock's painting *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* proposes a particular way of looking and thinking. In its material and compositional construction, this work of art urges us toward a greater attentiveness to detail and awareness of interconnectivity. These are tools that we can also apply beyond the gallery.

Figure 1



This Jackson Pollock painting consists of many different splatters and streaks of black, white, and brown paint strewn densely across a beige background.

Autumn Rhythm (Number 30) by Jackson Pollock. Enamel on canvas, 1950. 8′ 9″ × 17′ 3″.

Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* and the Art of Seeing Connections

In this section, you will analyze an abstract painting by Jackson Pollock. Use the information and images provided to answer the questions below.

Creating Connections in the Studio

Looking at art is a process of seeing connections. However, the connection that we have as viewers with a painting is, in many ways, the result of the connections that the artist developed with the work of art while making it. As the painting took shape, the material began to create connections with itself. Material that was being applied established connections with other material that had already been applied. A mark in one part of the composition could have a relationship with a mark in another area of the painting. The entire painting thus became a network of these relationships. These connections are what we observe and engage with as we look at the finished work of art. They suggest that the process of us viewing a work of art is, in many ways, a reversal of the process of the artist creatively interacting with his or her materials. Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* exemplifies this reversal in how the painting so clearly evidences the process of its creation.

Figure 2

In this black-and-white photo, Jackson Pollock uses a paint brush to fling black paint across a white canvas spread on the floor under his feet.

Jackson Pollock at work in his studio.

Photograph by Hans Namuth. Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. (c) 1991 Hans Namuth Estate.

Autumn Rhythm was created with a method that some viewers might find unusual (Figure 2). Pollock would take a piece of unprimed canvas and lay it on his studio floor. Using brushes and sticks, he would then drip, pour, and fling paint onto the canvas. As Pollock himself explained:

> *My painting does not come from the easel.... On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting. This is akin to the method of the Indian sand painters of the West. (Pollock, 1948)*

He elaborated on his immersive process:

> *When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well. (Pollock, 1948)*

Pollock's statement emphasized his connection with the material. The creative process for the visual artist is one of taking material and giving it form in a way that communicates meaning. This engagement with the materials, as Pollock noted, is one of give and take. The successful result of this creative process is a work of art that has a life of its own.

Multiple-Choice Question

What do you think Pollock might mean by a work having "a life of its own"?

- The paintings come to Pollock as a vision, and his job is to faithfully transcribe that vision.
- As a painting starts to take shape, Pollock feels his role is to help it fully take on that shape and identity.
- Once painted, the art exists apart from the artist and becomes whatever the viewer sees.
- The painter is working mostly subconsciously and really has no control over how such works come out.

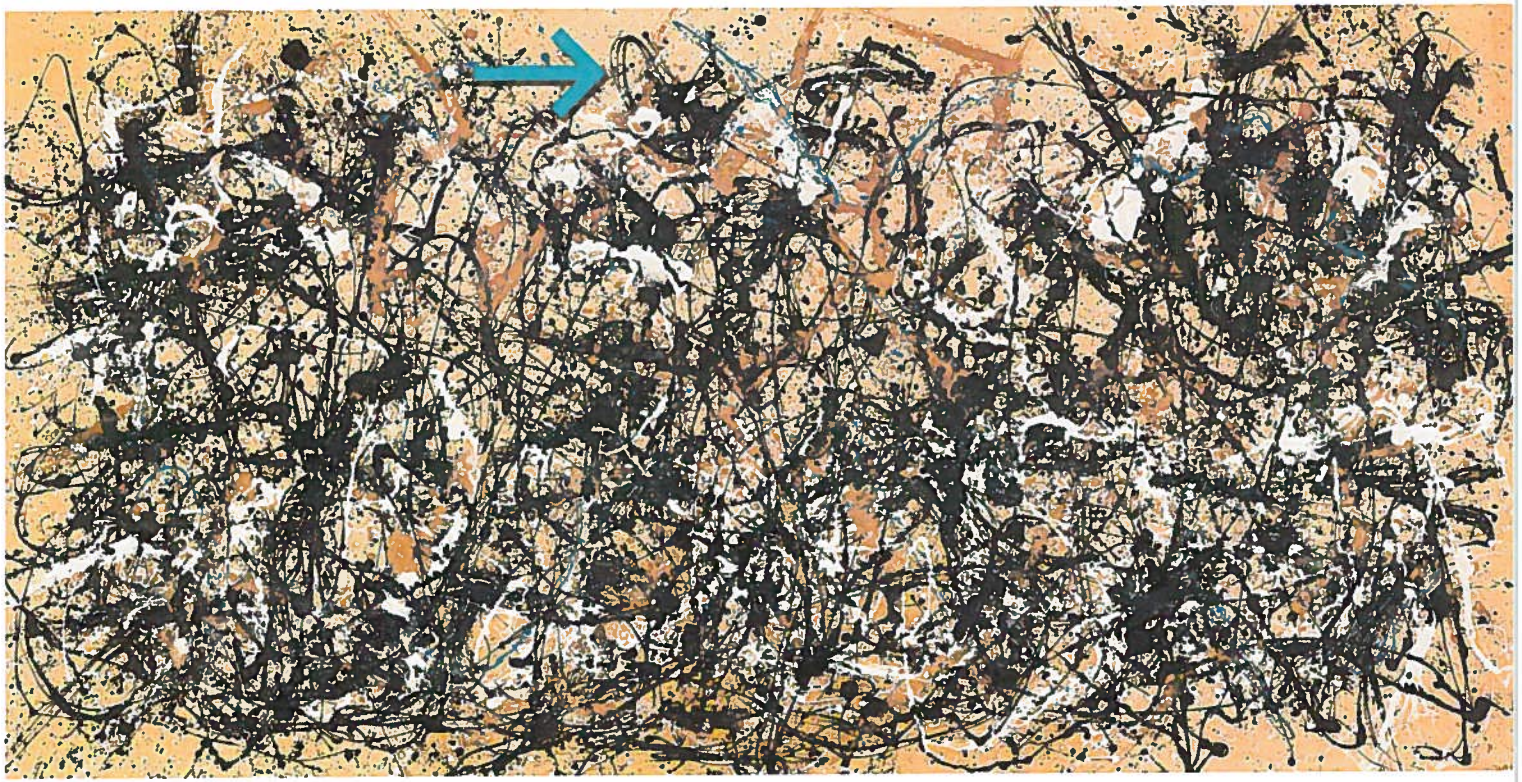
Incorrect. In light of the quotation above, this does not seem to be what Pollock has in mind when he speaks of a work having "a life of its own."

Last saved 8 days ago.

Seeing Connections in the Gallery

Seeing connections in a work of art that we encounter in a gallery is, first of all, a matter of looking carefully and being open to the work. The finished work of art is composed of relationships. Our process of seeing and responding to these connections begins with a careful visual study of the painting itself. Initially, *Autumn Rhythm* may seem to be a weird and random web of paint. However, a close study of the painting's details will reveal that the paint has been applied with a high level of technical precision. For example, if we look at a passage of paint near the center top (Figures 3 and 3a), we can observe three parallel loops of paint.

Figure 3



This Jackson Pollock painting consists of many different splatters and streaks of black, white, and brown paint strewn densely across a beige background. An arrow has been overlaid on the painting to indicate three parallel loops of black paint near the top of the painting.

Detail from Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm.*

Figure 3a

This image is a zoomed-in portion of the same Jackson Pollock painting portrayed in the previous image. An arrow has been overlaid on the painting to indicate three parallel loops of black paint near the top of the painting.

Detail from Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*.

One of the common criticisms of Pollock's paintings is the "I could do that" response. While anyone could make a random mark by flinging paint, it would take a more skilled painter to make a fluid loop.1 But how many artists could make that exact same mark a second time? And could anyone, short of a painter of Pollock's caliber, make a third nearly identical mark? But Pollock did. After making a mark, he made two parallel marks. This passage is not an isolated case. It, and others like it, demonstrate the skill with which Pollock worked. These three marks also demonstrate how the life of *Autumn Rhythm* emerges from the relationships of its material.

In looking carefully at *Autumn Rhythm*, we learn to trust the painting. In return, the painting rewards our investment of careful and detailed observation. Thus a connection is made between us and the painting.

Short-Answer Question

In your own words, summarize the above argument, which claims that where the paint lands is not random, and that the painting provides evidence of how the paint was thoughtfully and skillfully applied.

No response saved yet.

Connecting the Parts to the Whole

While *Autumn Rhythm* was created by applying paint in a process that seems unusual to many viewers (Pollock might object to this assessment of his process as "nontraditional," on the grounds that Native Americans have a tradition of making art by pouring material on the ground), the painting's composition is, by contrast, fairly conventional.

The compositional structure that we find in *Autumn Rhythm* is principally created by Pollock's use of visual density. As the paint lies across the surface of the unprimed canvas, which is visible throughout the painting, this paint is more compactly organized in some places, and more loosely applied in others. Also, since dark colors read as having more visual weight than light colors, the darker paint reads as solid and immobile, while the light paint reads as more fluid. By using the material density and visual weight of his colors, Pollock was able to create areas of the composition that are more visually solid, and other areas that are visually open. For example, the composition is more visually opaque across the bottom than across the top. More of the raw canvas is visible through the open areas across the top.

The compositional impact of this visual density becomes more apparent if we turn *Autumn Rhythm* upside down (Figure 4). Some of Pollock's critics might suggest that *Autumn Rhythm* looks the same turned upside down, but this

is clearly not the case. The visual solidity of the paint that Pollock placed across the bottom of his composition becomes an unsupported visual weight, one that threatens to crash down onto us.

Figure 4

This Jackson Pollock painting consists of many different splatters and streaks of black, white, and brown paint strewn densely across a beige background. In this image, the painting has been turned upside down.

Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*, inverted.

However, if we return the composition to Pollock's orientation, the visual weight across the bottom of the painting anchors the explosive composition.

Figure 1

This Jackson Pollock painting consists of many different splatters and streaks of black, white, and brown paint strewn densely across a beige background.

Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* in normal orientation.

Through his use of visual density, Pollock was also able to create forms and movement within his composition. For example, in the painting's lower left, the paint forms into a clockwise rotating circle (Figure 5).

Figure 5

This Jackson Pollock painting consists of many different splatters and streaks of black, white, and brown paint strewn densely across a beige background. A circular arrow has been laid over the lower left area of the painting to indicate a perceived clockwise rotation of paint.

Detail from Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*.

Since, in Western art, we read an image starting from the lower left, this circle draws our eye into the composition. Also, some of the most visually dense areas of the composition are at the far right, especially the upper right (Figure 6).

Figure 6

This Jackson Pollock painting consists of many different splatters and streaks of black, white, and brown paint strewn densely across a beige background. Arrows point to a box that has been laid over the rightmost quarter of the painting, indicating an area that is denser with dark paint.

Detail from Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*.

As we read the painting from left to right, this visual impenetrability at the right prevents us from visually exiting the painting and redirects us back into the composition. The upper center of *Autumn Rhythm* is the least densely painted area. This relative openness creates a visual core around which the rest of the composition turns. Our study of Pollock's composition not only further evidences his artistic skills; it also demonstrates how the painting's impact on us is born out of numerous connections between its material and visual elements.

As we continue to carefully study *Autumn Rhythm*, we should not let our attention to its details distract us from looking at the painting as a whole. A careful study of Pollock's composition reveals how it is deliberately created out of a unity of its elements. Pollock has done a masterful job of interconnecting the parts of his composition without making any of them stand out from the rest. His achievement was so impressive that art historians created a term for his method: "all-over painting." This means that our eye is drawn all over the composition rather than being directed toward a single focal point. While not every viewer will be familiar with the term "all-over painting," seeing the connections that make up *Autumn Rhythm* does not require any special knowledge about the artist or art history. Seeing these connections requires only careful looking and visual literacy.

Short-Answer Question

Composers use timbre, texture, pitch, and dynamics, among other tools, to create an impression on people who experience their work. List four of the tools described above that are used by painters to create their works.

No response saved yet.

Seeing Connections Across Art History

In this section, you will compare aspects of Pollock's work to those of works by other artists. Use the information and images provided to answer the questions below.

While it is possible to have a very rich experience looking at Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* without any knowledge of the artist or art history (only working with what we can observe by looking carefully at the painting), there are subtle connections that knowledge of the artist or art history can reveal. For example, Jackson Pollock was born in Cody, Wyoming. The landscape of the American West, as well as how that landscape had been depicted in art, was an important influence on him.

Figure 7

This painting depicts a broad landscape in the Rocky Mountains. A tall, snowcapped peak towers in the fading background over lesser mountains in the nearer distance and smaller foothills near the foreground. Amid these foothills, a waterfall tumbles into a lake. The foothills behind the lake and the flat ground to the left of it are covered in trees. A level plain stretches in front of the lake, covering the foreground, and there is a group of Native American people with tents and horses camped on the plain.

The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak by Albert Bierstadt. Oil on canvas, 1863. 6′ 1.5″ × 10′ 0.75″.

FineArt/Alamy

Therefore, if we compare (that is, pay attention to connections between) *Autumn Rhythm* by Jackson Pollock and *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (Figure 7) by Albert Bierstadt, we can see Pollock's painting in a new way.2 For example, both paintings are very large. That means that, as we stand in front of the painting, it encompasses our entire field of vision. Both paintings draw us into a pictorial space, a depiction of space within the painting, that is vast. Bierstadt's landscape opens up with a group of Native Americans in the foreground area. Behind them is a large

lake. As we travel (in our imaginations) further into the distance, we climb into the mountains. The landscape seems to extend endlessly, suggesting a sense of boundless possibility.

Likewise, *Autumn Rhythm* presents us with an immeasurable distance. Looking at this painting is like looking at the stars on a clear night. There is no point at which the space within the painting comes to a definitive end. While Bierstadt's painting suggests the promise of a geographic, westward expansion, Pollock's painting draws us into an inward journey (what Carl Jung called the "collective unconscious"). Although these two paintings are separated by nearly a century, they share a common spirit. Both of them visualize an ethos of limitless and inevitable possibility, a nod to the historical concept of manifest destiny. Recognizing the connections between Pollock's art and a history of American aspiration and adventurism expands our appreciation of *Autumn Rhythm*.

Figure 8

This engraving depicts ten naked men fighting each other in front of a cornfield and what appears to be a crop of grapes. The men wield swords, axes, knives, and a bow and arrow. Shields, scabbards, and discarded weapons lie on the ground at the combatants' feet. To the left of and just behind the leftmost man, there is a sign written in Latin. The words on the sign are not clear.

Battle of the Naked Men by Antonio Pollaiuolo. Engraving, ca. 1465. 1′ 3.25″ × 1′ 11.25″.

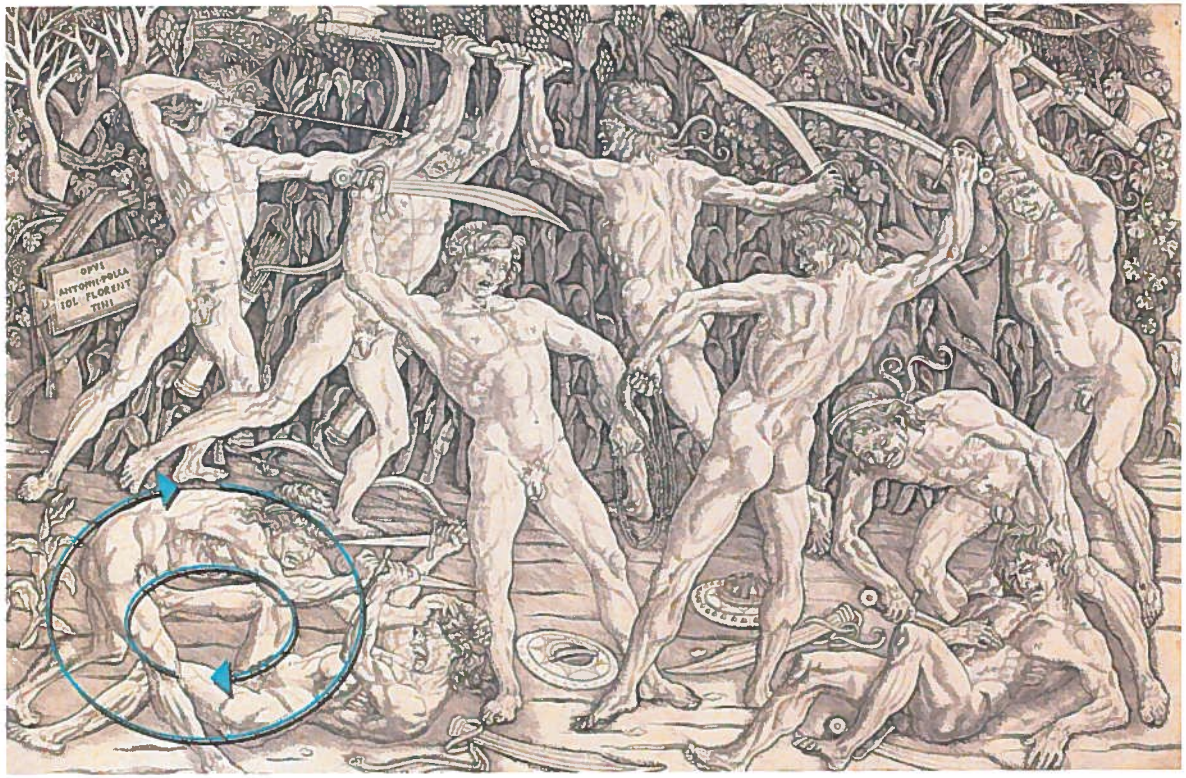
Archivart/Alamy

Seeing Unintentional Connections

Our examination of *Autumn Rhythm* can also uncover connections that were unintentional. For example, walking through the Metropolitan Museum of Art with Pollock's work fresh in our memory, we might encounter a print by the Italian Renaissance artist Antonio Pollaiuolo entitled *Battle of the Naked Men* (Figure 8). There is no evidence that Pollock knew this work (even though it is probably the most famous engraving of the Italian Renaissance) or

that he used it as a model. And yet the compositional structure in both *Autumn Rhythm* and *Battle of the Naked Men* is similar. Both compositions have a circular, clockwise-moving form in the lower left (Figure 9). In both works, the center of the composition consists of a group of interconnected forms that revolve around an open core (Figure 10). At the right, in both works, there is a density of material that visually blocks our exit from the composition and redirects the eye toward the center (Figure 11).

Figure 9

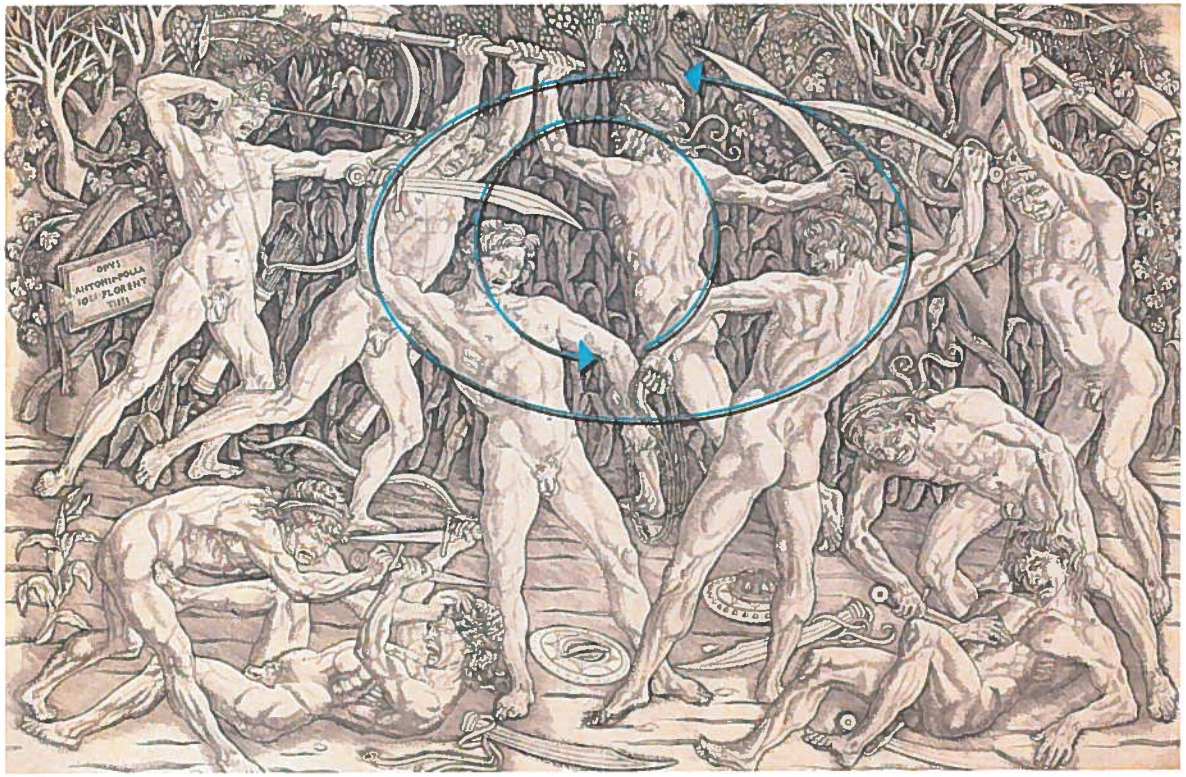


This engraving depicts ten naked men fighting each other in front of a cornfield and what appears to be a crop of grapes. The men wield swords, axes, knives, and a bow and arrow. Shields, scabbards, and discarded weapons lie on the ground at the combatants' feet. To the left of and just behind the leftmost man, there is a sign written in Latin. The words on the sign are not clear. Two circular arrows are laid over the image in the lower left corner, where two of the men are struggling with each other on the ground. The arrows indicate a clockwise movement in the poses of the two men.

Detail from Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Naked Men*.

Archivart/Alamy

Figure 10

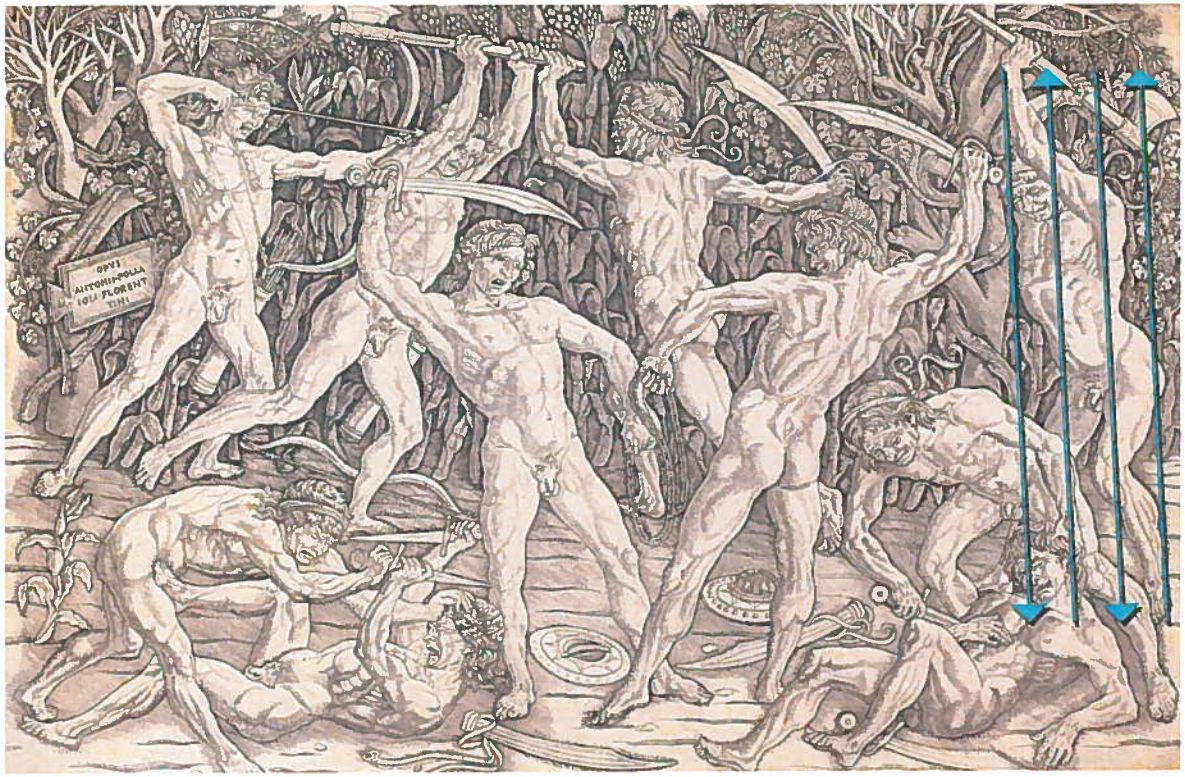


This engraving depicts ten naked men fighting each other in front of a cornfield and what appears to be a crop of grapes. The men wield swords, axes, knives, and a bow and arrow. Shields, scabbards, and discarded weapons lie on the ground at the combatants' feet. To the left of and just behind the leftmost man, there is a sign written in Latin. The words on the sign are not clear. Two circular arrows are laid over the image in the upper central area, where four men are battling. The arrows highlight how the poses of the four men create a counterclockwise motion around an open central space between them all.

Detail from Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Naked Men*.

Archivart/Alamy

Figure 11



This engraving depicts ten naked men fighting each other in front of a cornfield and what appears to be a crop of grapes. The men wield swords, axes, knives, and a bow and arrow. Shields, scabbards, and discarded weapons lie on the ground at the combatants' feet. To the left of and just behind the leftmost man, there is a sign written in Latin. The words on the sign are not clear. Vertical arrows are overlaid on the right side of the engraving, where one man is crouched over another, stabbing him, and a third man stands tall with an axe raised over his head. The arrows indicate that this side of the image is very densely packed with the men's figures.

Detail from Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Naked Men.*

Archivart/Alamy

In Pollaiuolo's print, these "forms" are figures in action. In Pollock's painting, these forms are abstract accumulations of fluid paint. Therefore, at least at first, the two works might not "look" similar, especially if we are focused on *what* the image depicts rather than *how* it is depicted. Nevertheless, as compositions, the structures of these works are alike.

If, as we noted, Pollock was not using Pollaiuolo as a model, what accounts for these compositional similarities? Both artists were aware that we would be reading their composition starting from the lower left and moving toward the right. Both artists wanted to create a dynamic and free-flowing composition that did not have only one focal point. The fact that they arrived at comparable solutions is an interesting observation, one that has the potential to further enrich our reading of both works.

This comparison of Pollock and Pollaiuolo demonstrates how we have permission to look for connections that the artist did not deliberately create. So long as these connections are rooted in careful observation of the work of art itself and do not directly contradict what we know about the artist and art history, we are at the point where the connections find completion.

Multiple-Choice Question

When composing their works, what did both Pollaiuolo and Pollock assume about their viewers?

- Viewers would take time to discover the connections between the two works.
- Viewers would read the composition from left to right.
- Viewers would base their judgments of the works primarily on the colors used.
- Viewers would be appreciative of the visual arts.

Conclusion

Jackson Pollock's painting process was spontaneous and personal, but it was not subjective or random. *Autumn Rhythm* cultivates in us a similar approach to viewing art. Like Pollock's method of painting, looking at art and seeing connections is a process of practiced intuition. Our attentiveness to how meaning emerges from relationships begins with a careful visual examination of the work of art. Here we should pay attention to the internal connections, the relationships between the material and the visual elements of the work of art. For some viewers, this is where the process ends. It is possible to have a rich engagement with the work of art by simply noticing these internal connections.

Of course, a richer understanding of the work can develop if we have some knowledge of the artist and art history. Countless relationships are possible between two or more works of art. In some cases, two works of art can even have a relationship that was not deliberately created. However, each new connection adds another layer of meaning to the work.

- Response Board

What can you now see in this painting that you couldn't see before?

No response saved yet.

Figure 1

This Jackson Pollock painting consists of many different splatters and streaks of black, white, and brown paint strewn densely across a beige background.

Autumn Rhythm (Number 30) by Jackson Pollock. Enamel on canvas, 1950. 8′ 9″ × 17′ 3″.

1 There is a famous story about the Renaissance artist Giotto in which he was approached by representatives of the pope. The pope sought to commission some art and wanted to know whether Giotto was skillful. The representative asked Giotto for a drawing that would demonstrate his skills. Giotto took a piece of paper and drew, freehand, a perfect circle. The representative was indignant, assuming that Giotto was mocking his request. But the pope, who recognized that only a great artist could draw a perfect circle without a compass, was impressed.

2 While we can't definitively say that Pollock had seen Albert Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, it is one of the best examples of a type of American landscape painting with which Pollock would have been familiar.

close

Applied Humanities

Themes in Literature
Forché
By Eric Steineger
2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.2.1 Forché
On this page: 0 of 4 attempted (0%) | 0 of 1 correct (0%)
Objective: Analyze a poem by Carolyn Forché to identify its theme.

Our study of the next four works—"The Colonel," "Meditation at Lagunitas," "Professions for Women," and "The Hare's Self-Sacrifice"—will focus on themes in literature.

This prose poem recalls an encounter with a colonel during El Salvador's civil war. Our narrator and a friend dine at the colonel's house while the family maid serves them food and the colonel's wife attends to their needs. The poem exudes Carolyn Forché's "poetry of witness" ethos, as she has championed human rights and egalitarianism for decades. Forché edited a 1993 anthology titled *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*.

The Colonel

By Carolyn Forché

WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD is true. I was in his house. His wife carried
a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went
out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the
cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over
the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English.
Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to
scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On
the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had

dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

May 1978

- Response Board

  During your first reading, what stood out to you? What was impactful (if anything)? What didn't make sense (if anything)?

No response saved yet.

Sensory details (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) factor prominently in any genre of creative writing. The eyes and the ears have priority in "The Colonel."

Multiple-Choice Question

Which of the following statements accurately describes the senses that are most prominent in the poem?

- The poem begins with not seeing and ends with not hearing.
- The poem begins and ends with hearing, with seeing and hearing in the middle.
- The poem begins with hearing and ends with seeing.
- The poem begins with seeing and ends with hearing.

A popular saying goes like this: "Believe only half of what you see and nothing that you hear." However, Forché stresses the importance of the observer's ear: "WHAT *YOU* HAVE HEARD is true" (emphasis added). This statement, placed at the beginning of the poem, serves to validate the story that follows. After dinner, however, questions remain.

Troubling to any citizen of the world is the casualness of this scene. On the surface, this could be any ordinary family (the son goes out, the daughter files her nails, there's a show on TV). The reminiscent perspective of storytelling at the table sounds familiar—this happened, then that happened—until suddenly we're confronted with barbarism.

Consider how the narrator responds when faced with this barbarism. How might her choice to share this encounter show the theme of resilience? Remember that we can think of theme as the "overallness" of the work, the central ideas that float to the surface.

Short-Answer Question

If resilience is a theme that applies to "The Colonel," what does it refer to?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

We've been taught to examine the poem for what information is there. But consider what's NOT there in "The Colonel." What does this encounter suggest about the responsibility of a witness?

No response saved yet.

close

Applied Humanities

Themes in Literature
Hass
By Eric Steineger
2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.2.2 Hass
On this page: 0 of 4 attempted (0%) | 0 of 2 correct (0%)
Objective: Analyze a poem by Robert Hass to identify its theme.

A former poet laureate of the United States, Robert Hass has a reputation as an intellectual; an artist; and an accessible, almost fatherly figure—one who is equally at home discussing 17th-century painters as he is relaying a personal narrative. Words, feelings, and remembrance are discussed in this poem.

Meditation at Lagunitas

By Robert Hass

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.
We talked about it late last night and in the voice

of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,
pine, *hair*, *woman*, *you* and *I*. There was a woman
I made love to and I remembered how, holding
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.
Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,
the thing her father said that hurt her, what
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying *blackberry*, *blackberry*, *blackberry*.

- Response Board
  What stands out to you after your first reading?

No response saved yet.

Multiple-Choice Question

How does the narrator set up the poem in the first line?

- with a puzzle, to be solved in the rest of the poem
- with a belief he will defend throughout the poem
- with a question, which he will answer in the coming lines
- with a statement, which he will support in the coming lines

Short-Answer Question

Quote at least two lines in which the poet defends his claim that the new (and old) thinking is about loss.

No response saved yet.
Multiple-Choice Question

Which of these seems MOST likely to be a prominent theme of this poem?

- the relationship of words to experience and reality
- the futility of thinking
- blackberries
- the pain of lost love from years past

close

Applied Humanities

Themes in Literature
Woolf
By Eric Steineger
2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.2.3 Woolf
On this page: 0 of 3 attempted (0%)
Objective: Analyze a speech by Virginia Woolf to identify its theme.

In this speech given in 1931, Virginia Woolf describes what it was like to be a female writer. At the time, women were just getting the right to vote in many countries, and they enjoyed fewer freedoms than men—freedom to pursue their interests, make a living, and lead an independent lifestyle. And yet Woolf had at this point attained these freedoms for herself as a writer. She states, "The cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in the other professions."

However, Woolf also credits previous authors (Austen, Behn, Burney) for "making the path smooth" and "regulating [her] steps." And she notes that not only is she able to write, but her profession in literature enables her to earn a living by writing.

Professions for Women

Short-Answer Question

After your first reading, what themes do you see in this speech?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

List some of the barriers of entry for women writers.

No response saved yet.

Woolf says she had to kill "the Angel in the House" in order to become her own writer (and person). This Angel is described as selfless to a fault. Woolf killed her because the Angel was a serious impediment to her writing, but eliminating her was a struggle: "It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality." So, the Angel was an *ideal* that *real* women tried to live up to.

Think about the two impediments to writing that Woolf mentions: (1) the Angel of the House, and (2) "telling the truth about my own experiences as a body." Consider what it took for women to submit work to a literary journal during that era—not in terms of having to "flatter" or "deceive" a man when reviewing his work, but the actual process of sending out their own work.

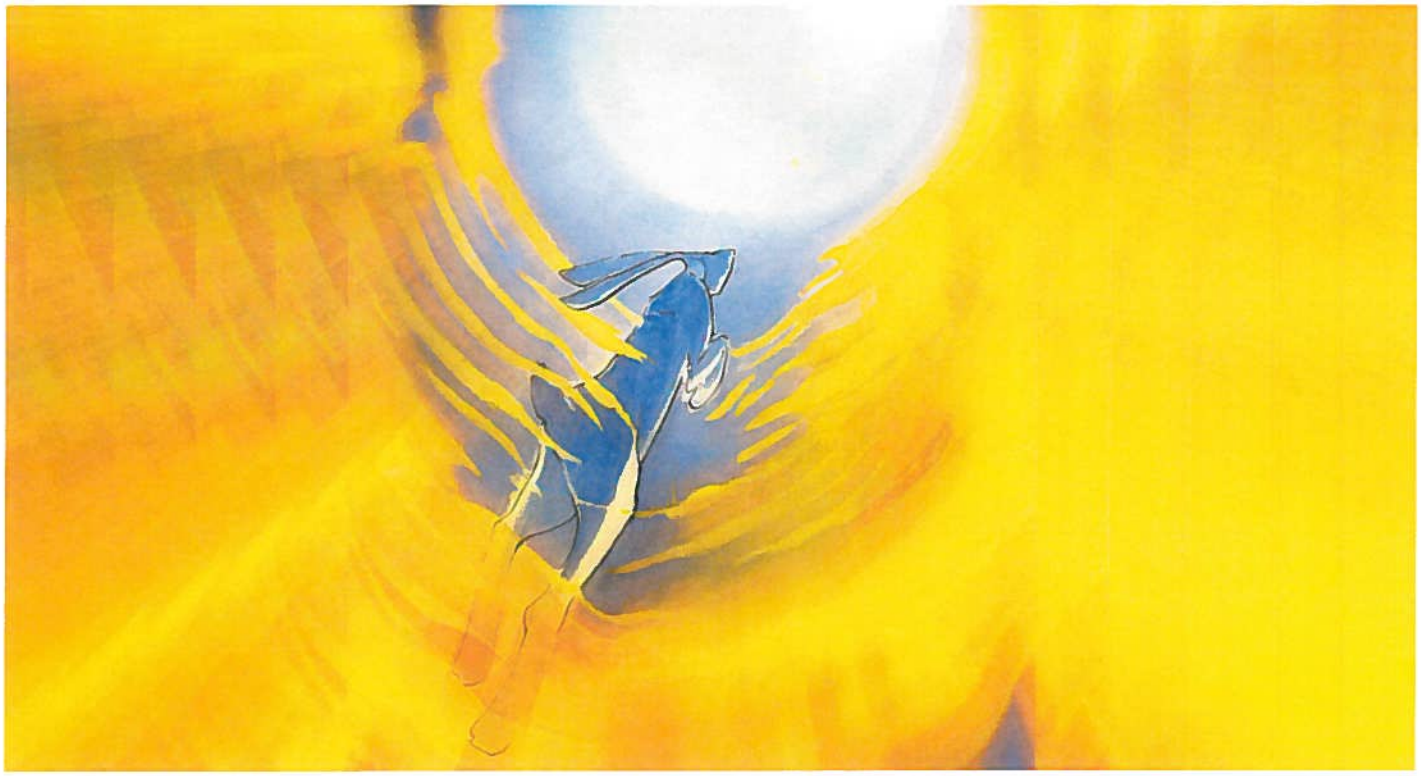
Short-Answer Question

Describe your understanding of what Woolf means by "the Angel in the House."

No response saved yet.
close

Applied Humanities

Themes in Literature
Jātaka
By Eric Steineger
2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.2.4 Jātaka
On this page: 0 of 3 attempted (0%)
Objective: Analyze a traditional Buddhist fable to identify its theme.



This is a watercolor rendering of a rabbit jumping through concentric rings of yellow toward a white circle. The movement is from the bottom left to the upper right.

The Hare on the Moon by Bridget Dunigan. Watercolor on canvas, 2012.

Bridget Dunigan

"The Hare's Self-Sacrifice" is a Buddhist fable that focuses on four friends: a monkey, a jackal, an otter, and the hare —who is the Bodhisatta. In this context, *Bodhisatta* can be translated as "the Buddha," though in later texts, it may mean anyone who wishes to achieve enlightenment through a careful cultivation of the mind and spirit (Buddha Sasana).

While these friends are autonomous and hunt and gather their own food on separate plots in the jungle, "in the evening they again [come] together." As the hare is imbued with Buddha's spirit, he reaches out accordingly: "The hare in his wisdom... preached the Truth to his three companions, teaching that alms are to be given, the moral law to be observed, and holy days to be kept. They accepted his admonition and went each to his own part of the jungle and dwelt there." We might infer, as is suggested by the fable's title, that a careful cultivation of the mind and spirit is not without trial.

The Jātaka Tales: The Hare's Self-Sacrifice

Short-Answer Question

On a first read, what themes do you see in this story?

No response saved yet.

To understand this text, it helps to understand its genre. Clearly the story was written a long time ago and has religious significance. Animals are personified and talk to one another. With such fantastical characters who drive the narrative and furnish a moral or spiritual lesson, "The Hare's Self-Sacrifice" qualifies as a fable rather than a parable, as parables do not involve such characters and instead use humans to furnish lessons. Most fables draw comparisons in order to bring the moral into the light. Consider the famous tale of "The Tortoise and the Hare." Not only do we see a comparison between the characters' actions (the Hare bursting ahead only to take a nap, the Tortoise slowly plodding along), but we also see a difference in demeanor. The moral: slow and steady wins the race.

Short-Answer Question

What are the key differences between how the hare in "The Hare's Self-Sacrifice" handles the challenge and how the others handle the challenge?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

What does the hare's sacrifice suggest about the tenets of Buddhism?

No response saved yet.
close

Applied Humanities

Themes in Music
Wagner
By Alisha Nypaver
2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.3.1 Wagner
On this page: 0 of 1 attempted (0%)
Objective: Examine an excerpt from an opera by Richard Wagner to learn how musical codes help establish the theme of a work.

As you have seen in examples of visual arts, artists often explore similar themes in their work. As an example of how themes work in music, we will look at how two composers depict the idea of power, particularly power in the realm of fantasy.

One way composers represent themes in music is through the use of **musical codes**. Musical codes are created through combinations of musical elements that have assumed a generally recognizable extra-musical meaning. Some codes are learned through frequent reference in popular culture, such as the iconic music from the shower scene in the movie *Psycho*. Even if you haven't seen the film, you probably recognize that this music represents something scary, because it has frequently been imitated or parodied in conjunction with scary things. We learn to associate the specific idea of "horror" with this code over time.

Other codes develop as many composers write variants of them using similar musical elements. As these codes appear in art, music, films, and commercials, they become generally recognized and associated with the ideas, emotions, or objects with which they frequently appear. For instance, think about the theme song from *The Pink Panther*.

Now imagine that you lived in a remote part of the world and had never been exposed to music from outside your region. Do you think that these musical codes would evoke the same feelings or emotions if you had no context or reference? Why or why not?

The question is whether these codes are always learned associations, or if there are intrinsic qualities in the combinations of musical elements themselves that suggest different emotions or feelings. For instance, the *Psycho* "shower scene" music features harsh, screeching violins that almost mimic a human's screams. If this kind of sound were always used in the background of love scenes, would we eventually come to associate this sound with love? Or would we always perceive it as representing something negative?

Many musical codes were created by Romantic-era composers such as Richard Wagner, whose utilization of specific musical language in conjunction with the visual representations on the opera stage had a profound impact on the work of 20th-century film composers such as Erich Korngold, Bernard Hermann, and John Williams.

Example One

First we will listen to "The Ride of the Valkyries" from *Die Walküre* by Richard Wagner (1856). This version was performed by the New York Metropolitan Opera, conducted by James Levine and featuring Deborah Voigt as Brünnhilde.

-02:25

A selection from "The Ride of the Valkyries" by Richard Wagner. Performed by the MET Orchestra, conducted by James Levine.

Read Text Transcript

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Impressions

You may have heard this iconic theme before. It has been referenced many times in pop culture, including a prominent appearance in the movie *Apocalypse Now*. As you listen, consider the following questions:

- Why do you think this piece is still so popular today?
- What do you think about when you hear this piece?

- Response Board
  Wagner (the composer of this piece) chose a specific melody, specific dynamic levels, and specific instruments in this work because he intended to convey a certain mood. What do you think that mood is?

No response saved yet.

Contextualization

Composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883) wrote this song as the dramatic opening to the third act of his opera *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*). This opera is the second in a series of four epic dramas that form a 16-hour saga called *The Ring of the Nibelungen*. The operas have dozens of characters and a very complicated plot. To help audiences follow the story and to make for a more integrated work, Wagner used musical codes to signify recurring characters and plot points.

The Valkyries are warrior goddesses, the children of Wotan, who is a major deity in Germanic pagan mythology. Their leader is Brünnhilde, Wotan's favorite daughter. In this scene, the Valkyrie sisters greet each other as they gather on a rock after a cosmic ride on winged horses during a lightning storm. The warriors are preparing to fly to their father's castle, Valhalla, but they are waiting for Brünnhilde to arrive. At the end of the ensemble, she appears, carrying the body of an unconscious woman whose life she has saved in direct defiance of Wotan's orders—a rebellious act that will cause trouble for her later on.

"The Ride of the Valkyries" was an instant hit, with the composer receiving numerous requests for the piece to be performed as a stand-alone work. For many years, Wagner withheld his permission, insisting that it remain in the context of the opera.

Listen to this work again, thinking about the story line and imagining what sort of visuals you might see on stage if you were at a performance of this opera.

Timbre

For centuries, the string family was the heart of the orchestra, dominating the melodies and remaining at the forefront of the work. To heighten the sense of power in this opera, Wagner elects to use the brass family as his main timbral element. Even though a typical brass section is already very powerful, it wasn't powerful enough for Wagner, who increased the number of brass players needed to perform this work. He even invented a new instrument called the "Wagner tuba," a cross between a French horn and a trombone, in order to get just the right timbres. Notice how the main "Ride" theme is played by horns, then trumpets, and then by an ensemble of brass instruments. Brass instruments have long been used as musical codes to signify royalty, war, and power—codes that all apply to the Valkyries.

Texture

There are a lot of musical layers in this piece, each competing for your attention. These musical layers are made up of musical codes that are designed to tell you something specific about what is happening in the opera. The first code, at the very beginning of the piece, is created by swirling strings and woodwinds that generate an atmospheric backdrop, setting the stage for the fantasy realm. The second code, at 0:07, is heard in the brass accompanied by the strings, which signifies galloping horses, the Valkyries' preferred mode of transport. The third code, at 0:20, is the famous "Ride" melody. Listen as all three combine in the dramatic opening of the song.

Pitch

The "Ride" melody is created with a series of ascending pitches. Upward motion can also be a musical symbol of power. At first, the pitches outline a **minor** chord, but then transform into **major**. This change from minor to major is often used to represent triumph over adversity.

Rhythm

Part of the reason the "ride" sounds so confident and powerful is the use of the uneven rhythmic pattern. Rather than have every note be the same rhythmic length, Wagner made some notes shorter and others longer, which has a

dramatic effect on the melody.

Dynamics

Generally, the idea of power in music is expressed by a loud dynamic level, and Wagner doesn't disappoint. ***Forte*** is the term composers use to indicate that a passage is meant to be played loudly; the Italian word *forte* itself means "strong," and strength and power often go hand in hand.

Form

Wagner didn't like the term "opera." Instead, he preferred "music drama." The form of a typical opera is not unlike that of a modern-day musical in that there are set musical numbers (called **arias** and **ensembles**) that are separated by a less melodic combination of speech and song called **recitative**. Rather than mold his music into a formulaic structure, Wagner wanted his operas to have the feeling of endless continuing melody. In large part, he achieved this by overlapping musical ideas. Do you get the sense of continuous melodic flow from this excerpt?

With these elements in mind, listen to the work again.

Applied Humanities

Themes in Music
Beethoven
By Alisha Nypaver
2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.3.2 Beethoven
On this page: 0 of 8 attempted (0%)
Objective: Learn how motifs can be used to tie a piece of music together and invest it with meaning.

Example Two

Now we will turn to the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, written between 1804 and 1808. This iconic work features one of the most recognizable openings of all time: short-short-short-long. This rhythmic motif becomes the main building block of the entire first movement and appears in all three subsequent movements of the work, albeit in a subtler form.

-07:12

Symphony no. 5 in C Minor, op. 67 – movement 1: Allegro con brio by Ludwig van Beethoven. Performed by the RFCM Symphony Orchestra.

Read Text Transcript

Having trouble? Click here to try our alternate player

Impressions

Like Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries," it is likely that you have heard Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and its iconic opening, which has been featured in cartoons and movies, and even appears in the theme music for the television show *Judge Judy*.

As you listen to this work, consider the following questions:

- What one major emotion or idea do you think the music is trying to convey?
- What are some of the musical elements you find contributing to this emotion?
- What similarities to "The Ride of the Valkyries" do you hear?

- Response Board
  What major emotion or idea do you think the music is trying to convey?

  No response saved yet.

Contextualization

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) is one of the most famous composers of Western classical music. Unlike many composers who came before him who were under pressure to write as much music as possible to please their listeners, Beethoven carefully crafted and revised his masterpieces over and over again, often taking years to finish a single piece as he experimented with different ways to express his musical ideas. For comparative purposes, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, a near-contemporary of Beethoven who lived only to the age of 35, wrote 41 symphonies. Beethoven, who lived to be 56, completed only nine. The Fifth Symphony alone took him four years to complete and went through many transformations before it reached its final form.

Beethoven's musical style is considered revolutionary. His work had a profound influence on a large number of subsequent composers, including Richard Wagner. Beethoven's notable style built upon and expanded the forms and conventions of the Classical era. His musical innovations are generally considered to be the impetus behind the start of the Romantic era in music.

As you read on the previous page, Wagner used distinctive melodies throughout his operas to represent and connect important characters and objects. The idea of linking thematic material across the four movements in his 16-hour-long *Ring* cycle may have come from Beethoven, who used the same rhythmic idea (known as a **motif**) to link all four movements of his Fifth Symphony. This rhythmic idea, a pattern that can be described as short-short-short-long (S-S-S-L), is the building block upon which the entire first movement of the symphony is based. Using a common element to link symphonic movements may seem like an obvious thing to do, but it was actually quite radical for the time.

While the enduring popularity of Beethoven's music is a testament to its quality, his music is doubly remarkable when you consider that the composer was deaf for much of his adult life. In 1801, three years before he began work on the Fifth Symphony, he was so distressed by his loss of hearing that he seriously contemplated ending his own life. In a letter to his brothers, he claimed that he was on the "verge of despair" but that he felt compelled to endure his "wretched existence" until he had produced all the music he was destined to share with the world. After Beethoven pulled through this dark patch in his life, his music began to take on a more powerful quality. See if you can hear that power in this piece.

Analysis

Listen to the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, paying special attention to the short-short-short-long (S-S-S-L) motif.

Timbre

There are four major families of instruments: strings, brass, woodwinds, and percussion. Which group of instruments is featured at the very beginning?

Does this group always get to play the S-S-S-L motif, or is it passed around to other instruments?

Texture

The beginning of this work is played in unison, meaning that the instruments play the same pitches at the same time. Writing a unison passage for a symphonic work was a very unusual choice. It wasn't Beethoven's first choice, either; he left a number of musical sketches for alternate openings, but ultimately he preferred the dramatic effect of many instruments playing the same thing at the same time.

Short-Answer Question

Listen to the segment lasting from 0:46 to 1:41. Where in this segment does another unison passage occur? Use time markers to make your answer specific.

No response saved yet.

Pitch

In the beginning of the movement, the S-S-S-L motif consists of three of the same short pitches followed by one longer, lower pitch. However, Beethoven does not always use the same pitch pattern for this motif. For example, about one minute into the work, the basses (the lowest members of the string family) play the motif in an inverted form, low-low-low-high rather than high-high-high-low.

Short-Answer Question

Note the time of one other place where you hear the S-S-S-L motif, and describe the pitch patterns.

No response saved yet.

Rhythm

The short-short-short-long rhythm dominates the first movement of this symphony, but there are other rhythmic layers happening as well. At one point, Beethoven shapes the rhythmic motif into a "battle" between the strings and woodwinds. For example, from 3:35 to 3:44, the motif is reduced to a two-note call-and-response. The woodwinds and brass start the call and are answered by the strings. Beethoven keeps breaking down this motif until it is reduced to just one note tossed back and forth between the two instrument families.

Short-Answer Question

At what time stamp do you hear the battle reach this point of tossing one note back and forth?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

***Allegro con brio* means "fast" and "with fire." What about this symphony is "fiery"?**

No response saved yet.

Dynamics

Short-Answer Question

This piece opens with a dramatic *forte* (loud) dynamic, and Beethoven plays off the idea of loud versus soft throughout the symphony. What dynamic level does he employ at the end of this movement, and how does it contribute to the overall theme or meaning of the work?

No response saved yet.

Form

This movement follows a basic structural template called **sonata form**. Sonata form is a three-part structure developed during the Classical era, and it consists of an exposition, development, and a recapitulation. This movement also contains a coda, or closing part, which gives the piece four distinct musical sections.

The first section is called the **exposition**, and it introduces the main musical themes of the movement. If you listen carefully, you will hear the entire exposition repeated verbatim and ending around 2:49. Many composers wrote music in this form so that their audience would remember the main musical themes and be able to recognize them in whole or in part when they reappeared later in the piece.

Short-Answer Question

Where does the repeat of the exposition start in this recording?

No response saved yet.

In the second section, called the **development** (2:50 to 4:08), the main musical ideas from the exposition are, as the name implies, developed. Listen to how the S-S-S-L motif is expanded, broken down, inverted, and rearranged.

The **recapitulation** (4:09 to 5:44) follows the development. It provides a "recap" of the exposition by playing it one more time before moving to a closing section known as a **coda** (5:45 to end).

One interpretation of this S-S-S-L motif is that it represents fate knocking at the door. As you listen again, think about this idea.

If this symphony is about the inevitability of fate (which, in Beethoven's case, was the tragic onset of his deafness), what statement do you think Beethoven could have been trying to make in this first movement?

No response saved yet.
close

Applied Humanities

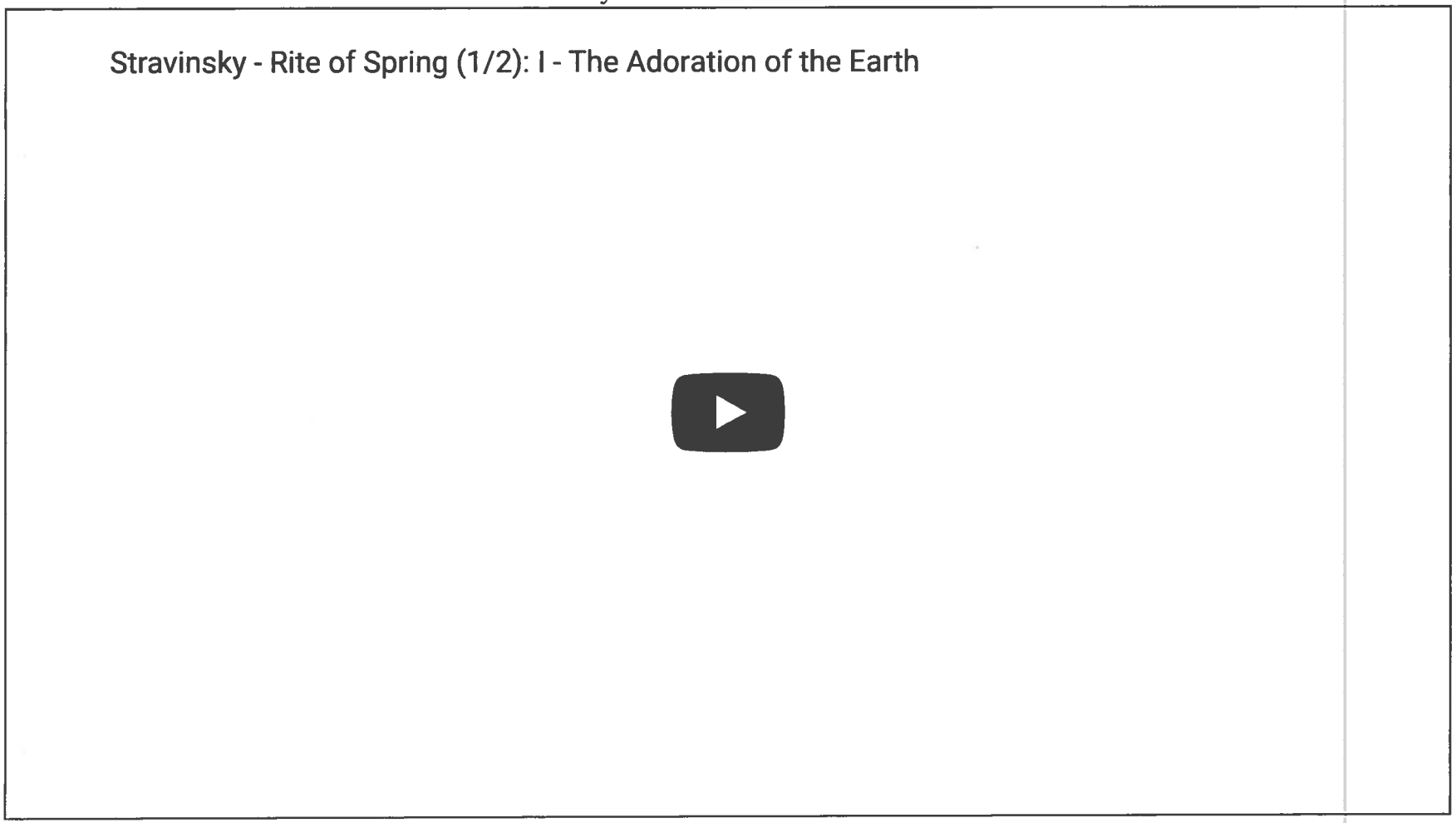
Themes in Music
Stravinsky and Vivaldi
By Alisha Nypaver
2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.3.3 Stravinsky and Vivaldi
On this page: 0 of 13 attempted (0%) | 0 of 1 correct (0%)
Objective: Identify how the theme of spring is presented in musical works by Igor Stravinsky and Antonio Vivaldi.

We've explored the theme of power. Now let's take a look at how two different composers explore another theme in music: spring. Artists the world over have long been passionate about trying to capture nature, and springtime in particular has inspired composers for centuries.

Example One

Watch the following video from the beginning until the 7:50 mark.

Stravinsky: "The Adoration of the Earth"



YouTube video. https://youtu.be/o_F8adQqKLc. Uploaded August 15, 2012, by Yale Symphony Orchestra. For a text transcript, follow the link below.

Read Text Transcript

Impressions

- Response Board

Do you think this piece sounds especially "spring-like"? Explain why or why not.

No response saved yet.

Multiple-Choice Question

Which of the following statements is TRUE?

- This work features only string instruments, like the violins and cellos.
- This work begins with only one instrument, which is then joined by others.
- This work begins with the full orchestra, and then gets softer.
- This work begins with a *forte* dynamic level but gets increasingly softer.

- Response Board

What specific ideas or images do you think the composer is trying to conjure?

No response saved yet.

Contextualization

If this work sounds a bit "weird" to you, you're not alone!

Igor Stravinsky was a Russian composer who was very avant-garde for his time. He wrote *The Rite of Spring* for the Ballets Russes company, which premiered the work in Paris in 1913. The ballet is set in pagan Russia and tells the story of an ancient tribe who must sacrifice a young girl by forcing her to dance herself to death to propitiate the god of spring.

Stravinsky claimed that his inspiration for the work came in part from the "violent Russian spring, that seemed to begin in an hour and was like the whole earth cracking." His music was so violent and shocking to Parisians that there was a riot at the premiere, with audience members hissing, booing, shouting at the musicians, and throwing things at the dancers. Despite its rocky beginnings, *The Rite of Spring* is now widely regarded as one of the most influential and important works of the early 20th century. Its nonconformist features served as an inspiration to hundreds of composers, encouraging them to explore new ways to compose music.

Today, *The Rite of Spring* is most commonly performed as a concert work, meaning that the music is performed by an orchestra without the dancers. Parts of it appeared in Disney's 1940 animated film *Fantasia* (specifically the "Big Bang" and "Dinosaur Age" segments).

As you listen again, focus on trying to identify which musical elements make it sound unconventional, especially when compared to the other pieces we've analyzed.

Analysis

Timbre

Stravinsky uses all the different orchestra families to create a wide range of timbres. Notice how he alternates which family (strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion) is most prominently featured at any given time.

Stravinsky liked to push the boundaries of timbre. The ballet opens with a bassoon solo that requires the instrumentalist to play higher notes than any other major orchestral work had ever demanded a bassoonist play. People were not used to hearing the bassoon play in this high range, and it created such an unusual timbre that some audience members were confused. Composer Camille Saint-Saëns was at the premiere, and reportedly asked a fellow concertgoer what instrument was playing. When the reply was "a bassoon," Saint-Saëns allegedly said, "If that's a bassoon, then I'm a baboon!"

Texture

Stravinsky uses textural changes to create startling effects. He begins the work with only one textural layer, the solo bassoon, and then uses a technique called **additive texture**, bringing in more and more layers over the next two minutes of the work. Eventually, the thick polyphonic texture grows to such a degree that it starts to sound completely chaotic and wild at 2:22. Then, quite suddenly, all the layers drop out except for the solo bassoon. It's as if a host of animals had emerged from hibernation after a long winter, then were suddenly scared back into their hiding places by the arrival of the pagan tribe.

Pitch

Stravinsky often contrasts high and low pitches to draw our attention to the different layers of sound. Listen to the pitch range in this section at 1:06, which is meant to represent "the wriggling and gnawing of birds and beasts" as they emerge from hibernation. In nature, there are often many creatures big and small moving and interacting at once, and Stravinsky's music captures that idea through his use of pitch. Notice, too, how Stravinsky writes a series of descending pitches at 4:44, to create a "waterfall" of notes.

There are also many harsh **dissonances** used throughout the piece. A dissonance is created when two or more pitches "clash" and sound unstable or disharmonious.

Rhythm

One of the main characteristics of this piece is its dramatic use of **syncopation**, a rhythmic technique that occurs when the accented (loudest) beats happen at a time when they are not expected, breaking the rhythmic pattern. For example, try to clap along with the accented beats in this section at 3:26. You may have to try it several times to get your claps to match those unexpectedly loud notes. Do you see how they don't occur in a predictable pattern? This use of syncopation helps Stravinsky recreate the violent and unpredictable nature of a spring thunderstorm.

- Response Board

Where else do you notice unusual or unpredictable rhythmic patterns in this work?

No response saved yet.

Dynamics

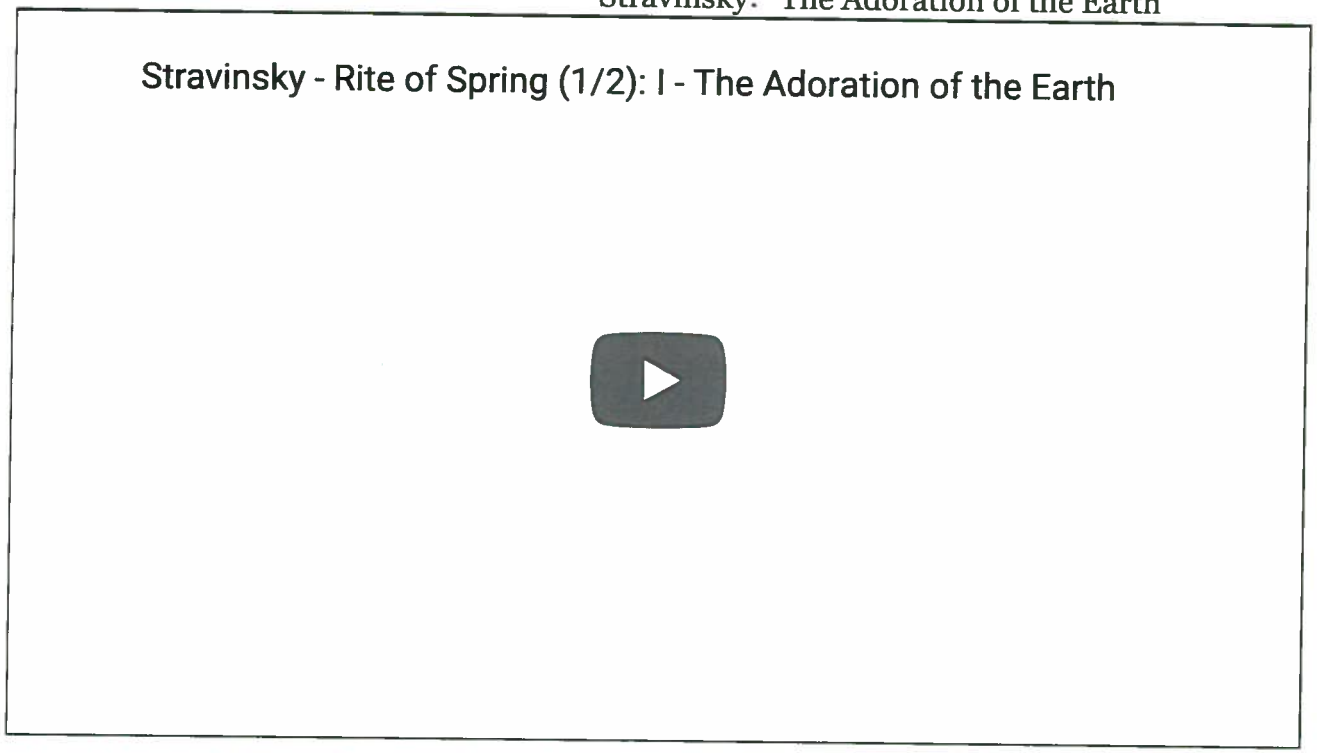
In general, Stravinsky uses loud dynamic levels throughout *The Rite of Spring*, making the rarer use of softer dynamics all the more noticeable. For instance, in this section at 2:43, a sage elder arrives to bless the earth, and his blessing is accompanied by a dramatic drop in dynamic level.

Form

This work is **through-composed**, meaning that it does not have any major sections that repeat. Even though short melodic ideas may be repeated in succession (as is heard here at 7:59), there is no overarching formal structure in the work.

As you listen again, think about what other musical elements could represent different aspects of a violent springtime in pagan Russia.

Stravinsky: "The Adoration of the Earth"



YouTube video. https://youtu.be/o_F8adQqKLc. Uploaded August 15, 2012, by Yale Symphony Orchestra. For a text transcript, follow the link below.

Read Text Transcript

- Response Board

What other aspects of the work evoke concepts or sensations of springtime to you?

No response saved yet.

Example Two

Vivaldi: "La Primavera"

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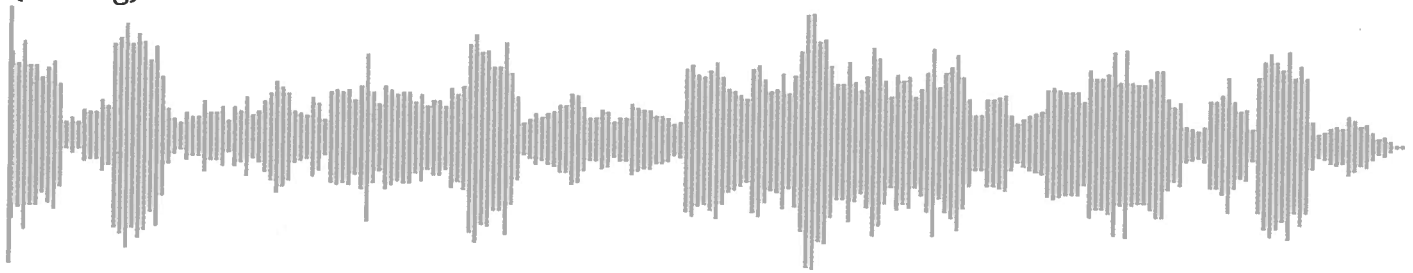

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-03:28

The first movement of Concerto no. 1, "La Primavera," from The Four Seasons by Antonio Vivaldi.

Read Text Transcript

Having trouble? Click here to try our alternate player

Impressions

- Response Board

Knowing that this piece is about spring, does it sound especially "spring-like" to you? Explain why or why not.

No response saved yet.

Short-Answer Question

How is the music different from Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*?

No response saved yet.

- Response Board

Which piece—Stravinksy's *The Rite of Spring* or Vivaldi's "La Primavera"—sounds more "spring-like" to you? Explain why this is.

No response saved yet.

Contextualization

Among the first things you'll want to know about this piece are:

Who was Antonio Vivaldi?

Antonio Vivaldi was an Italian composer who is best known for his concertos, which are works for a group of instruments (like an orchestra) that feature a soloist. His most famous work is a set of four concertos that depict the four seasons.

What is a concerto?

-03:28

The first movement of Concerto no. 1, "La Primavera," from The Four Seasons by Antonio Vivaldi.

Read Text Transcript

Having trouble? Click here to try our alternate player

Analysis

Timbre

- Response Board

What instruments are present, and what instruments (that are typically in an orchestra) are missing from this ensemble?

No response saved yet.

Pitch

Short-Answer Question

Pitch is an important element Vivaldi uses to recreate the poem in music. How does he use pitch to show the bird calls versus the thunder?

No response saved yet.

Rhythm

Short-Answer Question

Contrast the rhythm used in the section that shows "brooks" and "gentle breezes" with the rhythm used in the "thunderstorm" section. How are they different?

No response saved yet.

Dynamics

Short-Answer Question

How do the dynamics change in each section to reflect the poem? Start by considering which section is the loudest and which is the softest.

No response saved yet.

Form

The work alternates between the full orchestra and the soloist. Each time the soloist is featured, that person plays a different melody that reflects the scene described in each stanza.

Short-Answer Question

When the orchestra plays between the solo sections, does it play the same melody each time—like a refrain—or does the melody change?

No response saved yet.

Listen to this work a few times to get the full sense of how Vivaldi uses musical elements to evoke the sensations of springtime as described in the poem. The more you listen, the more you'll notice!

close