



Peeling Back the Layers – “Root Cellar” Grade Nine

Skill Focus

Levels of Thinking		
Remember	Understand	Apply
Close Reading		Composition
Reading Strategies Inference Paraphrase Literary Elements Diction Imagery Theme Tone Figures of Speech Metaphor Personification Simile Sound Devices Alliteration Assonance Consonance Meter Rhythm	Grammar	Types (modes) Expository analytical

Materials and Resources

- “Root Cellar” by Theodore Roethke
- Close Reading Lesson: “Multiple Choice – ‘Root Cellar’ ”

Lesson Introduction

Activities (with teacher notes):

1. Students will paraphrase the poem.

Bulbs and shoots in a dark cellar try to find their way to the light, producing strange-looking plant growths and strong smells. The plant life and even the dirt are determined to stay alive.
2. Students will mark and identify all the sound devices and connect their use to meaning in the poem:
 - alliteration
 - assonance
 - consonance
 - meter
 - rhythm

Close Reading

- Line 1 – “sleep,” “cellar”; “dank,” “ditch” – alliteration
 Line 2 – “bulbs,” “broke,” “boxes” – alliteration
 “boxes,” “chinks” – consonance
 “bulbs,” “hunting” – assonance
 Line 3 – “shoots,” “drooped” – assonance
 “dangled,” “drooped” – alliteration and consonance
 Line 5 – “hung,” “long” – consonance
 “necks,” “snakes” – consonance
 “evil,” “tropical” – consonance
 “yellow,” “necks” – assonance
 “long,” “like” – alliteration
 Line 7 – “roots ripe” – alliteration
 Line 8 – “stems,” “silo”; “rank,” “rich” – alliteration
 Line 9 – “mold,” “manure”; “piled,” “planks” – alliteration
 “mold,” “piled” – consonance
 Line 11 – “even,” “breathing” – assonance
 “breathing,” “breath” – alliteration

Free verse – no regular meter, only slant rime – “crates” and “snakes”
 Spondees – “hung down long yellow evil necks”

The abundance of alliteration, assonance, and consonance creates a sense of lushness of growth, of sounds and life spilling out of darkness, tumbling over each other in a search for light and life. The free verse mirrors the lush, unhindered growth of the burgeoning life in the cellar. The spondees in line 5 create a sense of the sinister length of the shoots.

3. Students will identify figures of speech and connect their use to the tone and theme(s) of the poem.

Line 1 – cellar is “dank as a ditch”	simile
Line 2 – bulbs are small animals breaking out of boxes, hunting for light	metaphor
Line 4 – “shoots lolling obscenely”	personification
Line 5 – shoots like “tropical snakes”	simile
Line 6 – “congress of stinks”	metaphor
Line 7 – “roots ripe as old bait”	simile
Line 8 – “silo-rich” stems	metaphor
Line 11 – “dirt kept breathing”	metaphor

The “bulbs” and “shoots” are compared to small animals scurrying or slithering about. They are also compared to organically rich elemental substances.



4. Students will identify the images in the poem and discuss the effect of the images on the theme(s) and tone of the poem.

Images of moldy dampness: "dank as a ditch," "mildewed," "tropical," "leaf-mold," "slippery planks"

Images of unpleasant looseness: "obscenely," "stinks," "evil"

Images of animal life: "broke out of boxes hunting," "snakes," "bait," "silo-rich"

5. Students will examine the diction in the poem, noting patterns and contrasts, and discuss the effect of the diction.

Line 1 – "dank" cellar (unpleasantly damp and dark)

Line 2 – bulbs are "hunting" for tiny slivers of light, "chinks" with the sense of small fragmented particles of light

Lines 3-4 – shoots dangle and droop "obscenely" as with a moral laxness, their growth uncontrolled and searching

Line 5 – "evil" necks – connotations of a menacing monster in the cellar

Line 6 – "congress of stinks" – the bulbs and shoots are joined as a body by the "laws" of nature; "stinks" is crude, abrupt, a verb used as a noun, distorting the part of speech

Line 8 – "rank" connects to "dank" and "stinks"

Line 10 – simple diction, literal language, declaration

Line 11 – even the dirt struggles to live

6. The student will determine the tone of the poem after examining the sound devices, imagery, figurative language, and diction.

The imagery, figurative language, and diction create a tone of disgust and corruption in the first nine lines. And the sound devices in the first nine lines create a sense of rich life spilling out of the cellar.

In line 11, the diction, imagery, and figurative language change. The tone in these two lines shifts to admiration of the tenacity of living things, even the dirt, to exist. The free verse mirrors the sense of unhindered growth.

7. The student will determine the theme(s) of the poem.

Example: Living things possess a strong instinct to overcome all odds and survive.

8. The student will write an essay based on this prompt:
How does Theodore Roethke use the resources of language to portray his attitude toward the life in the cellar?

Other poems teachers may use in conjunction with “Root Cellar”:

- “The Eagle” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson
- “Eulogy for a Hermit Crab” by Pattiann Rogers
- “Pied Beauty” by Gerard Manley Hopkins
- “Spring” by Edna St. Vincent Millay: (last lines) –
 “It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,
 April comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing flowers.”
- “in Just – “ by e. e. cummings
- “The Fish” by Elizabeth Bishop
- “Horse and Tree” by Rita Dove
- “Design” by Robert Frost
- “Apparently With No Surprise” by Emily Dickinson
- “The Meadow Mouse” by Theodore Roethke



“Root Cellar” by Theodore Roethke Grade Nine

- Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark,
Shoots dangled and drooped,
Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,
(5) Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.
And what a congress of stinks! –
Roots ripe as old bait,
Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,
Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.
(10) Nothing would give up life:
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

Roethke, Theodore. “Root Cellar.” *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. p. 743

Annotated "Root Cellar" by Theodore Roethke Grade Nine

Close Reading

Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch, double alliteration (s, d) simile

metaphor: small animals = bulbs Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark, alliteration (b) consonance (s, k) assonance (u)

Shoots dangled and drooped, alliteration + consonance in d's - double pattern of sound

Personification Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates, rhyme

consonance (g, s, l) assonance (e) alliteration (l) Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes, simile (animal)
Spondees (accents) Create sense of sinister length, slow down the line

And what a congress of stinks! - diction crude, abrupt
metaphor - joined as a body by the "laws" of nature

alliteration (r) Roots ripe as old bait, animal simile

alliteration (s, l, r) Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich, metaphor - figurative language... there is no silo literally in the cellar

consonance (d, m, p - all harsh-sounding) Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.

Nothing would give up life: Final 2 lines - tone is admiring of stark determination to live

metaphor - animal Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

Imagery

- moldy dampness - "dank as a ditch," "mildewed," "tropical," "leaf-mold," "slippery"
- unpleasant looseness - "obscenely," "stinks," "evil"
- animals - "broke out of boxes hunting," "snakes," "bait," "silo-rich"

The images create a tone of disgust, corruption in the first 9 lines.

Sound devices - alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme in first 9 lines - sense of rich life spilling out of the cellar

Final tone shifts to admiration -
 Free verse mirrors the lush, unhindered growth -



Peeling Back the Layers of a Poem – “Root Cellar” Grade Nine

Read carefully the poem “Root Cellar.” Then, with the help of your teacher and classmates, follow the steps in the activity to analyze the way its author has used language to create tone and theme.

1. Paraphrase the poem.
2. Mark and identify all the sound devices and connect their use to meaning in the poem:
 - alliteration
 - assonance
 - consonance
 - meter
 - rhythm
3. Identify figures of speech and connect their use to both the tone and theme(s) of the poem.
4. Identify the images in the poem and discuss the effect of the images on both the theme(s) and tone of the poem.
5. Examine the diction in the poem, noting patterns and contrasts, and discuss the effect of the diction.
6. Determine the tone of the poem after examining the sound devices, imagery, figurative language, and diction.
7. Determine the theme(s) of the poem.

Writing Activity

8. Write a fully developed essay on the following topic:
How does Theodore Roethke use the resources of language to portray his attitude toward the life in the cellar?

Revise your essay with the help of your classmates. Then edit your essay before submitting a polished draft to your teacher for evaluation.

